

JACKFLY THE REBELLION

A man's fight against the overwhelming power of a bank
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Translated by Angela Lombardi

In limbo

You, Giacomo La Mosca, Jack to your friends, must have done something really bad this time, to find yourself at the age of thirty-eight in a hospital bed with broken bones and all bridges burned. And there's even a dead body, so things must really change now. But when exactly did things begin to go wrong? You knew perfectly well how to do your job, otherwise they would have never paid you so well.

Milan, Investment National Bank (BNI) 3.00 p.m. February 18th, 2003

That time, in particular, about twenty months earlier, when you had gone inside the Investment National Bank, in Cordusio Square, you had the strong feeling of doing your job right. You were wearing your black sunglasses, just in case you ran into someone you knew, and you were approaching, as any other customer might, the waiting number dispenser for a ticket. You had then patiently waited your turn until a bank teller had called and directed you to a chair in front of her desk. It was a small and white desk and she was a small girl with blond hair and long fingers, wearing a sparkling white laundered shirt. And you, Jack, a man of 220 pounds and 6 foot two inches height, dark hair and fingers so thick that you could hardly push the buttons of your mobile, had a hard time fitting on that chair. You had been able, however, to shrink and hold an uncertain look, while, after the first usual formalities, you started explaining the reason you were there.

“You see, madam, I've inherited some money. My aunt Felicita. A holy woman, never got married and held me on her lap until I....well, maybe not that long, you see, I grew up fast... My parents passed away when I was little and she took care of me. She looked after me. Never spent a penny, never went out. She sent me to school and then to university. I don't know how she managed to save, but now, I find myself with this money....”

“....That you would like to invest, Mr. Fly.”

“Yes, that's right. I have been hearing such good things about your bank.”

“And how much are we talking about?.”

All right Jack, we all know how much you enjoy playing games. But that's not enough of a reason to destroy yourself, or is it? Right at that moment, you even pretended not to find your cheque. You had first opened your briefcase, then closed it, then rummaged through your coat pockets and then your pants while the blond girl was beginning to think you were just a fraud. When, from the breast pocket of your jacket, you finally retrieved a wrinkled cheque and showed it to the blond girl. She slightly blushed and her lips formed a soft smile.

She looked at you with sparkling eyes.

“Well, I see, the amount is quite interesting. In this case, if you don’t mind, I’d like you to speak to the *private banking* manager.”

“Excuse me, the manager of what? I don’t know English very well.”

“Never mind, we use English because it tends to make people feel more important, but what really counts is what’s solid and traditional.... It is Doctor Santini who takes care of particularly important clients, such as you.”

“Like me?” Your eyes almost popping out, you assumed the look of someone “shocked” to be treated with such reverence.

“Well, certainly, *Doctor Fly*. If you just wait a minute...”

The blond girl got up and left. Just a few seconds later she was back asking you to follow her. How did she change so quickly? She is no longer a little blond girl but a real hottie and she doesn’t make you sit on a simple chair in front of a desk but she lets you sink in an armchair in front of a smoke table.

“Coffee? A chocolate?..”

“A chocolate, thanks.”

The box the hottie hands you is, no doubt, Leonidas.

You take two and put them in your mouth simultaneously.

The hottie smiles.

Right then a grey double-breasted suit and smile make his way in.

The hottie almost bows: “Please, if you’ll excuse me,” and leaves.

The double-breasted is Santini. He’s got sharp eyes and marine-cut salt and pepper hair. He offers you a cigar. You are really thinking he’s full of himself but you accept.

“I’ll smoke it later, if you don’t mind” you say while you put it away in your breast pocket.

Santini sits on the chair in front of yours, a frozen smile on his face: “Well, we have quite a bit of money to invest.....”

“Well, actually... I have.”

“Sure, sure...It was just ...”

“You see, my aunt always told me not to trust banks too much.”

“Nonsense, running down banks only hurts those of us who *work fairly* in the market. Aren’t we here, after all, just to look after your interest?!!!.”

“Thanks but my aunt used to say that one should better look after its own interest.”

You are still playing dumb while Santini studies you.

“You must think of us just as an instrument to *satisfy your financial, insurance and pension needs* as most of the best known families from Milan already do.”

You shift your position, but not easily, as sunk as you are in that armchair.

“Interesting. And who would they be? Give me some names, maybe I know them...”

“Well, you’re asking for too much now. No need to be worried, when you become our client I’ll explain it all, for I understand that you are interested in knowing *the dynamics of each single proposal*.

Tell me, do you have any other income, apart from these.....two million?”

“Well, really, I wouldn’t know...I believe my aunt had money in Switzerland. You know, at that time people were taking their money to Switzerland.”

“You don’t need to do that. Why risk IRS problems? Take that money too and bring it back to Italy.”

“Couldn’t you take care of it without me moving it back from Switzerland?”

“Unfortunately, not! I know a lot of banks do, but it’s illegal. Who works in an Italian bank can only take care of money that is actually in Italy. I’m the one responsible for private banking and I can take care of your money within the national borders. But don’t worry, I’ll do a perfect job.”

“Well, this sounds just fine. I feel reassured now.”

Santini finally relaxes. Having a client with a lot of money and little experience makes him at ease.

“You’d like to ask me something more...?”

“Well, for example, how many clients like me do you manage, personally I mean”, you ask.

“Why are you asking me?”

“Well, my aunt used to say that if someone has lots of clients it means he is doing a good job.”

“Right. Well, in that case I have one hundred-eighty clients and I manage more than two hundred million Euro.

“Damn, it’s a lot of money! You know it worries me.”

“Why is that?”

“Because for you my two million are just bread crumbs.”

“Absolutely not, we often have clients with even smaller assets than yours.”

“So you are.... sayingthat mine is small?”:

“No, no, but....”

“Santini, it doesn’t matter, I like you even if you look down a little on my money, I’ll try to trust you. But I still have a few more questions...”:

“Yeah, certainly. We can give you a more detailed prospectus...”

“No, it is not what I meant I; want no prospectus. I need to know if you feel comfortable here, in this bank.”

“You know, your questions are quite extravagant.”

“Really? It’s because I always follow my aunt’s advice. It was she who used to say that if you really have to trust someone you have to, at least, make sure that they’re going to stick with you. It must have been because she had loved someone once but he had dumped her just before the wedding and she never got over it. So, since I’m gonna leave my money with someone, I just wouldn’t want him to leave and abandon me.”

“Well, your aunt must have been a really strong woman. In any case, let me reassure you. I’m perfectly comfortable here working for BNI. It’s an excellent bank.”

“And if you were to leave. Would you have to pay a fine?”

Santini gets up clearly uncomfortable.

“Excuse me , who are you and, what kind of questions are you asking me? This is unheard of.... In any case, I have no obligations. I wouldn't have to pay any penalty. I'm perfectly fine here, but I could go at any time without having to pay anything.”

And you, Jack, you were already standing, ready to shake hands.

“Very well then, it's time you start thinking about it seriously, Doctor Santini. My name is Jack Fly, area manager of Nattan Bank and after this conversation I have the pleasure to inform you that I'd be very much interested in having you as part of my team of financial promoters.

In limbo

It's clear that the world is not made for dummies, even if exactly like you, they have a degree in nuclear Engineering or they are financial promoters or better... *financial promoter head hunters*. The world is not made for dummies, they always end up badly, and are almost always at fault. It's so simple, practically mathematical. Do you get it Jack? You got what you deserved. Why should they have saved you? Why shouldn't they have kicked you out? Everybody can be replaced, especially the troublemakers.

When did it all start? Maybe that day, over at the Investment National Bank or the year after, at the manager meeting of Nattan Bank, when the general manager shot you dead with his eyes and whispered something to that lawyer, that Mr. Sturli? Or maybe just a few hours earlier when you had just saved Edoardo Corradi's ass and him, so grateful to you , tried to steal your clients?

A year after

Milan, Nattan Bank branch

8.05 a.m. February 18th, 2004

“Jack, I'm in trouble.”

Speaking is Edoardo Corradi, one of the financial promoters on your team.

“That's great, you hit me first thing in the morning before coffee. What happened?”:

“A real mess. Yesterday a client called and asked me to buy seven hundred thousand worth of Bio Niscagi. He told me he was stuck in traffic on the east-belt but he would send me the signed order before 1.00.”

“What the hell is Bio Niscagi?”

“A “biotech” stock in the new market”

“The Italian market?”

“Yes, the company is small and doesn't sell anything as yet but it's quite promising.”

“Never heard of it. Who's the client?”

“His name is Franco Bitto.”

“Bitto, Bitto....like the name of that cheese....is that the guy who worked for a

computer company and he's now retired?"

"That's him."

"He likes playing in the new market...but does he know anything about it?"

"Well, he had a tip from someone and the other day it was all over the papers that 2004 will be the year for Biotech shares and all the insiders are jumping on it."

"They sound more like fools than insiders. Anyway what did you do?"

"I placed the order immediately"

"And...?"

"At closing there was a drop of 18%"

"Great tip!"

"At four o'clock Bitto hadn't formally sent the order for the Niscagi, yet and so I called him"

"You should have done it before..."

"You are right, in fact he denied everything. He denied having placed an order and had no intention of doing it. Actually he threatened to file a complaint to the Consob"

"The lamb playing the wolf"

"What are we gonna do?"

"It's a real mess. If the Consob hears about it you'll be suspended, then investigations will start and God knows what will happen. You know it's forbidden to buy stocks without a written order from the client."

"I know, but we always do it. He usually calls me at 8.30 so as to place his order right when the Stock Exchange opens. Nothing ever went wrong."

"Yes but the other times he'd never lost one hundred and twenty-six thousand euro in one go. Let's see...He denies having placed the order and obviously he's not gonna send you any fax to confirm it."

"Obviously not."

"Well, Bitto, Franco Bitto, a good client... How long has he been with us?"

"Four years"

"How much money did he give the bank?"

"A million and a half euro"

"Good for Mr. Bitto, he's playing the jerk but I have no intention of losing a client worth a million and a half euro, not even for you. Let me think. I'll call you if I have an idea."

Well, Jack, the idea comes to you right away, just half an hour later and no coffee yet.

"Edo, come to my office."

Corradi flies in.

"It is written on the contract that we have the right to tape all the calls. I hope you *never* told your client that we actually don't, right?"

"No, I don't think so."

"So let's try something. Take this phone, call your client and pass him to me. I'll turn on the speakerphone."

"Ok..." He dials. "Hello...Good morning Mr. Bitto, this is Corradi."

“Mr. Corradi! I hope you found a solution to the mess you made. What came into you to buy all those stocks without my authorization? I gave you my money to make me more not flush it down the drain.”

“I only did what you asked, Mr. Bitto.”

“I never placed an order for Bio Niscagi.”

“Sorry, clearly you must have forgotten.”

“Look, Mr. Corradi I’ve had it with you. Cancel the order or I’ll go to the Consob.”

“Hold on please, there’s someone who wants to talk to you.”

“All right and let’s settle this matter fast.”

“Good morning Mr. Bitto, my name is Ignazio Satanasso, the bank’s lawyer. I have been informed of the situation. I’m sure it is just an unpleasant misunderstanding as, I can’t quite figure out how it’s possible that you forgot placing the order, since I listened to your conversation just a few minutes ago and everything seems pretty clear to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“You are aware that we tape all the calls, aren’t you?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Well, it’s written in the conditions of your bank contract. Even this one is being recorded. Would you like to hear? Listen:..... *I can’t quite figure out how it’s possible that you forgot placing the order, since I listened to your conversation just a few minutes ago and everything seems pretty clear to me.*”

“But...”

“I told you Mr. Bitto: we tape all the calls. Do you understand now? Try to remember, it’s important.”

“But, excuse me...”

“Are you aware that just the other day we reported to the police a client who was trying to squeeze us, a client of ours who was quite stubborn about a particular situation. You see, ...very unpleasant. Personally I think he had forgotten, too. But you know banks, after all, we must be very cautious.”

“I see, but...”

“Mr. Bitto think carefully and, if your memory comes back, call Doctor Corradi immediately. Instead, you feel you need a good lawyer then give me a call. We are always available to our clients and I’ll think of some good names. Goodbye.”

Now, Jack, you hang up and wink at Corradi. Just in time, as your colleagues are beginning to come in and some matters are better done in private.

“Edo, if he calls in a few minutes, it’s done and get his signature immediately, otherwise we’ll try something else. Let’s have a coffee now.”

“Sure, lawyer Ignazio.”

You get up, not yet out of the door when Corradi’s phone starts ringing. He looks at the display and breaks out with: “It’s Bitto!”

“Make sure you play along”

“Hello! Yeah it’s me. Yes, Doctor Bitto. What? You remembered? Yes, don’t worry,

it happens sometimes... No, never mind. I'll be at your house right away to get your signature."

Corradi hangs up, and you, Jack pat him on the back:

"The lamb has eaten the wolf, so what about that coffee now, on you."

You feel great Jack Fly. Yes, just for once the lamb has eaten the wolf, even if the wolf was just a fool.

To be honest, in your job, lambs don't live long.

In limbo

The truth is that, when someone is helplessly positive, sooner or later he'll end up paying for it. Nevertheless, well begun is half done, as your aunt used to say and you, Jack have always believed it. The morning Mancini had killed you with his eyes it had all started very well. First the matter with Corradi which had been successfully resolved. Then you had met Alberto Gotti and had the feeling everything had gone well, too.

In fact, if you had thought again, and if you hadn't been so blinded by your own satisfaction, you should have seen something was fishy. But who thinks twice?

Milan, Nattan Bank branch 9.16 a.m. February 18th 2004

"Look who's here! Alberto: Alberto Gotti from Perugia. Oh, that's right, the meeting of the area managers is today..."

"Yeah, but please don't mention it....Shit, what a hi-tech office you've got! Who pays for it, Jack?"

"What do you care who pays for it? Tell me if you like it, instead."

"Sure I like it. All these computers. What's this button for?"

"Hold it. That stuff is expensive, not like your Play Station."

"You know you've gained weight, Jack? Things are going well for you."

You smile. That's right, things are going well. You bought plenty of gadgets for your office and you like showing them off.

"Look at this. On the monitor on your left I can see in real time what happens to all the European stocks I bought for my clients, on the one in the middle the American stocks and on the one to your right the Asian stocks."

"I think I saw it on TV: How to throw money out of a window."

"Listen Alberto. I like my job. I work fourteen hours a day and if I have to invest money on it I'll do just that."

"I liked my job, too. But when you get to be fifty-five it seems you can't afford it anymore."

"What do you mean?"

“I mean, I got fired”

Here you go, Jack, right then you should have felt a pain, a shiver; heard a little bell in your head. Instead you felt nothing, actually somewhere in your head you thought:

“Here is another dummy who got screwed, not like me, I never get screwed”:

You sit down and invite Alberto to do the same.

“What, they fired you? What do you mean?”

“I mean that after twenty years they found an excuse to kick me in the ass and throw me out.”

“How could they do that? Don’t you have a contract?”

“Exactly, they used the contract to say goodbye to me. You know about my collaboration with a leasing company, right?”

“Yeah. I’ve always known. Everybody knows.”

“Well, they pretended they’d just found out. I was unexpectedly visited by the bank control inspectors who put their hands immediately on the leasing contracts of the other company. Just think about it, apart from the forms, I had everything in my office: catalogues, proposals on letter-head, posters promoting the leasing company...”

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with showing the products you sell...”

“No, but the day after, I received a telegram informing me that Nattan Bank considers my contract broken for a legitimate reason and accuses me of unfair competition.”

“Son of a”

“They even warned me they might go to the Consob in case I wanted to make any trouble.”

“Sure, the Consob. Today it’s Consob day.

“What?”

“Nothing. Just this morning a client tried to screw one of my financial promoters, threatening to go to the Consob. They always mention it when it’s convenient to them. However, I was not aware you got fired. When did it happen?”

“A week ago.”

“They’ll probably talk about it today at the meeting. They can’t just forget it and say nothing. What about you, what will you do?”

“At fifty-five? Nothing, I’ll go around offering to wash windshields at traffic-lights and nobody is gonna want me to.”

“Come on, cut the crap. With your experience? You are a great financial promoter.”

“Sure, sure, with my experience and no clients, no contacts, and no colleagues, with nothing of nothing.”

“Why no clients?”

“You see, just a month ago they made me sign a non-competition agreement in exchange for five thousand euro”

”What? What did they make you sign exactly?”

“If for any reasons my job with Nattan ended, I signed an agreement that I would have no contact with any clients or financial promoters of the bank for two years, otherwise I’d have to pay a three hundred thousand euro penalty. Do you know what

that means? Having to pay back three hundred thousand euro means having to make six hundred thousand.”

“What a trap!”

“Correct, Jack. This is Sturli’s trap, that son of a bitch. You know him, right?”

“I’ve only heard of him.”

“He’s a real pig.”

“Are you gonna sue him?”

“Whoa, Jack, you are really rolling this morning! Do you have any idea who I’ll be fighting against?” The entire Nattan Bank and the Sturli law firm. They’d destroy me. And by the letter of the law, they are right.”

“Right, what right?! They knew all the way along that you were brokering those leases and there was no competition because Nattan Bank doesn’t deal with leasing for their clients.”

“Jack, please, forget it. I know you’re trying to help but it’s hopeless. I know it’s over for me. Without being able to take with me either my clients or financial promoters. I won’t be able to do dick.”

“So you give up, just like that?”

“If I sue them I’ll just do Sturzi a favour, he would only see his fee grow.”

“You should have never signed that agreement.”

“Now I know...”

“Alberto, Have I ever told you, you are a great financial promoter?”

“Yes, a minute ago.”

“I lied.”

In limbo

Remember, Jack, always fix a bottom price for your client’s stock. Minimize loss. The *stop loss*. If the price goes down and reaches that minimum, then stop, don’t go beyond. You can’t think it’ll go up again. Just sell. You have always respected your clients *stop loss*, did you fix your own minimum? Your own *stop loss*? Or did you overlook it? When you realised you were getting hurt why didn’t you just give up? That’s not the way to play Las Vegas. Don’t you know that the easiest way to lose everything is to think it’s got to go up again?

Now that you think about it, what happened to Alberto was almost a sign. Instead you just laughed. They would never kick you out, right?”

A few minutes later

“You’re great Francesca! The best secretary in the shadow of the Milan Stock Exchange, I wonder what I’d do without you.”

“You know what, Jack? I agree with you, but since there’s no sign of a raise, I

stopped thinking about it. I'd rather not hurt myself."

"Come on, what are you complaining about? You got your last raise November 4th 19..."

"...1918? Yeah, that was a real victory."

Francesca is beautiful with great teeth and cheerful eyes: She's got two sons and she has you. "Don't worry Jack. What matters is, that you are rich and happy, with lots of women and money. Even if I end up begging for a living, who cares? By the way, what happened with Alberto? He looked pretty uptight."

"Nothing much. They kicked him out. He should have known.... Fifty-five, my dear: they start thinking of a way not to pay your retirement fund. By the way any news?"

"Nothing, everything is ready for the meeting. You can go in whenever you want."

"Then I'll go now. I hate these meetings! The sooner we start, the sooner we finish."

On your way to the conference room you run into Claudio Elli, one of the best financial promoters in the office. Before meeting you he'd worked in the *elite private banking*. You always loved checking him out and this time is no exception: "Well, well, Doctor Elli, where is the market going?"

"Listen Engineer Fly, if you want a honest answer, don't ask me. Even the best brokerage companies fail and who am I not to be wrong?"

"Great answer! You've got a point... But I'm only interested in your opinion in general. What are you up to currently?"

"Do you want to know what I should be doing or what I am doing?"

"Why? You're not doing what you should?"

"It depends. What do you think I should be doing?"

Doctor Elli is a very quiet man, he looks a bit like Renato Pozzetto: slightly overweight, funny, well dressed with thinning hair, always calm and by the book. You have always loved who are unlike you, Jack. Especially if they are funny. And so you tease him: "You should be doing what I'm doing. A little in money market funds and a little in more aggressive stocks. Share the risks with the client and always offer top quality products. You know the golden rule: first protect the client's interest, then yours, and after that of the bank"

And at that very moment Elli bursts out with a loud laugh: "Mr. Fly are you kidding me? If I did that I'd die of hunger before the bank kicked me out. Have you seen the latest product the bank is pushing in its new marketing campaign, 'Make your friends your clients'?"

"The Galaxy?"

"Yeah, that's right. While the other banks offer 3.8% interest on checking accounts, they come up with a 1% minimum guaranteed for the following five years."

"So you're selling the Galaxy, Doctor Elli?"

"Sure I am, and I'll also sell the Niscagi when we have the bonds available."

"Niscagi? Will there be a public offering?"

"So they say..."

"So first you sell Galaxy, then you'll sell the Niscagi? You really wanna lose all your friends?"

“Listen Mr. Fly. I’m not sure if you’re teasing me or not. Maybe you can afford to be the perfect knight, fearless only because you’ve been doing this job for twenty years and have such an incredible number of clients I can only dream of. Me, I’ve only worked in a bank for twenty years. Now that I’ve been a financial promoter for three months I can see that to make the money I was making before, I need a ton of commissions...”

“And so....?”

“So, back to work and I’ll think about friendship later, for now I’ve got to concentrate on closing contracts.”

“A flexible man, then? I didn’t know you were like this when I recruited you.”

“You knew, you knew...”

In limbo

Who thought of using “recruiting” in such a way? As if we were in the army. Was it you, Jack, or maybe it already existed when you started? Must the recruit swear on the Bible he’ll always defend the bank or the client’s interests? What are their weapons? Machine guns, tanks, CIA-style contracts, knives, nuclear bombs, poison? Who do the recruits fight against? Who’s the enemy? Competition, the market, bad luck, the client?

You, officially, prefer the definition “research, selection, and acquisition of excellent financial promoters from the competition.” Much better to go around stealing financial promoters from the enemy than a real war.

But then what happened? At some point a dead man was found. You went soft and your little soldiers started to flee, the general wanted your head and they stole the tank from under your ass and now you go around with an old infantry rifle, Version 91 and shoot pigeons with a target sign on their ass...

Congratulations, what an accomplishment!

Milan, Nattan Bank head office

10.15 a.m. February 18th

When you enter the conference room, with the usual crowd of the *best* financial promoters, the *best* recruiters, the area managers and the *top executives* of Nattan Bank, you immediately feel something strange. Marco “Shitface” Mancini is seated in the same place, in the centre of the mahogany table, wearing a mahogany suit and hair dyed mahogany. He is not alone. Next to him, you see Mr. So and So, you know, to say that you never liked that Mr. So and So wouldn’t give justice to your real opinion. And then you definitely start feeling something, *inside*. But even this time you pay no attention: if you start paying attention to this kind of thing, it’s over. The meeting begins as do all of the others, with Mr. Mancini blubbering away on

how good and beautiful we all are. And, how well we have grown, thanks to the recruiting of the area managers, and how much bigger we still want to become. To make a long story short, what he means is, we have to work our asses off to bring fresh money in, that is, the client's money, and keep on stealing financial promoters from the competitors. Mainly those with plenty of clients. Mancini knows what he's talking about: he wants to increase the money managed by the bank and increase the market share. This is why Mr. So and So starts talking, Sturli the lawyer, from the Surtli&Sturli law firm, and all of a sudden the situation is altogether different.

The lawyer, Mr. Sturli is white, dressed in white, with that rarefied purity typical of the Northerners, something Southerners, like you Jack, sometimes envy.

Mr. Sturli introduces the new contracts Nattan Bank has written present its financial promoters. Nothing special: between restrictions, penalties, codicils and complaints, someone who starts working for Nattan will be bound up until their deathbed. Or better, until they decide to get rid of it. The Nattan motto is clear: we don't want the others to do to us what we do to them. We don't want people to leave us halfway through.

Sturli, the lawyer, is as pale and pure as evil itself.

This is what you think and you are no saint either. It's just that you'd never thought they would have gone so far.

After all, it was all very simple, as usual. Nattan Bank was giving the best commissions in the industry, in exchange they tied a rope around your neck and an iron ball to your feet for the next twenty years. Or until they would decide to get rid of you. All the area managers sat mute. But then the meeting started getting interesting when Carletto Rodari raised his hand: "If you excuse me, since we've been part of Europe, all the other banks have cancelled these types of contracts and you want to reintroduce them now?"

Sturli is not the kind to play with no aces. He stares at him and hisses: "Exactly. I really want to see who will be the financial promoter to sue the bank after having accepted the contract."

"You really think someone will accept?" Giuseppe Polimeni, one of the elder financial promoters says.

Instead of Sturli, Mr. Mancini steps in, he is not the type to hold back for too long.

"You really think, that someone faced with the chance of making twice as much money, will stop just because of some codicils?"

"I think so." Even you Jack, are not exactly the "shut up" guy.

"Really, Engineer Fly? Well, maybe someone won't be happy. So what?"

"I think it'll be more difficult to convince financial promoters from the competition to join us."

"But you, as usual, will succeed" Mancini reply.

"Maybe, but it'll be harder and I ask myself if it's worth it. To be exact, I *don't* ask myself, I *ask* you."

Sturli turns around to face Mancini who beckons him to hold it.

"My dear Engineer, our goal is to place Nattan Bank in the Stock Exchange by September and reserve some shares for our best financial promoters."

“Interesting promise, Doctor Mancini, maybe a little vague, while the job we’re doing is very much for real.”

“Very much for real I wouldn’t say” Sturli steps in. “I believe your area is selling less Galaxy than all the others.”

What kind of a snake is this Sturli? Better forget him for the time being, Jack. Not only the joke but forget about Sturli altogether. So, staring back at Mancini and ignoring the other, you reply: “Doctor Mancini, you know I offer my clients only products I believe in. It’s my reputation at stake and so far...”

“So far I thought that an area manager would sell what the bank tells him to, without giving it too much thought.” The Mancini of the club is speaking. “Anyway, Mr. Fly do you trust us or not?” Now it’s the Mancini of the carrot.

And you soften, too.

“I know I can trust you. What I don’t know is for how long I can keep my men quiet. We all know the market is getting harder and harder but we keep on having the same goals we had before the crisis, and with the same products, too. I see people around me not getting any sleep, not eating, always on the lookout for new clients without finding them. I see people on the verge of breaking down or giving up. If I could only tell them something more solid...”

“Tell them our goal is to get into the Stock Exchange as soon as possible and reserve for the best of them some shares that later on they can freely dispose of.”

“Are you talking stock certificates or *stock options*?”

“What kind of a question is that? It sounds as if you know nothing of this job.”

“All right, then. What percentage of stocks will be reserved? How will you give them away? What’s the price?”

“Hold it, hold it...Fly, we are working on it. What’s the hurry? You don’t have to cash them in tomorrow.”

“Sure! I want to invest in a bet on Inter, if it ends relegated to Serie B, I’ll win 100 to 1.”

Everybody starts laughing. Mancini is fanatical about Inter, the only weakness of a man, who otherwise always wants to back a sure thing. Laughing is good, it releases the tension. Even Sturli, slightly moves his lips in what looks like the smile of a cobra.

You laugh, too, Jack, of course, and Mancini thought he had you.

Sturli can’t just stop and adds: “Well, there’s more. To clients with over thirty thousand euro the bank will offer, starting from next month, a 6% interest on their checking accounts.”

“That means lots of people will just keep their money in accounts!” Innocenti exclaims.

“Well, no. 6% is paid only on the first 5000 euro.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let me explain you: For example: a client worth 30000 euro gets its 6% on the first 5000. In exchange for the advantage we give, in case the client moves his money to a different bank in the following five years, there is a penalty of 3% on the total that’s been transferred.”

“Then we’ll risk losing all the clients reluctant to accept these conditions” Imperiali replies.

“Don’t worry, Imperiali, in the next few days the bank will send a letter to all the clients, informing them about the change in the conditions of their checking accounts, making sure they won’t miss the 6% interest. The client is free to accept or not. If the client *doesn’t* answer it is implicit the new conditions are accepted. Statistically, we all know that most of them won’t answer, out of laziness or simply because they won’t open their mail on time.”

The room is dead silent. Some are happy, Sturli has found a way to keep the clients for the next few years, others are shocked to realize that they, together with their clients, will be stuck with Nattan for ever.

You’re brainstorming Jack, to find a silent but workable solution. You’ll call all your clients and tell them not to accept the new conditions. Just like that you’ll both be free to change banks. However, there’s still something no-one seems to be wanting to talk about and you are not the one to let it pass by: “Sorry, getting back to what we were talking about before, the *stock option*, it seems to me that, if later on you decide *not to* distribute them, this won’t be considered a “legitimate reason” to break the contract with you.”

It’s then that Sturli springs up from his chair and almost yells: “What are you trying to say? You and your colleagues are paid well and on time. We’ve always respected our agreements. Such an attitude is unacceptable.”

You like the attack. If Sturli loses his nerves, it means you are right. “Dear lawyer, no-one’s receiving charity here. We are paid according to the profits we guarantee the bank and we have every right to question.”

“Question? Why? What’s wrong?”

You don’t talk back to him. You’ve given him already too much attention. Back to Mancini instead.

“Mr. Mancini, you know it, too. We should be carrying better products, more efficient structures. We should do more consulting, some *private banking* and all we do is sell mutual funds. And what about Alberto Gotti. He worked for Nattan for twenty years and got fired...”

It was right then that Mancini gave you a look to kill you. It was just matter of seconds. A bullet was shot from his eyes that hit you right in your brain, then he smiled and looked at his watch: “Gentlemen, I don’t think this is the right time to question our personnel policy and the global strategies of our group. After all, I know how busy you are and don’t want to waste any more of your precious time. The appointment for those wishing to stay with us is same time next month. Mr. Fly, do you think you’ll be one of them?”

In limbo

You’re a big bird, Jack, and you too will disappear from earth like the dodo. You, so good at judging the *sentiment* - what a fucked up word – of the market, the political

and economic situation, medium and long term foresight, you just got screwed by a nobody Mancini. An Inter fan, too. The sack they put you in has been tied and thrown in a river with a stone as heavy as a ton. Goodbye, Jack, have a nice bath!

Nattan Bank branch

90.30 March 5th

Then, after the first dead body, your life really started to change, Jack: you knew things would never be the same because you'd never seen a dead man before. And so close up, too.

Two weeks had gone by since Mancini had killed you with his eyes and nothing much had happened, apart from some market losses, some gains, a little sex, a few dinners, a few laughs. Everybody was still hearing about the Niscagi public offering, but no visible of action yet.

Then, one day Santini comes in your office skipping all formalities.

"You know Engineer Fly, what will happen next month?"

"Next month? Spring will come and we can spend the weekend at the beach?"

"No. Next month I won't get my cheque. The deposits on the commission are already spent and I have not a single penny saved since I put all my money on the house, I'm fucked. Got something to say?"

Careful, Jack, watch your mouth. Santini wants to get you involved.

"First of all, why do you say 'next month?' Doesn't the bank guarantee you a year's salary?"

"Are you playing dumb with me?" A year anywhere else, but at Nattan, no. Not anymore."

Yes, that's right, Santini is right. How did you forget? You try to make up for it.: "I don't have your updated production results. How many clients have you brought in, Santini?"

"You wanna know what I've been able to acquire in the last six months? A big zero. BNI hasn't given up one single client, and all my former colleagues have declared war on me. Nattan hasn't given me any contacts. You didn't give me shit. And now, what are you going to offer me? Still holding onto your aunt's cheque? Listen, this time I really need it! I should have known that a job, starting with a lie, cannot work."

"Listen, Santini: you must be patient. Things will take care of themselves."

"Really? How? Will you give me a loan? Five thousand? Ten? Well, thank you, thank you indeed. And what about next month?"

Santini sits down in front of you challenging you.

"Please, Santini, calm down. It's not by lending you money that I'll solve your problems. You must close some deals. I could pass you the people calling the 800 number or reassign you some clients. It's just not possible that my man Santini can't close some contracts. It got to be just a matter of time."

"Sure, time. Time I don't have. How long do you think the bank will take to seize my house after my first mortgage cheque bounces?"

“Which bank holds your mortgage?”

“You’re asking me? It’s with BNI.”

“It won’t take long, then.”

“You see?”

“Ok, lets’ calm down. This is not the end of it. We just have to get organized. I’m pretty sure if we talk things over we’ll find a solution. Starting with short-term problems.”

“You sure? All right, I wanna trust you. Come for dinner tonight and we’ll talk *things over*, as you say. By the way, my wife and son want to meet you.”

Tonight, at Santini’s. You’ve never done something like this before, to go over to a colleague’s, meet his family. God, how embarrassing. Santini keeps looking at you with downcast eyes and you, Jack, you are way too familiar with those fearful and weak eyes. If Santini gives up, what will happen to the rest?

“All right then, I’ll be there. I’ll bring dessert.”

In limbo

No doubt, time is always way too short. Keeping Santini quiet, checking on the work, keeping an eye on Mancini, loving your fiancé. How do you do it?

You must give up on something, but on Santini, no, it’s too dangerous right now.

Cèline will understand. And then, don’t worry, Cèline is also quite busy. Maybe, she’s neglecting you, too. You see, how women are? You neglect her because of your job. She works because you neglect her.

Just don’t worry, don’t think, go ahead. That night you tricked her. You had to go over to Santini’s, no discussion.

But tonight, she’s not here.

How long has it gone since then?

How much do you miss Cèline?

Milan, Rossi Café

1.15 p.m. March 5th

“You’re late, Jack.”

“Sorry, Cèline. First the area managers monthly meeting. Then an executive from Martani Bank, some Mr. Esposito, I told him I’d like to join them”

“The same usual trick?”

“Yeah, I told him I want to change just to hear what they’d offer me.”

“And what did they offer you?”

“In terms of money, less than Nattan. But at least they don’t try to make you sign a CIA-style contract. Sorry I’m late but he wouldn’t let me go. He’s a real joker, one joke after another. I can’t say I liked him too much, but the jokes were good.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“Better not, you are not supposed to know them, my love. You’re a serious girl and serious you must remain. Even if my beloved aunt wouldn’t have liked your job.”

“Why? What’s wrong with being a lawyer?”

“You just said it. You are not just a lawyer, you’re a *female* lawyer. How can you think she would have liked that?”

The drink is cool, You really needed it. You take a long sip, then you keep on teasing each other. It’s relaxing after a long workday, to be still working your brain, but freely, with no anxiety.

“So, this is why you don’t marry me?”

“No, nothing to do with it. It’s just that, when I see you, I can’t help thinking about sex. Then, I feel psychologically blocked. All the excitement gone when I think of sleeping with a *f...lawyer...*”

The smile on Céline Daccò becomes more penetrating. The café is packed, it’s the *hell* moment of the day: *happy hour*. Luckily your table is in front with a breeze:

“...that will definitely give us a cold.”

“Too bad. I won’t move.”

Céline picks up a strawberry and swings it in front of your mouth.

“Well, losing control?”

“I must admit.”

“Why?”

“Because I like you.” And you try to snap up the strawberry with no success.

“Is that all?”

The game of the strawberry goes on.

“Also because...”

“Because...”

“Because...I love you.”

Good for you, Jack, you said it. You lift your hand and swiftly get hold of Céline’s wrist, you kiss it and then bite on the strawberry. Then you add: “Maybe.”

Céline leans back, a little annoyed: “Well, can’t ask for too much, but I see you’re improving.”

She takes a sip of her drink through the straw. Then her hands are in the purse looking for cigarettes. She lights one up. You look reproachfully at her but she smiles back, all tender: “You want one, my love? Just to chill out.”

You come closer and whisper in her ear: “Well, if you really want to relax, I can lick your sweet little pussy. For sure it’d be healthier.”

Céline bursts out with laughter: “You’d really do it?”

“Why, don’t I always?”

“No, I mean *here...*”

“Sure. Shall I get to it?” You get up from your chair meaning to kneel between her legs.

“No, no, are you crazy?” She tries to stop you with her hands but you push harder.

“Come on, stop it, I’m tired. I had one of those days...and by the way, I wanted to ask you something.”

You pull yourself together. After all, admit it, you wouldn't have been able to lick her right there in the middle of the café....

"Shoot."

"A lady came to the office today. She wants a divorce from her husband, a small businessman from some town around here, one of those with ending in "ate"

...Agrate, Bollate, Carugate..."

"BullshitATE, NonsensATE"

"Yes, that's right. The point is that she doesn't know what to do, the husband will never give her the divorce; he claims it'll be a trauma for the kids."

"The family and the kids come first..." you use the old cliché.

"Because of that, she has to accept all the lovers he takes home with him?"

"Well, it seems right."

"Jack, watch it or I'll throw one of these glasses at you. See how heavy they are."

"Ok, sorry. Go on."

"She said, she can't take it anymore and she wants the divorce. He said he couldn't care less about what she does but he won't give it to her, and if she goes on with it she won't get a penny."

"Didn't you say he's a businessman? Maybe I know him."

"Maybe. You are not going to believe it, but his name is Brambilla."

"Come on! You're kidding, so Brambillas really exist, didn't they all disappear from earth?! No, I don't know him. I bet he has more debts than money."

"That's not the point. The point is that it's got nothing on his own name. He transferred everything to a so-called *trust* in the Channel Islands, money, real estate, even the house."

"Well, really clever."

"Is he really or does he just think he is?"

"Let's see. What's the wife like? And the lover?"

"Just stop it!! From what I know, if the wife were to ask for the divorce, this *trust* is entitled to sell even the house they live in and give the money to a third company. Is this possible?"

"Anything's possible" is your answer. You could care less about all of this. You'd rather be somewhere, licking her little pussy for real, but it would be hell if she even suspected it.

"The *trust* is a very flexible instrument, ideal to protect your assets anonymously."

"Tell me more. We still have some time and we haven't even spoken about tonight, yet. Is it ok with you?"

"Sure. Let's see, the subjects in a *trust* are the *settlor*, that's Brambilla, who transfers for good all of his assets to a so called *trustee*, who is a trustworthy person or a bank taking care of the assets on behalf and in the interest of beneficiaries, chosen by Brambilla himself."

"And he cedes all his properties?"

"Yes. The *settlor* loses ownership of his assets"

"Why would someone be so crazy to donate all of his properties to a *trust*?"

“Not to give a penny to his wife would be enough of a reason.”

“That’s nonsense. We are talking millions of euro!”

“That’s exactly why. Brambilla, by losing his assets ownership, has protected himself from any other money troubles he’d be involved in. In case of bankruptcy or legal actions by third parties, nobody will be able to claim any right to the estate of the *trust*.”

“Nothing can be done, then?”

“You can try to impugn the *trust*, if you can prove that Brambilla opened it against the interest of creditors, or of his wife’s, and he’s still the beneficiary of it, indirectly through a third company.”

“So, Brambilla is the beneficiary of himself?!”

“Yes, and the wife is empty-handed”, you smile and lift your glass: “Cheers to Cumendatur Brambilla. Not a dumb-ass!”

Right at that moment you feel an ice cube hitting you in the eye.

“Fuck, you could have blinded me.”

“You asked for it. You filthy bastard.”

“Whoa, you are getting nasty, you know?”

“That’s nothing, you’ll see. Just stop please and give me an advice, what shall I do?”

Suddenly the game is no longer fun. There is tension but nothing to do with the one from before. The fight is tangible. You stare at each other. At the end it is you who softens.

“What can you do? I agree with you, I don’t think Mr. Brambilla intends to support a charity with his *trust*. We need to know who his beneficiaries are and who’s behind them. Can you give me some more details? Maybe I’ll look into it. I once worked on a *trust* for some clients of mine, using a law office specializing in international financial planning. Maybe I can do something.”

Céline smiles at you, she bends over her briefcase and takes out a folder. “Here you go, this is what the wife gave me. I don’t know if it’s enough.”

“We’ll make it enough” you reply and get closer to her face. You close your eyes, smell her perfume and take in the fresh taste of her lips and tongue.

When you two move apart, everything seems ok again.

You look at your watch. It’s almost three. Time to get back to the office. Good, if you get up right away there won’t be any chance to do or say anything wrong.

But you still have to ask for the check. You could go over the counter and pay but Céline stops you.

“It’s on me, since you *volunteered* your consultation” she says smiling and waving to the waiter.

Finally you feel an omen. If the waiter doesn’t come immediately, something to break the harmony will surely happen.

And there it is: “So, are we going over to Suzan’s tonight?” asks Céline distractedly.

“Well, actually. I have a problem. I’m busy tonight.”

Céline freezes, her hands engaged in looking for her purse stiffen. She looks up at you, her eyes icy cold. “Really, great news. What is it this time? A conference call from Japan? Or maybe midnight spaghetti with investors from Polesine?”

“Céline, please. It’s serious. You remember Santini?”

“Listen, I don’t remember any Santini and I don’t care. We said we were going out together tonight, that we would go to see Suzan. She’s invited us millions of times and we never showed up.”

“It’s important...”

Céline holds her cigarettes. She lights one up and slightly inhales. It’s clear she’s about to lose her cool.

“Maybe Santini is very important, I understand. But I’m important, too. At least to myself, I am. What about you?”

“Of course you are.”

“All right, then show me please, I can’t go on like this. I work, you work, all right everybody works, I know. But what I want is a man, a man I can count on, a man I can go out with. Do you have any ideas when was the last time we went out together for dinner?”

“A week ago?”

“Oh, for God’s sake, just forget it.”

“Please, tell me. Two weeks ago?”

“I told you, just forget it, or you’ll make me lose it.”

“You’re pretty busy, too.”

“Yes, but I’m but I’m able to stop with some of the evening left. It maybe seven or nine, but then I stop. And if you were free we could do something together. Instead I spend every single evening eating pistachio nuts in front of the TV. Or I go out alone as if I were single. No, wait a minute: I actually am *single*.”

“Listen, I’ll have a bite with Santini, talk for a while and around eleven, twelve max I’ll come by. We’ll sleep together.”

“At what time do you have to get up tomorrow?”

“The usual: six thirty.”

“Then, forget it, I don’t feel like waking up so early. Sleep at home and we see each other another time. Maybe.”

“What do you mean maybe?”

“I mean maybe. I love you but I can’t take it anymore, you need to give up something or you’ll have to give up on me.”

“All right, forget about Santini. I just hope I won’t regret it.”

It was right then that Céline got up, put out her cigarette in the ashtray, smiled at you as if she were a female cobra and said: “No, no, Jack. Go to Santini. He really needs you. I can take care of myself. Alone or with someone else, what do you care after all?”

And left.

In limbo

Céline had warned you: you had to give something up.

Now, at least, that's not a problem anymore. You've nothing left, apart from two broken ribs, two black eyes and your spleen, which only by a miracle didn't get smashed, too.

You have all the time in the world to think. About love or your friends, for example. They were not such good friends after all, if when you were kicked out, they all ran away from you as if you were a leper, and stole all your clients. Everyone gathering to party at *Planet Woman*, and you paying for them, you playing the "big shot"... where are they now? Hello, you, where are you? Yeah, where are they? And Santini? Where is Santini now?

Concorezzo (MI) Luca Santini's house 8.00 p.m. March 5th

The street, where the family houses are lined up, is lit by street lamps. The night is fresh and silent.

Your Maserati is parked at the curb. Behind a window, on the first floor of a house, you and Santini are standing facing each other, silent. You're holding the box with the dessert in.

"I see you don't have much to say, Engineer."

"No, that's not true. I think we can do something. Actually, we must. We just have to think about it. We'll talk about it tonight. By the way, do you want to do it now or after dinner?"

"After, after. Now you must meet Michela and Giovanni. Be careful: I don't want them to know."

"Ok, trust me."

"Wait, one more thing. I have something for you. Don't open it now. Tomorrow, it's something from the office."

And so Santini gives you a white sealed envelope. You look at it and slide it in your pocket.

"Shall we go? Starters should be ready. "

"Thank God. I'm starving, if we had talked now you could have pressured me for anything in return for a piece of bread!"

You smile, get closer to Santini and take him arm-in-arm: "Call me Jack, Luca" you whisper to him.

Santini is surprised. Maybe uncomfortable. Then he leads you to the living room.

"You'll see, we'll find a solution" you insist.

You are not yet seated when a *long and narrow* 16-year-old boy comes in.

"This is Giovanni, my son."

"Hi Giò! I see you are the kind of guy who cuts his hair with a machete and comb it with a rake" you say, stretching your fat hand in the boy's direction, who looks puzzled and smiles faintly. The boy doesn't volunteer his hand but mumbles: "Nice to meet you." Then he turns around and makes it to the door.

“You’re not having dinner with us?”

“No, thanks. I made myself a sandwich, I’ll eat it in my room. I’m behind with my homework.”

Giovanni runs away. Now it’s Michela’s turn, the wife. She’s got sweet manners, slightly aged skin, hair with nice streaks. She comes into the living room arranging her skirt, as if she had just removed her apron. “Good evening, good evening. What a pleasure to have you here! I’ve been hearing so much about you from Luca.”

“Positively, I hope, right Luca?”

“It depends” Santini replies. “What do you think, Michela?” “How do I talk about Engineer Fly? Well or not?”

“Engineer, please excuse him. He’s always kidding.”

“Don’t worry, Madam, I like a joke, too.”

“I know, I know. Like the time you went to the bank with that story about your aunt...”

“Well...that time it was just a little joke...”

“Yeah...” said Santini, “who the fuck does this asshole think he is, I said to myself...”

Michela turns red. You smile, trying to make the best of it. Luca goes on: “Then it was her fault” and nods towards his wife “she convinced me to accept your offer. Right, dear?”

Michela ignores the comment. She is obviously disturbed, but tries to overcome the feeling quickly. And you, you wouldn’t mind the chance of changing the subject either.

“Well, thank you, I can see you have good taste. By the way, congratulations on the beautiful house.”

Michela is about to say something but Santini steps in after sipping on his drink:

“You like the house? Too bad they’ll take it away. In your opinion, will they kick us out immediately or will they take the furniture first?”

“Luca, what’s the matter with you, tonight?” Michela is frozen. She smiles fixedly at you, but her voice is full of irritation, puzzlement and doubt.

“What’s wrong with me? Nothing. Why?” Santini answers. “I just wanted to ask our dear friend Jack Fly, who put us in this mess, if he’s gonna help us with the mortgage. Because, you see, I don’t think I’ll be able.”

“Luca, stop it!. Michela’s voice is shrill but decisive. “I don’t know what’s wrong with you, but please stop. Mr. Fly, please excuse us.”

“No problem, really”, then you look at Santini. He kept calling you Engineer Fly. He doesn’t want to get informal, but you insist: “Come on, Luca, I told you. Everything’s gonna be fine. We’ll find a way. We just have to think about it...”

“Think about it? You still need more time to think about it? I have no more time. You know that at Nattan they’ve scorched the earth around me?”

“What are you talking about?” you protest.

“I’m only saying what I know to be true. They never considered me one of them. And now, with this Niscagi junk I haven’t sold to anyone,they’ve sentenced me to death”.

You and Michela look at each other perplexed. Michela is not standing anywhere near her husband. Maybe she could go to him and give him a hug. But she can't. She stands still, frozen, holding her glass. She looks at you, who are even more puzzled and shocked than her. You try to come up with something. "Come on, stop it. How can you say that they've torched you at Nattan? I know everybody praises and appreciates you. Then again with these Niscagi... How can they have put pressure on you, if I, the area chief manager, know nothing about it?"

Santini smiles. Puts down his glass on the coffee table and smiles. It is as if, all of a sudden, he has distanced himself, as if he has regained control. His tone now is completely different. "I apologise. I know this kind of problems mustn't be talked about over dinner." Maybe later. I know Michela has made a wonderful *quiche*. Right, sweetheart?"

Michela regains her aplomb quite quickly, too: "Yes, sure. Time for dinner. Please take your seats while I go to the kitchen." She moves towards the well-laid table showing you to your place. She does the same for her husband, who is right behind her. "Please sit, Luca. I'll be right back."

"Well, there's something missing, don't you think?" Luca notices.

"What?" his wife asks.

"The wine. We forgot to bring the wine upstairs."

"Don't worry, we can do without it" you say, not that convinced. Michela on her way to the kitchen stops at the threshold.

"No problem, sweetheart, please stay with Jack just a minute, but first, give me a kiss."

Michela is embarrassed while Luca kisses and holds her tight.

"Ok, I'm going down to the basement to get... hmm, I've got something in mind you're gonna love."

He goes down to the basement, while his wife and I are left alone. You make a move as if to stand up but she stops you. Actually, she sits down staring at you.

"Engineer, please tell me the truth. What's going on with my husband?"

"Sorry, Madam. Luca didn't tell you anything?"

"Absolutely nothing. Why? What was he supposed to tell me?"

"Nothing special, I believe." If Luca didn't want to confide in his wife, you were not the one to do it, either. This job, if nothing else, teaches you how to be discreet.

"Maybe Giovanni knows something, they spend a lot of time together. They share a passion for computers."

"I see..."

"But, if Giovanni knew something he would have told me, he tells me everything."

At this thought, Michela seems a little reassured. As you consider how naïve she is, you smile at her. She feels better: "Maybe it's nothing. Just a bad moment. It'll pass."

"That must be it. After all, this is a bad moment for everyone, in our field, at least."

"It'll pass, right? Michela asks, trusting.

"Of course."

A sharp sound rings out right at that very moment.

You and Michela stare at each other.

How strange, neither of you have ever heard the sound of a real gunshot, nevertheless you know it immediately.

Michela stiffens. You jump out of your chair and run in the same direction you saw Santini going. You get to the door leading to the basement at the same time as Giovanni, who has run out of his bedroom and he pushes you aside to go in first. But you, Jack, don't let him. He's still a boy, after all. You need to see what happened first. Giovanni looks at you full of hatred and freezes you. Just a split second and he's right in front of you, running down the stairs. You follow him down. Santini is lying on the floor of the basement in a pool of blood. In his hand he's still holding the gun. He's shot himself in the head. The air is filled with a strong smell, a burning smell. You gently move Giovanni away and feel Santini's wrist. There's no pulse. He died on the spot. Right then, just behind you, you hear a sigh and a moan. As you turn around, Michela falls with a heavy thump to the floor.

"Mom, Dad! And you, what are you doing there? Do something!"

You dash over to Michela, enfold her in your arms and lift her. She has the same heaviness of a dead body but still smells good. For a minute you think of Santini and his family. The family you never had, and maybe, never will. Then... only then you truly realize Santini is dead.

"Giovanni, she hasn't come to her senses, we need to lay her on a bed"

"Yes, let's take her upstairs."

You two can hardly make it upstairs, holding Michela, you by her arms and Giovanni by her feet. Once on top, you ask Giovanni: "Where is your mother's bedroom?"

"Forget it. It's upstairs. Better put her here, in my bedroom."

Giovanni opens the door. The room is full of computers, still cameras, videocameras, cassettes. You gently lower Michela on the bed. You feel her forehead. She's alive, at least she is. You'd like to say something but Giovanni shuts you up: "Don't!." He's like a robot, firm, scientific but his eyes are blank. "Call an ambulance, instead" he orders knowing all too well that it's too late.

You obey. You call an ambulance and the police.

Three hours go by before you leave Santini's house. The street is crowded with ambulances and police cars. You are spacy: the police questions wander through your head, also the way Giovanni was looking at you and Michela's vague stare. You walk towards your car, looking back to the windows several times. As you search for the keys in the pocket of your jacket, you find the envelope Santini gave you when you first arrived. You sit in your car and open it.

"Engineer Fly, in order to avoid having the house taken away. I have no other choice but to kill myself: I have four life insurance policies, at least one will pay! Please do not leave Giovanni alone. He's a good kid, and he might need a father, someone, who's not a loser like me. I don't really know why I'm asking you...perhaps, to cause you trouble, perhaps because I, somehow, want you to feel obliged to give something back to my family and me for all the pain you caused us. Goodbye."

In limbo

That night you cried. And even now, when Giovanni comes to see you at the hospital, you feel a sort of torment. You could be his father. A very young father like yours was. Only twenty-two years apart. You'd like to tell him, wouldn't you? So tell him, Jack. Tell him that even your father killed himself. He too, was ashamed of his debts. Who knows, maybe he'll forgive you. You know, you can talk to him. He comes to the hospital with Francesca. Sometimes you wonder, why is that? Don't ask too many questions, Jack. Take what comes and thank God for it. I'll be honest with you. You can do it. Let me tell you, you can.

"You see, Giovanni, what happened to your father has opened a wound I thought had been healed, but from that moment on it started bleeding again. You know, even my father killed himself..."

Giovanni moves back in his chair as if to avoid a blow or contact with a sharp object. "If you have a little time, if you want, I can tell you the story."

Who knows if Giovanni really wants to hear it, but how can you deny someone in a hospital?

"My parents were from the South and in the early '70s they emigrated, like many others. Some of them came here to the North, some went to Germany or Belgium. Mine chose America. They had relatives there who'd promised to help them. They were the *boat people* of our history. They went to Detroit and my father worked on the assembly line for a car company. Things must have gone well since they decided to have a baby...that's how I was born."

"Wow, so you were born in the States" Giovanni asks with shining eyes.

"Yes, I was an American citizen until at the age of eighteen when they asked me to choose, either Italian or American, and..."

"...you kept the American citizenship, right?"

"No, Giovanni. I chose to be Italian. Please don't look at me like that."

"Ok, but it's crazy. I would want a million times better to be American than Italian. Just think of all the opportunities..."

"Sure, sure, but I can have everything I'd have in the States. And on top of that, I have something that otherwise I would have lost."

"What's that?"

"The bond with my country, my roots."

"I don't get it" Giovanni says, slightly disappointed. "Never mind, go on with the story."

"Well...when I was born and for a while longer, as my aunt told me, my father and my mother, who was at the time working in the bakery of a cousin, were able to save money they would regularly send home. But in those careful times they didn't send it as they do now, through a bank or the post office."

"They did not exist? So how then?"

"No, no. Of course they existed, people just didn't trust them. They kept their money

under the mattress and when they were ready to send it home, they would give it to someone they trusted. People they knew, who would take the money and carry it to the relatives back home. My dad did that, too. He gave it to a relative, an uncle, Uncle Scignia, who promised him to take it to his hometown and buy him that piece of land my dad wanted so much. This uncle made great promises as to how safely he would invest the money and, when its value grew, he would buy an even bigger piece of land for him.”

“It sounds a bit like what you and my father used to do” Giovanni steps in.

Yes, Jack, this is what you feared, right? But you deserve this observation. So don’t speak, just think for a minute and then continue.

“Yeah, maybe you’re right. But let me finish the story, you’ll come to your own conclusions then.”

“Go ahead...”

“Well...my dad and my mom always dreamt of sending me to school back in the old hometown. They knew their old teacher was still there and they had become more and more homesick as time went by. It’s not like today, you can call practically every day or e-mail people. At that time long distance calls cost an arm and a leg, you had to go over to a friend’s or use a public phone. Only the mail was practical, and letters would take forever to cross the ocean. One day my parents receive a letter from uncle Scignia telling my dad he’d become an important businessman. He had bought a tractor factory and was waiting for him with open arms. He was offering my dad a job to thank him for having trusted him with his money for all that time, the money needed to buy the land. What was wonderful, the uncle went on, was that before you had needed to go miles and miles to work in a factory, maybe over to Fiat in Turin, well, now finally, there was someone delivering work to your very door. Not long after that, another letter arrived from an old friend of my dad, confirming everything the uncle had said. Everybody in town had applied to get a job in uncle Scignia’s factory. There were plenty of and my dad, who had already had experience in car assembly, would have had a job right away. They were promising something he could not refuse...just imagine: going back home, finally, with the idea of a job and a safe future. And so we came back to Italy.”

Good job, Jack. Giovanni is carefully listening to you and you feel proud of yourself, you’ve been able to get that smart and mocking boy interested. You continue with your story.

“When my parents got back to the town, they found out that things were tremendously different from what they’d thought. So different that not long after my dad...”

“Your dad?”

“Once thing at a time. First of all, uncle Scignia’s tractor factory, called Gancisi, did not exist at all.”

“There was no factory?”

“Worse: it went bankrupt even before producing a single machine. It had been a foolish investment. Scignia had bought the majority share of a company not doing

well, pretty sure of making it work. The result: the company went bankrupt and fired even the few workers who were still there.”

“It’s insane. This story pisses me off.”

“Shame, the feeling of having wasted years of hard work and no hope for the future killed my father who...”

“... killed himself.”

“Yes.”

“Like mine.”

“Yes, like yours. They found him one morning at the foot of a tree on that piece of land he so badly wanted to buy with the money he’d saved...He shot himself.”

“Poor Jack.”

“Poor dad, you mean. Suicide did not solve any of his problems, either. Actually, rumours went around town that he killed himself because of debts, because he lost everything gambling, because he had affairs...Well, shame fell on what was left of my family. My mom, poor woman, tried to manage, continue to work, be strong but she couldn’t keep it up. She got sick and after a while she died. I realize that from that time I have only very foggy memories, as if I wanted to erase them all.”

“You remember nothing, really? You were not that young.”

“No, I was almost seven but everything I told you, it’s from my aunt.”

“Your aunt Felicita?”

“Yes, how do you know?”

Giovanni almost smiles: “Don’t you remember? It was the aunt who left you all those millions of euro. Come on, don’t be embarrassed. My father was pissed, but my mother and I had fun with the story”:

“My aunt didn’t leave me any millions, but she took good care of me, she raised me with the memory, better the *veneration* for my parents. And I grew up with the desire...don’t know how to say it, well, with the desire to avenge them. Someone had picked up the gun my dad killed himself with and gave it to my mom. In my homeland, something doesn’t need to be said, I’ve always known, without ever being told, that the gun had been given to my mom so that she could use it to take revenge for my father’s death. Then, after her death, it was my job. The fact was that nobody was around to take revenge on. No-one knew anything about uncle Scignia, he was nowhere to be found, maybe he fled abroad with the cash, maybe he’s got a different name...I simply don’t know. I came to understand what had happened from reading the newspapers of the time. A real smart guy: no hints, no contacts, nothing. Even the police dropped the case after a while...”

“Yeah, at that time you didn’t have the show *Most Wanted?*”

You smile. “That must be it, in my hometown few had TV sets even in the early ‘70s. There was one in the town bar, and the bartender was charging a lot more even to those who didn’t watch it, and he’d go to the back and play cards. You have no idea how pissed off my uncles would get.”

Giovanni takes some time to think, as if gathering his thoughts, as if trying to retain everything he’s been told, then he asks you: “Do you still have the gun?”

“Yes, I do. I never even broke it open. It could still be loaded, for as much as I know, with just one bullet missing, the one that killed my dad. I must have put it somewhere, even if, to be honest with you I don’t know where. I don’t think it still works after so many years. Doesn’t matter. My revenge has been working hard and building a career for myself. More than a revenge, it’s a pay-off.”

Giovanni is pensive: “So, nothing has ever been heard of uncle Scignia? Unbelievable.”

How come, Jack, you are not answering right away? Why do you turn to the window, from where grey light trickles in, reminding those who might have forgotten that it’s still winter in Milan? And there’s nothing to laugh about.

“Unbelievable, yes. But let’s stop talking about it. Let me just tell you that I tried to find a job worth a lot of money and that I’ve always tried to be honest. It’s this longing to redeem my parents and their bad luck.” This is why what happened to your father affects me so much. I feel responsible. Please, Giovanni, forgive me.”

Now Giovanni is gone but there’s still something inside of you that keeps resounding, a pain you had forgotten, and now, has come back to stay. You said nothing, for example, that it was actually that very uncle Scignia, who had deceived your parents, used their money for all his speculations, who supported you through university and paid for your studies. Didn’t you receive Christmas money for fifteen years from a someone called Scagini? Money, lots of it...a lot more than you needed? It took you a while to understand that Scagini...Gancisi...were all anagrams of Scignia. Even when you finally understood, you pretended not to, you didn’t want to know that the money was coming from the very one responsible for your father’s death. The whole family pretended not to know, either. You tried to justify accepting his money, as a way, of getting a bit of pay-back for what was due to you. But a little voice kept telling you that things weren’t like that, that the bottom line was you were two of a kind. A little voice like this one, the one in your head that tells you the truth. The truth was, that he was buying off your forgiveness, and you were happy to sell it to him. Exactly as you’ve tried to buy off Giovanni’s forgiveness, right from the day after his father’s death.

Nattan Bank branch
9.05 a.m. March 6th

You’re standing by the window looking out. Francesca is also standing and has been staring at you for a while. Between the two of you, your desk, stacked with the usual million things. But today there are a million and two. A newspaper opened to the local section with a very short article on Santini’s suicide and also a white envelope, from which a hand-written paper sticks out.

“Jack...”

No answer.

“Come on, please, answer me...”

You begin to wake up, turn to Francesca and talk to her as if you were coming from a faraway world. “Yes, tell me.”

“It must have been terrible.”

“Terrible is not the word. I don’t even know if a right word exists. A minute before Santini was alive, asking me for help. A minute later he was dead. You know why?”

“Jack, calm down, don’t...”

“I’m calm, dead calm. You see, Santini asked me to help him and I tried to avoid him. I didn’t help him. It’s my fault!”

“What have you got to do with it? First of all, he was the one to quit his previous bank and, secondly, at best it was Nattan that could have given him a job as a bank teller.”

“I was the one who went to BNI, I praised him, I brought him here and then... Listen Francesca, I’ve got a lot to do with it, a lot indeed. I know it all too well. Now, I’ve got to do something, do what I can.”

Francesca comes closer. She lifts her hand and touches your arm. After so many years of working together, that’s the maximum intimacy she allows herself. Both of you know it’s enough. It says exactly what there is to be said.

“What are you thinking of doing?”

“First of all, I’ll never try again to convince any other bank employees to leave a safe job and become a financial promoter. I’m pretty sure they are not meant for this job. I’ll recruit only financial promoters from the competition.

“Nattan bank won’t like that very much.”

“I don’t give a shit. I’ll worry about Mancini later.”

Then you sit down, pick up the newspaper and the letter, and slip both of them in the drawer of your desk. You look up, your eyes on Francesca. You know they are tired eyes that show a lack of sleep.

“Please bring me the information about Santini’s account and call the bank. I haven’t been able to help the father, at least I can do something for his boy...”

In limbo

And then, there was Santini’s funeral. From Nattan bank only you and someone from his office, as if the big guys were all afraid of getting contaminated by being seen there. From the Investment National Bank, no-one. At least no-one you knew. That’s how people end. How did that guy used to say it?

What evil men do outlives them. The good is often buried along with their bones. So be it for Santini, too.

Later that evening, still with that feeling of emptiness in your head, that distant nausea and when you saw Celiné was calling you, you decided not to answer. Then you went to *Planet Woman*.

Milan, *Planet Woman*
11.40 p.m. March 12th

All of Nattan Bank that's worth shit was there, that night at *Planet Woman*. You, people from your office, some from the competition...Not a single managing director, no general managers, no heads of personnel, forget about a legal adviser like Attorney Sturli, from Sturli&Sturli, Swindles, CIA-style contracts & Likewise. Better this way, no? Who would want those swindlers around anyway? *Planet Woman* is not for married men but for bachelors like you. You have no family, no wife, no children. Families are no good for *Planet Woman* or this job. Santini proved it, after all. You need people who play with money, who squeeze money out of you with the same nonchalance they spend it. Someone who doesn't need the money he makes. One who uses it to buy a Maserati, not to pay for the mortgage or the kids' school. But if one starts thinking too much, then: Goodnight and Goodbye. Caution trickles in, fear, even fear of taking in people who'll end up killing themselves, and then Nattan will make no profits. And this is bad, as Sturli the lawyer says; as pale as guilt itself; really bad.

Probably this is why you need carefree people for this job, so that as soon as your men see you, as they usually do, they won't swarm around you like pigeons on tourists, knowing that you'll pick up the first tab and likely the last one, too. That night some of them pretend not to see you, some barely say hello. You've been touched by death. She brushed against you. You're dirty, you're not clean anymore. Thank God the music is loud and drinks are strong, and you can't stop thinking about it, even if you try.

"How come alone? Who's that dog that leaves a woman like you all alone? Do I know him?"

"No, I don't think so" a tall blond woman answers. She has irregular features and eyes that can cut you through. "Unless your name is Jack Fly":

"Wow, what an insight. At your service."

The blond woman smiles and lifts her glass as if to make a toast, but realizes her glass is empty. You take one from the bar counter, wink at the bartender and hand it to her.

"What is it?"

"No idea but I'm sure it's great. I know the bartender."

"Yeah, sure, you know everyone around here, right?"

"Practically. How do you know me?"

"My name is Alessandra Durante. I'm a friend of Claudio Elli."

"I see, ... good for him Got to congratulate him when I see him."

"He'll like that. But don't worry. I'm *only* a friend. Not *his* friend."

"I like that, too." This is what you are, Jack, the best dissembler on the market. The man always ready with the right answer. By the way, answer this question: what about Céline? Where is she? When you need her most, she's never around. Lately she's just been busting your chops. But now you are here, with a heavy heart and fate

sends you this beautiful woman. Chatting for a while is no sin.

“Well, so you are Big Jack. Claudio keeps talking about you, I’d hoped to meet you sooner or later.”

“What does he say about me?”

“That you are one of the toughest financial promoters around...”

“Too much praise. I like people like him, but...”

”But?”

“Nothing. What’s your job?”

“Ouch, I knew it was coming.”

“Why, are you from the IRS?”

“Worse.”

“Worse than the IRS there’s only one thing.”

“Correct.”

“No, I can’t believe it.”

“Please do...”

“You are a journalist!”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“I got it right, then?”

“First tell me why you don’t like journalists”

“Worse, you’re are a journalist who writes about economics”

Alessandra is wearing a tight dress with no nylons. She’s sitting on a tall barstool and crosses her legs. “Bravo, you guessed right. How did I know that you can’t stand journalists?”

“I suppose Claudio told you.”

“Oh, that would be too simple.”

“So..”

“So....it was written all over your face. Being a journalist means understanding right away who’s in front of you. Someone who does a job like yours, has a body and face like yours, doesn’t like people sticking their nose in other people’s business, and particularly, in yours.”

It’s your destiny, Jack, always having to deal with intelligent women. You wouldn’t mind some dumb model, some show girl who would just give it to you for a nice memory they could carry around, instead you always run into intelligent women, who just want to give you a hard time.

“Let’s see. What in my face and job make you think I don’t like journalists?”

“You like female journalists?”

“Let’s say that there are women I like. What the hell if they’re journalists... But don’t change the subject, answer my question.”

“I don’t answer, Jack, I never do. You wanna dance?”

She steps down from the stool and leans on your shoulder. The dress goes up showing her thigh, a lot of it. All the way up for you to see she’s wearing black panties.

It doesn't take much to get a man excited, she must be thinking. And it's true. As you're dancing, Alessandra takes your hand and leads you. You're not a bad dancer, for someone who weighs almost a ton and is six foot two. You move with ease. It's something unconscious. When one is so big, it's best to be careful. Alessandra pulls you, and you let her. She laughs a lot, Alessandra, but suddenly or maybe because of it, you recall Santini's suicide. This memory is a sharp pain, a pain so intense to take your breath away. You move away from Alessandra and head to the exit. "Where are you going? Listen, even if you stepped on my foot thirty times, it's ok" Alessandra says to you while grabbing at your sleeve as you are walking away down the dance floor. "Sorry, I don't feel like dancing anymore" "I understand." "Why?" You stop and look at her. "Why do you understand?" "I've heard that a friend of yours committed suicide." If you need to talk, I'll listen." Suddenly, you remove Alessandra's hand from your arm. "I don't feel like talking about anything to anyone. God forbid with a nosy journalist! Goodnight." And you leave the club as if someone were running after you.

In limbo

What was chasing you that night, Jack? Was it your own regret or the fear of what a journalist could have written in her paper: a story you wouldn't have liked at all? You got home, finished a bottle of water as if you were on fire, took off your clothes and dropped them on the floor. Then you opened the closet and took out an old super 8 projector. You placed it in front of the couch, took down the pictures on the wall and put a film on.

Three people appeared, out of focus, on a beach.

There was a man, who looks a bit like you, and a woman...she also looks like you. And a boy of five, who doesn't look like you at all. But it is you.

What was chasing you that night, Jack? How many times have you seen that film, over and over, that night, with elbows on your knees and hands holding your chin? How many times before that fate that was running after you, came knocking at your door?

Milan, Jack Fly's house 3.29 a.m. March 13th

"Coming."

You trip on the projector wire. Turn on the light. Who the fuck can it be at this time of night? "Coming!"

The front door has a peephole but you never look. Someone your size doesn't need to peep. So you open the door, suddenly, abruptly. You are in your underwear but when you realize it, it's too late.

In front of you, Alessandra.

"What are you doing here?"

"You always receive guests *like this*?"

"Sorry...I wasn't expecting anyone at this time"

"You're not gonna let me in?"

"A nosy one that just can't give up, right?"

"Sometimes."

"Come in. Just let me just put something on."

You lead Alessandra into the living room and along the way, you pick up your coat, your jacket, your shirt and tie, your pants, your socks and shoes. You bundle everything up and disappear into the bedroom. When you come out you're wearing sweatpants and a worn-out sweater.

"You know, you looked much better before" Alessandra says after having checked you out for a while.

She's seated on the couch, right behind the projector. You rush to gather up all the films. "Really, Well, I told you, I didn't expect anybody this late."

"I know financial promoters have no imagination" Alessandra says. "It's just that you left so bluntly, without even giving me your number..."

"Actually, how did you get here? I didn't give you my address."

"Remember my job?" Alessandra smiles while taking the glass of whisky you hand her.

"And you must be very good at it, too."

"That's what everybody says. I'd love your opinion, too, but not tonight. Tonight I want you to tell me everything. I know you need to talk to someone who'll listen to you. Here I am."

"Who's sending you? The paper *Sole 24 Ore*?"

"Don't be such an ass. Let's just say it's the Salvation Army who sent me. They knew you needed help and sent me to save you." Alessandra invites you to sit down next to her. "They even told me I can do anything necessary to succeed."

Has any woman, in the entire world, been able to cross her legs in such a tempting way?

In limbo

I remember a time I really liked you, Jack. God knows if you remember.

You were walking across Vetra square, you'd just bought some 'Coin Stores' shares, and were walking around with a nice lady and her Chihuahua, as if you knew everything about department stores. At some point a pit-bull came dashing and flung itself on the tiny dog, biting on it as if it wanted to swallow it. The little dog started

yelping, the lady was in panic and started yelling. You, you didn't think twice: grabbed the pit-bull by the leash and started pulling.

The dog was growling. You started swearing, then the owner of the pit-bull showed up, yelling and screaming, your friend almost fainted, her little dog completely trapped (which is normal for Chihuahuas anyway) in the pit-bull's mouth, which had no intention of letting go. And you, you were pulling. Up until when, you bit it on the ear. Finally the pit-bull-monster let go of the Chihuahua and started yelping. But you, you didn't let go. Thank God some of the people who'd gathered around pulled you back and moved you away. What the fuck did you want to do to that dog anyway, Jack, eat it?

The funniest thing was that, after the situation had calmed down and everyone understood that nobody, either human or animal, was badly hurt, you went around giving away your business card to the small crowd which had been attracted by the show of a man biting a dog, and started looking for clients.

That's what I liked about you, Jack, biting a pit-bull. Not when you got fucked with no Vaseline either. Not now that you're spending your nights getting drunk on cough syrup.

Definitely not now, Jack..

Jack, are you still there?

No, I guess you fell asleep. Too many drugs.

Nattan Bank head office

10.00 a.m. July 26th

Bricks don't fall from the sky all that once. They come from God knows where, perhaps behind the solar system, and then calmly aim at you. You still might not realize it, but they're already on their way. And then they arrive, first slowly, consistently, with no hurry, as if taking pleasure in your illusion that your troubles might be over.

And so, the day right before the holidays, a month before the Stock Exchange debut, Marco Shitface Mancini, comes to the area managers' meeting looking almost repentant, always supported by Sturli, the lawyer. The cat and the fox, but who's the cat and who's the fox?

"Dear friends, I'd like to wish you all happy holidays. I think you really deserve it, even if not all of you have reached the goals we expected. This is why we are forced to postpone *sine die* the distribution of the stocks we had anticipated. The bank administration, in fact, doesn't want to assign them anymore. I don't agree with that, but you now how it goes.....I had to accept."

General uproar. From the end of the room a voice is heard: "What the fuck are you talking about Mancini?"

"Imperiali, look, you have an unmistakable accent. ..Please behave."

“You idiot! A month prior to getting into the Stock Exchange, you come and tell us such shit” replies a voice.

“I’m sorry I’ve disappointed you, but they guarantee me it’s only a question of time. As a matter of fact the president is not happy about the results, but if...”

“Doctor Mancini! Do you have realize what you’re saying? In a few days everyone is going on holiday, and in September Nattan will be listed in the Stock Exchange, and right now you’re asking us to give up our stock options?”

“Innocenti, I didn’t speak about giving them up.”

“Your interviews are all over the papers telling how much everyone should trust you and then you don’t keep your word, not even with us?”

“It’s only a little delay.”

“The perfect speech from an Inter fan” says someone else.

Mancini would love to take the chance to change the subject...:”Well, why?”

“Because the near future of Inter fans is *never*. And I think we’ll see those stocks only when Inter will have won a tournament” says the same voice.

Sturli is amusing himself.

“You see, I was right”, says the same voice.

“Well, no...” says Mancini, “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that you’re just fucking with us...”

“That’s not it, believe me. After all, this stock option was just an additional bonus the company wanted to grant you. No other banks did it.”

“Listen, Mr. General Manager. Serious banks promised stocks and gave them to their financial promoters. Management has kept its promises.”

“We were ready to do it, too. But then...”

“...But then, what?” you step in, “It’s not true this option was additional. Let’s stop with this shit. You’ve kept us quiet for so many years with these promises. With similar promises you made us accept new conditions, new restrictions, new penalties, the crazy budgets you’d fixed for us regardless of the market. These stocks were part of our salary. It’s all written in black and white.”

Hey, Jack, when you speak like that, you always stand up. One with your body might as well take advantage of it. But Sturli, the lawyer, is a snake; thin and winding, the kind that’s never been afraid of brown bears.

“Mr. Fly, you have actually signed nothing.”

He had gotten up, too. He’s as tall as you, but a thousand times lighter. Like a long, thin dart filled with poison that could kill an elephant. “From what I know, your group in the last few months hasn’t sold any Galaxy and you recruited... wait, let me think.” Silence fell in the room. Sturli takes out some papers and looks at them.

“Nobody. Here you go, not a single financial promoter. So, you see, you’re the last one who can talk. Not only that, but how come none of your clients have accepted the new account conditions and can still change banks as they wish?”

“So what? Afraid of the competition? I’m not.”

“It was clearly written that Nattan had the right to decide, up to a month before the Stock Exchange debut, how to subdivide the stocks.”

“Yes, correct., but deciding on how to subdivide them has nothing to do with distributing them.”

“Exactly, my dear Fly. It’s written nowhere they’ll be given out...”

As silence falls in the bedroom of two lovers, bound in ecstasy, moaning and panting until the unaware husband, thought to be away, suddenly comes in the room and turns on the light, now in the conference room of Nattan Bank no-one seems even to breathe and chill fills their hearts. After a few seconds of dead silence, the rustling of contract paperwork can be heard, louder and louder along with a more and more consistent hum of voices, but not for very long. Jack is still standing. All the other area managers are looking at each other. Mancini pretends to be reading the paper *Sole 24 Ore*.

Sturli, the lawyer, sits back down and says with a soft, but clear voice: “Well, now, Engineer Fly, are you considering suing us?”

In limbo

Your limbo, Jack, is a hospital bed. Everything is white, the walls are white, the bandages are white, the sheets are white, as white and pure as Sturli the lawyer. Once in a while someone comes to visit you. Sometimes you’re awake, sometimes not. If it’s Francesca who comes, she doesn’t wake you up. You know she’s come because she always leaves you something on your bedside table. The newspaper, that you won’t read, or cookies, or oranges. In contrast, when Giovanni comes, nothing can stop him. He starts clearing his voice, he coughs. You like it that he wakes you up. Now that you’ve told him your story, you feel at ease. He’s also at ease. He thinks on how to take revenge. You don’t, it’s just that you feel too tired. He’d like to counterattack, then looks at you, all wrapped in bandages and starts laughing. Alessandra Longhigh Durante comes, too. She comes and makes you dream. Be honest, you’d love to see her in a tight hospital uniform, with tits ready to explode out at any second and the red cross printed on the little hat. You dream of her kneeling on you, as you peep into her neckline while she checks your blood pressure or your heartbeat with the stethoscope. Instead, she talks about economics and finance, and how it was only by chance that she came to visit you in the first place, just because a friend from the crime beat happened to be at the Emergency Room the night a guy, nearly beaten to death; who was said to be a financial promoter, had been admitted, and so gave her a call. Working girls! Smell a rat and dash to the Great Loser Ward, where from then on you had your personal sexy nurse to fantasize about. You, who still remember that night at your house, but we know you’re great with the imagination. She, instead, doesn’t even seem to remember having slept with you. She asks you how come you didn’t report the assailants to the police. If you believe that it was your former bank that had sent them...Come on, forget it, it’s impossible!

“So... you have enemies?”

“No. Absolutely not”, you answer.

“Come on, give me something.”

You tell her that if there's something you'd like to see investigated, it is whether there are any relationships between Niscagi and Nattan Bank. She thanks you and kisses you on the cheek, but not far from your lips, and leaves.

There's someone else who comes to see you, an old schoolmate from primary school, Mirko Cascetti. Just think about it, you hadn't seen him for over twenty years, and now here he is at the door of your hospital room. He comes a couple of times a week for some sort of treatment on his shoulder and saw you by chance. This makes you happy. You let him tell you lots of stuff and you do the same. What a coincidence: Mirko had been in the police for many years and was now a private detective.

"Could you help me find out who beat me up?"

"I could, but don't want to, Jack. From what you told me, you've gotten into something real big and, you'd better forget about it or you'll find it up your ass. It'll hurt!"

"What makes you think it's like that?"

"Well, you don't beat the shit out of someone just because he wants to sue you or steal some customers. Maybe I'd beat him up if I'm the shopkeeper next door, but if I'm a bank, what the fuck do I care?"

"So?"

"So there must be something else. Something you did without realizing, but whatever it was, you'd better apologise and make clear you didn't intend for it to happen."

"All right, but to whom? Who do I have to make that clear to?"

"I don't know and I don't wanna know. But I'm pretty sure that if you really wanted them to know, they would get the message."

"So, I should just forget about it?"

"Well, what do you think?"

"I think that no matter where I turn I've just been eating shit. I'm getting tired of it."

"There are two ways of thinking here. One is, if someone made you eat shit, you can start thinking about revenge. The other is, if someone has made you eat shit, you just shut up so you won't have to eat more. When one is a small fish, and you Jack, are small..., tiny, you know what's the better choice."

Milan, Nattan Bank head office

11.10 am. July 26th

As you get back from the meeting the only thing you wanna do is let the steam off. Someone's gotta pay. So first you do it with Francesca by telling her everything in a flood of words, and then, when Céline calls you, you turn it into the Vajont tragedy. Maybe, who knows, it's because you want her to pay for having cheated on her with Alessandra four months earlier, that's why you're so rude with her.

"They stuck it up my ass, They fucked me up, Céline, what do you want me say?"

"How? I don't understand."

"You don't understand because you never gave a shit about my work. They've been fucking with me all these years and this is the result."

“Who are you talking about, can you tell me? Calm down and explain it to me.”

“I don’t want to fucking calm down! How long have I been working for Nattan? Ten years. And how long have they been fucking with me? Ten years, that’s it.”

“You’re not making me understand anything.”

“It’s just, I don’t know what to do now. I feel like sending everyone to hell and walking away. I’ve just put too much into this bank. I’m not gonna give them the satisfaction.”

“Why would you have to leave?”

“Because they’ll end up kicking me out. I know it’s gonna happen. That Sturli, that jelly-fish can’t wait for it.”

“Jack, you’re the best, why would they kick you out?”

“Enough, with all these fucking questions! I’ve had it.”

“Jack, I get it, it’s just impossible to talk to you right now. Let’s have a lunch together, ok?”

“Ok, ok. One o’clock?”

“Yes, but not the usual café. Let’s meet over at the San Tomaso.”

“Why?”

“Well, now it’s you asking too many questions. Just do it and give me Francesca on the phone. I hope I’ll get something from her, at least.”

In limbo

Céline, Céline, light of my eyes and flesh of my thoughts... Well, actually, it wasn’t exactly like that, but anyway. Since you’ve been in the hospital, Céline has never come, never called. You tried to call her on her mobile: either no answer or no signal. Her home answering machine after a while refused any new messages. It means that if she listened to them, she didn’t cancel them. But it’s more likely she hasn’t even listened to them. Even Francesca tried to call her, although she did not tell you to prevent giving you more pain.

When exactly did you lose Céline? Maybe you never had her. Maybe even when she was in your arms, letting you kiss her and make love to her for an entire weekend, you never had her. Well, lately, you did nothing else but fight. And when, over at the San Tomaso, she came up with that brilliant idea, even then she was actually already cheating. Cheating too, like everybody else.

Milan, Osteria San Tomaso

1.00 p.m. July 26th

“Why are we having lunch here? I don’t even like this place.”

You look around only slightly disgusted. The place is not that bad, after all. Well furnished, rustic style from the early 19th century, with ceramic and white metal plates and a cool awning. At least it’s not decorated Babylonian style, with braziers,

gold, stucco, decoration and mirrors, as if you were on the stage of the Nabucco opera.

“I didn’t feel like having lunch with the entire Nattan Bank” Céline answers.

“Good idea. Sorry for before. Let me tell you what happened.”

“Forget it. Francesca already told me. I realized you weren’t...let’s say, in control of your feelings.”

“At the least! Do you realize I won’t get my stocks. What did I work all these years for? I should have thrown the table at him and walked out.”

“That wouldn’t have been the right thing.”

“It would have.”

“Jack, calm down please. Listen to me. I have an idea.”

Your mobile starts ringing: “Wells Fargo? We bought it at 58 dollars and 11 cents...Ok, see you.”

“What did you buy?” Céline asks.

“Wells Fargo shares, one of the biggest banks in the world.”

“Wells Fargo. Never heard of it.”

“It’s not listed in Italy.”

“So, even if you wanted, you couldn’t find work there...” Céline says, trying to ease the atmosphere.” But you, of course are already a thousand miles away from her.

“Oh, come on! You really think they’d come all the way here to look for financial promoters?”

“Too bad. So do you want to hear my idea or not?” she asks.

“Sure, I’ll burn his office down with a flame-thrower?” you ask.

“No. My idea is serious, and it may turn this mess into a great opportunity.”

“Oh, for God’s sake... even you started using market language.”

“Please, don’t say anything now... the waiter is coming. Let’s order first:”

“Ok, but...”

“Give me a kiss meanwhile.” You obey willingly. After you order she resumes talking: “So, listen. I’ve given it some thought. Regardless of what Sturli says, the promoters who have signed the new contracts, still have the right to sue the bank on the ground of implied breach of contract. And you could leave taking with you all your promoters, who I think are pretty fed up with Nattan and all the rest. Is this really what you wanna do?”

You stop eating, the piece of celery stuck in your mouth. “No, I don’t think so. Well, it’s clear I don’t feel like starting all over again somewhere else. If possible I’d rather see things get resolved, if they give me what’s mine and leave me alone to do my job.”

“Exactly. Are you willing to forget about the *stock options* in exchange for peace?”

“Can’t I have both?”

“I don’t know. For now, you have to protect your ass. Sturli and Mancini are playing tough: CIA-style contracts, no stocks, tomorrow they’ll probably lower your commissions and maybe they’ll want to know who you’re gonna vote for in the next election. All right, but they must understand that they don’t hold all the aces. You have a few, too.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that, first of all, a lawsuit on the ground of a breach of contract, even though very difficult for you to win, but in my opinion not impossible, is always lots of trouble a bank would rather avoid.”

“Especially now that they want to get listed on the Stock Exchange.”

“Yes, especially now. Secondly, the risk of you leaving and taking with you your financial promoters is real. Thirdly, you are truly one of the best promoters and recruiters. Why would they want to have you as competition?”

“Hmm... Quite a flattering portrait but I don't think Sturli will be willing to sign on.”

“We'll find out immediately. Read this.” Céline takes a protocol out of her bag and with an accomplished smile hands it to you. “Here. I gave you the idea. Now, what you have to do is to make those over at Nattan believe it's not your idea, or mine, but theirs.”

And you, Jack, take the paper and start reading it.

Milan, Nattan Bank head office

11.30 a.m. July 27th

Giorgio Salutti is the general director of Nattan Bank. A young and decisive guy. Funny. Treacherous. He's younger than you, Jack, and more powerful. But you are a brown bear with a lot of interesting things to say. And you know how to talk to him. He's the kind of guy that if taken on face to face, straight forward, he'll listen. You know you don't need any turn of phrases. Actually, be a little sarcastic. He'll have fun talking back to you. “How come a meeting just before the holidays, Mr. Fly? Can't we see each other when we come back?”

“You know, Mr. Salutti, I thought this way you'd have more time to think things through. So, in September, you'll be ready with an answer.”

“If you think I'll be spending my holidays thinking of work, let me tell you right now: No way. The only thing I'll be thinking about and that reminds me of winter is Inter. Please no jokes. Not because the sun never shines on Inter but I do miss spending those beautiful freezing evenings at the stadium... Something that, if you don't already get, you'll never understand.”

“Well, look. I've never been in a stadium.”

“Really? You don't like sports?”

“It's not that, I love sports. I was a boxer twenty kilos ago. It's soccer I don't get.”

“Well, you're not here to beat me up over the *stock options*, are you?”

“I only answered your question. I don't go around beating people up.”

“Great! Then, what? What can I do for you? Holidays are just two days away and be sure that whatever you're gonna tell me, it'll be forgotten even before you leave.”

“That's why I'm going to leave you this memorandum. What kind of a promoter would I be if I didn't know these little tricks?”

Salutti starts laughing “Good job, Fly. Tell me then.”

“You’ve heard the news, right?” you press him.

“No. What are you talking about?” Salutti asks.

“You know what I’m talking about. You just mentioned it before.”

“You mean the *stock option* that has been postponed?”

“Postponed? Let’s say that Nattan has never been soft, but now, that you go hand-in-hand with that Sturli, you’ve become real vicious.”

“Wow, what language. You know perfectly well how hard it is to be listed in the Stock Exchange. I told you, and Mancini, too: it’s only postponed.”

“All right, all right. I’ll pretend to believe it, but that’s not the point. The point is, that after what’s been happening lately, I don’t feel safe anymore at Nattan. I saw the contracts you make people sign and that you can kick people out as you please.”

“We absolutely have no intention of messing with you, Fly, you know that.”

“I do and I don’t.”

“Come on! You’re one of the best.”

“Yes, but one of the few who still doesn’t have any formal restrictions or agreements. I didn’t sign the new contracts. You don’t have complete control over me, I can leave any time. And you might not like that, especially now that you are about to get into the Stock Exchange.”

“Right. How come you didn’t sign anything?”

“Because I already had the promoter mandate, so I didn’t get flattered by mermaids offering me bonuses in exchange to my signature on a non-competition agreement, restrictions and penalties perfectly crafted by that vicious lawyer you work with. My clients, are also free to change banks, exactly as I am. Freedom, my dear Salutti, is worth more than a few millions euro.”

“I see, even though I don’t fully agree with you, had I been you I would have taken the bonuses; bottom line, money is money and a good way to evaluate freedom. So, what do you want?”

“I want to be sure you won’t kick me out. You know, looking for another job when you already have a contract is one thing. Looking for it when you’re unemployed is another.”

“Wow...quite a comfortable cushion you want, Mr. Fly. You can’t be asking to be safe here, working for us if, on the contrary, you don’t guarantee us that you won’t just leave whenever you want.”

And now, Jack, you smile.

“You’re right. I thought about it. Here it is, my memorandum. I guarantee you not to leave Nattan if you guarantee not to fire me. Since you said that anyhow, you don’t want to lose me, I’m not asking anything extraordinary. As for myself, I have no intentions of going anywhere else.”

“So, what you suggest is a double-binding contract.”

“Exactly. With this we’ll all be a lot more relaxed.”

“I have to think about it.”

“You see, wasn’t I right then, when I told you that summer is the best season to think and wanted to give you this? And another item in my memorandum, whoever breaks

the contract will have to pay four million euro.”

“How much? Boom! Heavy on the gall, Fly, aren’t you? Who’s gonna give you four million euro? Salutti keeps on smiling as he takes Céline’s paper and adds: “I’ve got to consult the lawyer.”

“These contracts are routine for a bank like yours and you need to consult with Sturli?”

“They are common for executives, not promoters.”

“So what? Can’t you make a decision on your own? Aren’t you chief of staff?”

“Fly, listen, you’re not selling me an insurance policy here. Now you only need to ask me to sign it immediately and my wife would be grateful to me for the surprise.”

“Yes, that’s right, didn’t you think of that?”

Salutti stands up, smiling, and wants to shake hands: “Have a great holiday, Fly, and have fun. I promise in September I’ll let you know everything as soon as possible. In the meantime, however, promise me something.”

“What?”

“Subscribe to some pay-tv channels and start getting interested in Inter. Here, if you want a career, let me tell you in all honesty, this is a *condicio sine qua non*.”*

condicio sine qua non.”* (mandatory)

In limbo

You remember that day, don’t you Jack? You left Salutti’s office ready to dance. You gave Céline a call telling her the bait had been flung in the water. You only had to wait and fish would eat it. You didn’t know that the only stupid sea scorpion in the sea was you.

Milan, Nattan Bank head office

3.02 p.m. July 30th

As you’re returning to the head office of Nattan Bank for that unexpected appointment Salutti has scheduled for you on the Friday just before the holidays, you trip on something and are almost fall. Unbalanced for a moment, you turn around to see what you’ve tripped over. It’s a young bum, seated on the sidewalk, his back to the wall of the building and one leg, paralyzed and barefoot stretched out. You had tripped on his leg. You don’t know whether to start yelling at him or apologize, when your attention is caught by what’s written on a cardboard sign next to him. It’s up-side-down, he hasn’t even noticed. You stop and tilt your head.

SORRY I NO WORK
I NO HOUSE NO FAMILI
HELP ME SMALL MONEY

The young kid stretches his arm. You know for sure that his leg is fine, that he's faking, but the sight of it wrings your heart. You know for sure you don't want to give him a penny, however you take a 5 euro bill from your pocket. You know you'll forget him right away, nevertheless you ask his name.

"My name is Jack" the boy answers.

Salutti is waiting for you in his office, he's with Sturli. As you go in, you can hear them talking about their passion in life.

"Look, Sturli, comparing Inter to Arsenal means knowing nothing about soccer!"

"Well, it seems that this discrimination between people who understand soccer and those who don't, exists only in terms of those who support Inter and those who support any other team."

"Hold it, this is insulting! Well, you really think supporting Milan is something to praise? Did you know that a well known colleague of yours has the Milan logo printed on his toilet?"

"Giorgio, it's envy, just envy, my dear. Simple, pure envy."

"What envy? Any team can win the tournament by bribing the referees":

"Now, you're going too far. It wouldn't take much to sue you for libel."

"Yeah, sure...Oh, here is engineer Fly. Please come in, take a seat. You know, Sturli, that our engineer here confessed knowing nothing of soccer?"

"Unbelievable. Absurd. What are you interested in then Mr. Fly?"

You, Jack, need a little time to recover from the shock of seeing Salutti and Sturli chatting away about soccer as if they were at the Bar Sport. But it takes you just the blink of an eye. This is what I like about you.

"Well, just because someone's not interested in soccer, it doesn't mean he has nothing else he's interested in."

"Really, why? What else is there?" Salutti asks with just a touch too much of surprise on his face.

"Women, for example."

"No, no, not for me. Too much trouble, too time consuming" Salutti replies as he bursts out in a loud laugh.

"That's it. But, supporting Inter doesn't cause you trouble?" Sturli insists.

"Yeah, but that's different" Salutti replies, "if you watch a game you can always get up and take a leak. When you talk to a woman, forget it: they want your attention round the clock and no distractions. What do you think, Fly?"

"Women being a bit of a bore is out of the question. But, with them there's no risk of falling asleep. If I watch a game on TV, maximum ten minutes and I'm sound asleep. It's totally different if there is a boxing match on, then I can stay up all night."

"That's right, are you aware Sturli that our Mr. Fly here is a boxing fan":

"One must be crazy to step into a ring and beat the shit of one another" Sturli adds.

"Being brave, stepping into a ring is not enough, lawyer Sturli, what's more important is to be competitive."

“Competitive?”

“Yeah. When I was a boxer, they used to call me The White Hope, I was eating well, no alcohol, ran 20 kilometres a day, thousands of push-ups, worked on the speed-bag and endless rounds with sparring partners. Physically I was a finely tuned machine. After all, it was my face at risk in the ring.”

“Like with your clients!” Sturli ironically replies.

“You know, I didn’t think of that, but I’ve just realized....”

“What?”

“That I’m one of the lonely types, I work on my own. That’s why I like sports like boxing, just one man versus another. It’s my philosophy to do all that’s necessary, all the sacrifices needed to be competitive, take all the risks, the responsibilities but get all the glory, as well. Instead, both of you are made for team work. You love soccer and work in teams. If things go well, you take the credit. If things go wrong, well, you fire the coach. However, everyone is free to do whatever they like.”

“Am I hearing a slight reproach?. Look, I called you because I have good news. Don’t get too clever or we won’t tell you anything” Sturli proclaims.

“I’ll be a good kid then.”

“Good, Fly. We gave it some thought. You see, we really care about you, therefore we have decided to satisfy your requests.”

“Wow! You made up your mind so quickly?”

“We’re in the middle of this situation with the Stock Exchange and we want no unfinished business. Even then something always seems to come up. Here’s what we have to offer.”

You, Jack, are seated on one side of Salutti’s desk, that side is spotlessly empty. On the other side, Salutti and next to him, Sturli, the lawyer. God knows why he’s always on everyone’s right side. You take the papers the lawyer gives you and start reading.

“To make a long story short, Fly, it’s all very simple. We guarantee you your position of area manager for 60 months. Likewise, you guarantee to us not to go to the competition for the same 60 months. Whoever breaks the deal will pay one million euro penalty. You have a million euro, right?”

You lift your eyes from the papers and look at the lawyer “I don’t know. Eventually, I’ll collect it from friends.”

“Obviously” Sturli goes on, “This doesn’t mean that you’ll just sit on your butt for the next five years, doing nothing, sure of your position. The possibility to break the contract always exists.

“What’s that?”

“For legitimate reasons. If you were to do something really bad, extraordinarily bad, sanctioned by the Consob...”

“Like what?”

“Like stealing money from us, or punching Mancini on the face during a meeting.”

“What about something less farfetched?” you press on.

“It’s not that farfetched that you might punch Mancini” Salutti steps in, “I know you two don’t always get along. However, even a considerable decrease of commissions

produced by your area could represent a legitimate reason for dismissal.”

“I see. And you?”

“What about us?”

“You, I mean, what kind of right would you give me to break the contract?” you then ask.

With eyes half-closed, an affected smile appears on Sturli’s face. You know Jack, what’s behind this smile, and you realize that Nattan is risking zero. Just when Sturli is about to answer you, Salutti steals his joke: “What’s good for you, obviously, is good for us, too. If we did something terrible to you, or cut down your commissions without notice and good reasons, if we prevented you from working... Come on, my friend, it’s clear!”

You just sit there, empty minded. You leaf through the papers, read it and reread it, then speak directly to Salutti: “Excuse me. Didn’t we mention being more formal?”

“Well...yes, I think so, the fact is that we don’t write contracts like this every single day. In a way, the fact we have accepted it, turns you into something more than just a promoter, even something more than an area manager...I’d say almost a partner. But, if you don’t like it, please lets’ be more formal.”

“No, no. It’s ok.”

“So, are you gonna sign it?”

“Bottom line, both of us seem to have an interest here: you, the protection I won’t leave you in the lurch, since you care so much about me, and I, that you won’t kick me out. Something I care about. So, what have we got to lose?” you say looking back and forth between Giorgio and Sturli.

“To lose?” Nothing I believe” Both of them answering almost at the same time.

You, Jack smile, take out of your pocket the ballpoint pen worth 500 euro with which you sign contracts with your clients and put your signature down.

There’s a moment of such silence that the sound of the pen on the paper can be heard. But right after, the atmosphere becomes suddenly relaxed and you almost feel like chatting.

“Good for you engineer” the lawyer says.

“By the way, Jack, how did you end up being a promoter with a degree in nuclear engineering? Salutti asks.

“I chose nuclear engineering because in the early ‘80s it seemed that nuclear energy use was feasible and that would have guaranteed me a job. Instead after the 1987 referendum when all four nuclear plants were shut down, my hopes of finding a job in Italy became ziltch. I couldn’t leave my aunt. I even tried to work in films as a script writer.”

“Yes, but how did you become a promoter?”

“By chance. I met the general manager of Modestini Bank who was looking for new blood. It’s because of them I do this job.”

“Very well.”

“And you Giorgio, how did you end up becoming the commercial head manager of a bank”

“My father’s fault. He made me quit university quite early. He was an important client of a bank and he found me this job. After a few years as a bank teller, I was transferred to bank trading, I’ve always been special. In 1985 I was the one who opened the highest number of new accounts, in 1986 the one to sell the most policies and in 1987 the one to sell the most bonds...In short, I’ve always done everything they ordered me to, perfectly.”

“Of course” it’s your comment, mumbled between your teeth, but clear enough for them to hear, “this is how you build a career.”

In limbo

What’s in that juice, Jack? Not bad, right? Thank God, they didn’t beat you up so badly that you’d need a straw to drink with. Actually, that Don Perignon, you drunk with Céline, the night you celebrated the contract, had another taste altogether, didn’t it?

Also the taste of her skin, her mouth, her hair was different. The day after, early, you left for MonteCarlo, the typical vacation for a ramping financial promoter. She had suggested Avignone, of course, but you, well, let’s face it, you asked yourself: “What the fuck do I care about a pile of thousand-year-old stones? I wanna see cunts, cars, play at the Casino, meet the stars...” that night you didn’t care much about getting enough sleep. You toasted, you made love. After a long break you finally had made love again. Right at that moment you thought that things were bound to work out fine. What you had planted over the years was finally giving you its best fruit. Céline was on your side, she’d given you an excellent idea, she’d allowed you to find peace. That night, it was beautiful. After making love you just feel asleep in each other’s arms. But in the middle of the night something woke you up.

“What the hell are these Bio Niscagi bonds, anyway? How come everyone knows about them but me?”

The morning after you remembered nothing.

Then, vacation was over. You came back to Milan, all tanned, right on time for the monthly meeting.

Milan, Nattan Bank head office

10.00 a.m. September 10th

“What the fuck are these Bio Niscagi bonds, anyway? How come everyone knows about them but me?”

“What do you mean you don’t know? Didn’t you get the e-mails with the information?”

“Which e-mails? I got nothing. I’ve been hearing about them for months now but nobody told me anything official.”

“Strange, I thought all area managers had been informed. Are you positive, Jack?”

“Listen, cut the crap! If I tell you I got nothing, I mean nothing.”

“Engineer Fly, could you be so kind as to tell us, too, what you and Doctor Innocenti are talking about?”

“Nothing, just nothing Doctor Mancini. Sorry for the interruption. Please continue.”

“Ok, thank you Innocenti. As I was saying...”

Great, caught like two kids chatting in class. You only lacked a note for our parents to sign.

“... Nattan has been quoted in the Milan Stock Exchange for a week and our share has already jumped from 10 euro to 11,41. The Niscagi bond placement has been absorbed by the market in just a few days. We’ve already placed twenty million of them without even a press bulletin. They have a better interest than State bonds. The uncertainty of the market makes savers look for safe investments. It’s a solid company with great prospects for the future; if we are able to sell them to all of our clients, we’ll not only make profits, but we’ll help the economy of the country, too. So, do you agree with me? Shall we all try to book them even if they’ll be only available starting in January?”

Marco Shiface Mancini is the only man in the entire world, who looks worse with a tan than without one. It’s just that the brownish of his tan gets all mixed up with that of his hair, his suit, his tie, his teeth. He ends up looking exactly what he is: a big, huge piece of shit.

“I won’t” you say, Jack.

“You won’t what, engineer Fly?”

“I won’t try to market the Niscagi bonds and won’t have my men do it. I know nothing about them and nobody gave me any information. The only time I had anything to do with them they dropped 18% in just half a session.”

“What do you mean no-one informed you? What are you saying?”

“Only the truth. I’ve come to know about the Niscagi from my collaborators.”

“This is damn serious, you know? Especially coming from an area manager who has signed a contract like the one you have. The fact that you don’t get informed about your promoters’ portfolio is extremely serious, don’t you think?”

“Mancini, don’t try to make me the fallguy. I wasn’t the one who didn’t get informed, it was you who didn’t inform me.”

“Do you realize what you are saying? Listen, let’s just forget it. I’ll have the prospectus sent to you. Actually,...” Mancini turns to Sturli, who’s next to him, as always. “Well, you’ll get all the information you need.”

“Mancini, don’t waste your time. I’ve already obtained the information myself and let me tell you something, I’ll offer these Niscagi only to very few clients. They must like gambling, be interested in the Biotech market. Well, more or less...” you pretend to be thinking “I’d say a couple.”

“That’s how you put it, Fly?” Mancini looks at you as if he wants to kill you. Then he turns around to face Sturli and they whisper something to each other. “All right” Mancini resumes speaking, “let’s change the subject. Nattan shares have been doing pretty well...”

“... definitely for their holders” your voice is heard. What’s the matter with you? What’s your problem? Vacations didn’t do you any good? Who are you angry with? Do you really have to take on Mancini? Do you really think your contract is 100% safe? That it allows you to do whatever comes to your mind?

“Listen, engineer Fly, enough is enough. We are here to work, I can’t take this behaviour any longer.”

“Really, what about the story of the stocks you were supposed to...”

“This is not the moment. This matter was not on our agenda, please.”

“No doubt it’s not on the agenda, I wasn’t expecting it to be.”

“So, just drop it!”

“I won’t drop it, Mancini, You can’t act like nothing happened!”

“Well actually, nothing did” Sturli, the lawyer steps in. His voice freezes the room.

“Engineer Fly, you have no right to talk, you know that? Especially since you’re privileged. So, if you wanna be positive during this meeting, you’re welcomed to stay, otherwise, you might as well go.”

You look at your colleagues. Everyone’s staring at you: if nothing else, just because you’re a privileged one. Either you make clear what this privilege is about or give up and leave.

In limbo

Probably even there you made a mistake, Jack. If you wanted the others to be on your side, you should have told them everything. A leader cannot have skeletons hidden in the closet from his followers. You could have said: Sure, I was able to get an interesting contract. But you can do it, too.” Instead you just got up and left. While Mancini, looking at you as you were leaving the conference room, remarked: “You’re leaving. Better late than never”. Do you recall hearing it or not?

Milan, Nattan Bank branch

9.15 a.m. September 22nd

“Jack! Thank God you’re here! I don’t know what’s going on. I tried to call you on your mobile but there was no signal.”

“Hey, Francesca, please, calm down. What’s the matter? Who are these people?”

“I don’t know”.

Francesca is clearly all messed up. Not a bit less than your office is. All the computers are On, file cabinets open, drawers on the floor and closet doors wide open. On the floor piles of papers. In the middle of all this mess, two men, wearing dark suits even if it’s only the 22nd of September, are browsing among your clients’ folders. One of them, after hearing your voice, approaches you.

“Good morning, are you engineer Fly?”

“Yes, it’s me. Who are you?”

The man dressed in black takes out of his jacket a sealed envelope and hands it to you. “My name is Lampredi. This is my partner Fascetti. We are from the bank internal investigation bureau. Don’t worry, simple routine.”

“Simple routine, so that’s what you call it. You are destroying my entire office. From what I know you shouldn’t have even touched anything without me here.”

“Please, don’t get upset, it’s not worth it. I’m sure your secretary will put your office back together in no time:”

“Yes, but I don’t get it. I’ve been doing this job for over eleven years and nothing like this has ever happened. Why this privilege all of a sudden? Stepped on someone’s foot?”

“Please don’t get the wrong idea. It’s just routine. Today it’s you, tomorrow someone else. Please let us do our job and we’ll be out of here in no time.”

Sure, sure. As if they were willing to volunteer the fact that this was the punishment for what you said at the last meeting. Francesca is in pain as if they were searching through her bedroom with her standing naked You hug her.

“Come on, I’ll help you with this mess, but now I’ve gotta go.”

“You’re leaving? And let them ransack your office?”

You smile. “Come on, didn’t you hear what the gentlemen said? “Don’t get mad. It’s nothing”. Come with me, let’s have a coffee.” You push her delicately to where the coffee machine is. Francesca follows you reluctantly, always looking back, as if checking on the inspectors.

“Listen, Francesca, don’t worry. It’s probably just a random investigation. We have nothing to worry about? Right”

“Of course not, as always. But I have a strange feeling. Why are they looking? What are they looking for?”

“Nothing in particular, and they’ll find nothing. That’s why I want to leave. I want to show them I’ve nothing to fear. Please stay here and check on what they’re doing. Don’t do anything, just keep an eye on them, please.”

“Ok, but really, all of this it’s very disturbing. Oh, I don’t know if I feel like breaking into tears or throwing computers at them.”

“Please, don’t”.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m just gonna wander around for a while. Please, try to cancel all my morning appointments, do it quietly, please, but don’t be too secretive. Tell my clients I called you from home , that I’m sick.”

And after that you leave, a smile printed on your face as you say goodbye to the two inspectors.

In limbo

Then you wandered all morning. With no destination. You bought a synthetic fur-coat for Céline. You sat down at a café and read the paper. Things you had never

done before. For some reasons you found yourself in front of the window of the weapon store down on Borseri Street. All kinds of weapons on display: Japanese swords, machetes, jack-knives, guns, rifles, knuckle-dusters. A party of danger, burnished and chromium-plated stainless with sinuous and rugged shapes, of sharp and cutting lights. Who knows if the inspectors were sent really by Mancini after the meeting the other day, you wonder. Impossible, was your answer. It's purely by chance. What do you think now, Jack? Was it really by chance? Oh, here's Francesca. She brings you the newspaper you're not going to read but also some good news. Real top of the hour news. The doctors haven't told you, yet, right? In three days' time you're going home.

Milan. Nattan Bank branch
2.30 p.m. September 22nd

"Did you go out for a bite, Francesca" you ask her after you've gone back to the office.

"No,they left only 20 minutes ago and I started putting things back together."

"They did a very thorough job! Not a single paper it's where it's supposed to be. Did they say anything when they left?"

"No, thanks Heaven. They just said everything was fine."

"You see, there was nothing to worry about" you say as you help her pick up some folders from the floor. "Has anyone called?"

"Nothing urgent". I wrote you a note, it's on your desk".

"Perfect. Please, go eat something. I'll put things back in place."

Francesca leaves as you start putting back your clients' folders. It's strange that you just right then remembered that kid, the one you tripped over, right before your vacation.

"I NO WORK NO HOUSE NO FAMILI". God knows what happened to that kid whose name was Jack, or Jacques. God knows if his leg was really crippled... then the thought of Giovanni sneaks in. How were things going for him? Had he been able to keep the house? To pay off the debts? And the mother, was she doing any better? Right then the phone starts ringing-"Coming, coming" but you can't find it. It keeps ringing. "What the shit, where is it?"

It keeps ringing. "Where the fuck those bastards put it..."

It keeps ringing. "Oh, there it is. Hello! Ah, it's you Giorgio. You know a couple of inspectors have com.....ah, you know! Ok. What? Yeah, all right. I'll just wait for Francesca to come back and I'm right there. She took the keys. What? Well, you'll just have to wait. If you care so much about seeing me, five minutes go by quite quickly." Back again at Salutti's. Lately you've been going pretty often to his office, haven't you, Jack?

Milan, Nattan Bank head office

3.24 p.m. September 22nd

“Well, engineer Fly, we know you had the pleasure of a visit today” who’s speaking is Sturli. You haven’t even had time to sit down, at your usual seat in front of that ice-hockey rink-desk, and Sturli is on the attack, You, Jack, get the idea but decide not to react.

“Yes, true, but I wonder. It never happened to me in all these years.”

“The fact is that we have decided to change something in the working relationship you have with us.” This time it’s Salutti speaking. God knows why all of a sudden you recall all those interrogations you saw in movies, where the cops questioning someone were always in pairs. The tough one and the softer one. Sturli and Salutti. One formal, the other informal. One delivering the bad news, the other who tells you, that if you confess they’ll only rip your dick off. It must be something typical of the secret service. “An inspection was needed to make sure that in your new position everything was in order.”

“You’re gonna give me a promotion, then?”

“Not really. You see, Fly, you go back to being just a financial promoter. From tomorrow. No,...actually, from today.”

You’re in your car and as you drive peacefully, lulled by the notes of *Unchained Melody*, you suddenly realize that a small truck is about to collide with your car. It’s exactly in your lane and visibly swings, there’s nothing you can do. You know that you’re feeling fine, you know you’re perfectly healthy and you know exactly that in five seconds you’re gonna be dead. How do you feel, what are you thinking about, where are your muscles going to move? Hey, Jack, what are you thinking about when the Nattan Bank truck is about to crash into you?

“I don’t understand.”

“You should, engineer Fly, really. After all, you should have expected that sooner or later we’d get you making the wrong move.”

Use your flashing lights, at least push on the horn. Maybe the people in the truck will see you, maybe they’ll be able to avoid you.

“I don’t seem to understand and this is getting me nervous.”

“Do you know Salvatore Esposito?”

“Who would that be? Some little Neapolitan mob boss?”

“Don’t be so smart, Fly. Better not. So do you know him or not?”

“No, I don’t think so, but let me think. Why,... should I?”

“He’s been working at Nattan for a week. Does the name Martani Bank rings a bell?” Salutti steps in.

“Ah, yes, I remember now. He’s an executive I met a while ago.”

“Very well, so far so good. At least you admit it.”

“Admit what? Of knowing Esposito? So what? You know him, too Giorgio and even the lawyer here, I think.”

“Yes, but I didn’t tell him I was willing to move to Martani Bank with all my clients and my area promoters.”

Just a second, you think: “Wow, that was a close one.” Then you burst out laughing. “Ah, I see. It’s all a misunderstanding, then!”

“Really?”

“Of course”. You sit on the armchair. “It’s clear it’s all a big misunderstanding. I met Esposito and told him a bunch of lies, like I wanted to know how much they would offer me to move to Martani. It was just a way to know what his bank was willing to offer. I often do it, you know that. I needed to feel out the market situation but also to know what to offer to the Martani promoters, in case I found someone I was interested in. Or I might want to offer the high bid for competition promoters not dealing either with us or Martani Bank.”

“So, you admit having met Esposito and offered to move to Martani with your promoters.”

“Do you...?”

“What do you want me to admit, Giorgio? Fucking shit, you know perfectly well that I’ve been working like this for years.”

Giorgio doesn’t answer. He gets up and moves toward the window. Sturli, the lawyer pushes further: “So, do you admit it or not?”

At this point, it’s expected, you’ll lose it. You jump up and almost yell: “Fuck this shit. What the hell are you talking about? Where are you getting at? What is this all about?”

Giorgio turns around and looks at you with the most sorrowful expression he’s able to find in his repertoire. “I’m sorry, Jack. But it’s unacceptable that one of our area managers unfairly competes with us without being punished. Let me tell you how sorry I am, twice sorry, not only because I trusted you, but also because I realize that the contract you made us sign in July was part of your plan to cheat us. Yours was not just unfair competition but you also wanted to prevent us from taking action. I did not believe you were capable of this. Just thank God we don’t kick you out and report you. I wanted to give you a special treatment because you’ve worked with us for eleven years. But we can no longer risk it with you. You go back to being just a promoter.”

Nothing can be done. Now the truck has finally crashed into you. You hear, from the distance, the sound of the impact, the metal plates being twisted, the glass breaking in a thousand pieces, your body rolls over, gets pressed, deformed, broken. It’s all a dream, far away, even your voice is distant .

“You can’t do this to me! We have signed a contract, you can’t demote me to promoter. You’re breaking the agreement!”

“Please, Fly. Don’t even try. It’s written in the contract that we can’t change your position. And we are not going to. You formally remain an area manager but in reality, you’ll be a promoter with no men to manage. You should thank us for not firing you and, you see, we could. So please empty your office, too. Now that you are a simple promoter, you don’t need it anymore.”

“Are you crazy? My office! That office is mine. My own!”

“Yes, but you rented it to us and therefore you can’t go in if we don’t let you.”

“This is insane, absurd.”

You are standing, sweat rolling down your spine regardless of the air conditioning. You can hear your voice now, loud and clear. All your senses are alert. It seems as if you can see every single hair of the carpet. You pick up your briefcase, and stare alternatively both at Salutti and Sturli. “If you put it like this, I’ll be the one to leave.” “You’re welcome.” Salutti looks you straight in the eyes, expressionless. It is Sturli instead, who moves his lips in a sneer: “As long as you pay us the one million euro penalty.”

Milan, Céline Daccò’s house **5.15 p.m. September 22nd**

Fighting pain, finding a reason, trying to understand. Fleeing the room in frantic, desperately and flying to Céline’s house. She shouldn’t be home at this time, at 5 o’clock in the afternoon, instead she is and she opens the door, a beautiful smile on her face as she dries her hair with a towel, she’s naked. But you, Jack, don’t even notice it: “Congratulations, you put me in real shit.”

“What’s that?”

“What’s that? *That* means following your advice got me fired.”

“Fired? What do you mean?”

“Just what I said. Practically, they fired me. They took away everything I built in all these years. From today on now I’m a simple financial promoter.”

Céline closes the door behind her, holding the towel in her hands. “Please sit down. Let me put something on and we’ll talk about it.”

You take your jacket off, unbutton your shirt and loosen your tie. You drop on the couch. It’s exactly in moments like these that one feels all the heaviness of his 220 pounds. Céline before stepping back into the bathroom, passes in front of the fridge and takes out a bottle of water and one of grapefruit juice, then gets a glass and places everything on a tray on the smoke table in front of you. “Please, now calm down.”

You drink, sweat and start talking; as if speaking almost to yourself, relating what happened to Céline, who is in the other room. You are a flood of words: “And then, do you want to hear the cherry on the cake?”

Céline comes back to the living room. She’s wearing a tee-shirt and shorts, she sits down next to you. “Tell me”.

“They’re kicking me out of my office.”

“They can’t do that. Isn’t it yours?”

“Sure it is, the office is mine, but if you recall, I rented it to the bank until 2010 to pay off the mortgage.” So they have every right to kick me out since they are the legal tenants. Not a single financial promoter in Nattan, not even the worst one, has ever been treated like this. They really went too far this time.”

“It’s incredible! Come here, sweetheart, let me hug you.”

You struggle to free yourself. You don’t want to be hugged. You just feel like biting

someone. "Let me go, if I'm in this mess, it's also your fault."

"What are you talking about?"

"What I'm saying is that it was you who suggested to me the same very contract they're using now to nail me down."

Céline stiffens up. "Don't you think what you're saying is a little too much?"

"Not at all. That contract has turned out to be a death trap. If I stay with Nattan Bank I'll lose seventy percent of my income in one shot. Not only that, but I can't even do my job normally. My clients are used to coming and visiting me. Where am I going to see them? Shall I ask them to come to your house? And if I leave I'll have to pay a million euro to be free."

Céline stands up: "Listen, sweetheart. I know you're in trouble but I'm here and I want to help you. But if you want to take it out on me, that's the door."

Suddenly, you seem to wake up. "Sorry..."

You are a hunted animal. You drink some more water and juice, you almost drain them. You try to keep calm as you tell her everything, but inside you're quivering.

Céline lowers her voice: "Listen, there's something incoherent in all of this. First of all, don't you realize there is a major contradiction? If they had evidence of your unfair competition, they could just fire you on the spot, even within the law of the contract you signed. Why don't they do it?"

"Because they don't have any evidence. I haven't practiced any unfair competition with Nattan Bank. It's they, who are getting for free something that's worth eight hundred thousand euro a year. They don't want me around during the area managers meetings, that's why they came up with the accusation of unfair competition."

"Don't you see, there's an incongruence in their behaviour right there? This a point in your favour. But tell me, what kind of game do you think this Esposito is playing?"

You retire into yourself, breath deeply as if for lack of air. "I don't know. I don't know if he's telling a bunch of lies because they promised him something or, if instead, it's them, Salutti and Sturli, who are taking advantage of whatever he might have said in good faith."

"Don't you think it would be a good idea to know?"

"What do you suggest?"

"For example, to meet him. To ask him."

"No way!" you exclaim. "It would be like admitting I'm guilty":

"I don't think so, to be honest. It could be a good idea, actually, to try to understand what they really have, if either Esposito is falsely swearing or if he's unaware of the situation."

"No, I don't feel like it. I'm not gonna start being a detective. I don't give a damn. I already know why they're doing all of this. Mancini can't stand me because I always says what I think during our monthly meetings. That's why. They are inventing everything just for that. They want to force me to do whatever they want. Then again, how can they break a contract we signed just two months ago and think of getting away with it? A contract that stated they were keeping my position as a manager for the next five years? Do they really think I'm going to accept these conditions without suing them?"

“Actually, this is what Sturli really wants: you sue him and he charges a great fee.”

“Either way I lose and they win.”

“Ok, that’s why we have to keep calm and try to gather all the evidence possible to make them drop their charges.”

“I don’t care about them dropping charges. They are false, that’s it. I don’t have to do anything, it’s they who have to leave me alone!”

“But how do you think of...”

“You see, you’re on their side, too! You keep on contradicting, opposing me!”

“Jack, cut it please!”

“You cut it, bitch! I came here for support, for help and you tell me I have to find a way to make them drop charges! There are no charges to drop. Believe it or not I’m innocent.”

In limbo

What was wrong with you that night, Jack? What the fuck were you thinking about? Why did you get angry with the only person who for sure was on your side? Why did you leave her just like that? You simply got up and left, slamming the door behind you. And then, you wander around the city with an empty head. Only a huge sense of frustration, a need for revenge, the desire to start World War Three and the anxiety to act immediately leading you unconsciously along. Yes, there must have been a lead otherwise you wouldn’t have stopped again in front of that same weapon-store down on Borsieri Street. And again, shining blades, swords, scimitars, machetes, knives, rifles, weapons shining even more brightly because of the window’s neon lights. It’s the second time you find yourself in front of that window in just a few days. Chaos in your head. A part of you is telling not to go in, and you even remember you already have a gun. The one your dad used to kill himself. Why, Jack, do you want get into trouble? But then, the other part of you is already talking to the shop owner. “No, no, I’m sorry” he says shaking his head, but you insist. At that point being able to obtain what you wanted was an act of voodoo: “if I’m able to buy a gun with no permit, no authorization, if I’m able to do something so outlaw, once in a lifetime, then everything is gonna be fine.” And you, you took two five-hundred-notes out and placed them on the counter along with your four-hundred-euro watch. The shop owner looked at you straight in the eyes, shook his head once more and you knew you were about to get yourself in big trouble, then he took the money, the watch and asked you to wait. And you waited, your heart beating fast, your brain going at a thousand miles an hour and without the slightest common sense, until he came back with a closed package wrapped in plastic.

“Here you are.”

“Is everything in it? Also the...”

“Everything, don’t worry.”

Today, in your limbo, you look at your bandages. No doubt they really bit the shit out of you. The gun was not enough. Thank God. Otherwise you'd be at the hospital just the same, but with two police officers standing outside your room, or at the cemetery. Instead, you're listening to music. Someone has turned on the radio, You've been hearing songs all morning and right now there is one by Renato Zero on:

*"I defend myself indeed, but you know
Someone has killed me.
They tried and failed other times... but then succeeded.
An absurd, inexplicable will to fire....
I was wrong to trust...."*

It's the same song you heard a thousand times, sound blasting that night you drove around with no destination and a gun in your glovebox. First around the city, then into the suburbs, with the windows down, the radio blasting and the tears that were rolling down your cheeks and you, not able to restrain them.

What to do, where to go, how much time do you have before moving out? Where would you put all your things? What would you tell your colleagues? Why is that fucking truck stuck to your ass, blasting on the horn as if it's possessed? Why are you going at 30 kilometres an hour in the fast lane, Jack? Wake up! Either you think or drive.

*"...The more you will, the more you give...
And the more envy you will create.
A thousand unspoken words,..
Until someone has killed me...."*

You push on the gas and move to the right lane. But, where are you going? Did you take this entrance by chance or because you knew where you were going? Are you going to call Celine? It's three o'clock in the morning. Forget it. Are you going to Esposito's? No. But you want revenge, right? You wish this revenge to be divine, to come from Heaven. After all, what is God's reason to exist if not to punish evil for you? Have we got to do this alone, too?

Now your speed is about two hundred and twenty kilometres an hour. You can see dawn on your left. It's not time to let go. *Until someone has killed me...* At least let it be on the field, on the battleground, not like this, like an idiot, on the highway. Then you slow down and enter a gas station. You push your car seat back. *A thousand unspoken words...*

As usual, on Fridays, Mancini has lunch with his most intimate collaborators, Giorgio, Sturli the lawyer and Esposito, in the restaurant in front of Nattan Bank. You go in and approach Mancini's table:

"Good morning everybody, can I take a minute of your time?"

“Engineer Fly” Mancini says, who although seated, is always able to look down on you.

”Sorry, but we have something quite private to discuss . If you want, you can see Salutti afterwards.”

You grin your teeth and pretend a smile: “Gentlemen, I came to apologise.”

Mancini puts down on the plate the piece of chicken he was about to eat. He’s visibly surprised: “Oh, great. It was about time”.

“Does that mean you’re accepting our conditions?” Salutti adds. “Great, you’ll see that you’d be happy even with being just a financial promoter.”

“This means you are not going to sue us? Sturli insists. “I’m surprised, I have to say. Filing lawsuits is for stupid people, and you...”

“What about you Esposito, aren’t you gonna say something to our good old Jack?

“The prodigal son” Salutti adds.

So you resume speaking. Your voice is soft, calm, sharp: “Gentlemen, I don’t think I made myself clear enough. I’m apologising for something I still have to do.”

You take out the gun you bought over at the store, a Beretta 98. Everyone tries to find shelter. But you shoot all four of them dead. You shoot Mancini right in the head and the sound of the gunshot wakes you up, and finds you on the seat of your car, drenched in sweat.

You open the glovebox, take the plastic bag out, unwrap it and look inside. The gun is still there. You remember it being heavier, bigger, in your dream. It’s weird that such a small, ridiculous object can destroy a life. You hold it at length in your hands, turning it on all sides and staring at it. Then, you get out of your car and stretch your legs. No-one is around. You could easily take the gun and throw it in a garbage can. Nobody would realize that it was you getting rid of a huge potential troublemaker. But then, you reconsider. What if someone sees you? And sticks his hand in the can and finds it? What if they detect your fingerprints? What if the shop owner reported you to the police? What if this gun already killed someone and they would blame you for it? Who knows... Maybe it’s better to keep it, at least for now, then we’ll see. So you reconsidered and placed it back in the glovebox. Another burden you don’t seem to be able to get rid of.

Rome, Parioli quarter

9.45 a.m. September 23rd

It’s morning and Rome is shining with sunlight. Your dark Maserati stops in one of the streets in the Parioli neighbourhood. You get off your car, go to a public phone and dial a number.

“Hello Augusto? Yes, it’s me, Fly. How are you, super area manager? Good, good. Me, too, I’m fine. Have you heard? What? Of my super hi-tech office? If you happen to be in Milan, you must absolutely stop by. Listen, I’m in Rome. Yes, you know, a friend of mine is getting married this afternoon and I’m invited to the wedding. Where is she getting married? Hmm, let me see. In the church of Santa Maria dei

Macelli di Ripetta. What? You don't know it? Well, neither do I but I'll find it, don't worry. So, shall we go for coffee? In half an hour? Oh, you're away. All right, let's have lunch then, one o'clock. Meanwhile I have a favour to ask you. I need to send a fax, urgently. Can I go by your office? Please tell your secretary. What's her name? All right, thanks. I'll stop by your office and after we'll see each other for lunch. Great."

Rome, Nattan Bank branch
11.50 a.m. September 23rd

Back on track, Jack Fly. You enter the hall of the Nattan Bank Rome branch holding a bunch of white roses. You immediately locate the secretary of Augusto Imperiali, the area manager you've just spoken to on the phone. She's a distinguished lady, with lots of jewels, who moves behind her desk as if she were in her living room.

"Good morning, Mrs. Marina. My name is Jack. May I?"

The jewel-decorated lady shines up. "For me?. Thank you. You shouldn't have..."

"Well, Doctor Imperiali spoke so highly about you. He said that you perfectly combine grace and efficiency, that you like beauty....so I dared."

Mrs. Marina knows too much to let herself get embarrassed too easily, but no doubt she's flattered. "Ah, is that what Doctor Imperiali says about me?"

"Yes and much more...but don't worry, only good things."

You try to make her laugh and Mrs. Marina plays along.

"Listen, while looking for a vase for these roses, tell me: did Doctor Imperiali mention anything about me coming by?"

"Yes, he mentioned something about a fax."

"Oh, no...I think I didn't make myself clear. Actually I need to send an e-mail."

"You'll need a computer, then..."

"Of course, it's true we are in Rome, but where do you want me to write an e-mail, on a wax board? But, if there is a problem..."

She takes some time before answering. "No, I don't think so. You seem like a proper gentleman...After all, you're a friend of Doctor Imperiali, I'm sure there won't be any problems."

Here you are Jack, exactly where you wanted to be. Now, you have a Nattan Bank computer all for yourself. You have a lot to do, but first make sure to get access to all possible information. Especially what they wouldn't want you to find out.

In limbo

Maybe it's because of the air you breath in Rome, but the day after the catastrophe you felt fine. In great shape and full of energy. After having rerouted all of the mail Imperiali would get from Nattan to your computer from that moment on, you went back to Milan. You started getting busy, smartly, with intelligence.

First of all you had to organise the moving of your beautiful, hi-tech office to your home. Too bad, but never mind. Thanks to Francesca and her good mood everything went fast and smoothly. Computers, tables, bookcases, file cabinets, clients folders, desks, printers, phones... To make a long story short it hasn't been easy but the room was almost empty and it didn't take you that long.

The most troubling thing to move was the gun. You found it in your hands, just like that, still inside its plastic bag and your blood froze. Hey, nuclear engineer, why did you do something so stupid? Buying a gun only because they kicked you out. Had they killed your cat, what would have you done then? Built a nuclear bomb? You've got to do something about it now. Throwing it away, it's not simple. In the garbage? What if they find it? They could track you down. You must think of something safer. One day you can take a boat and throw it in the water of the Lake Como. It's the deepest lake in Italy. They'll never find it, but until then, what are you going to do with it? You'll do what your grandfathers, who were wise people, would, that is put it either under a brick or the mattress. Since it's your Filipino maid who makes the bed, that doesn't seem like such a good idea, but some boards on the wooden floor in your bedroom are loose... So that night, you wait for Francesca to leave, then you check it out and see that the gun fits perfectly. Where are you going to put the shells, now? How many are there? Well, you put some in the loader and the rest in an old bottle of medicine. After all didn't they use to call them 'pills' in the movies from the '40s? Then you went around for interviews to other banks. Luckily you had contacts and nobody volunteered any embarrassing questions. You already had a few appointments. Then, God bless Francesca, you started checking out the possibility for your clients to follow you to a different bank, in case you took the final decision to leave Nattan. You haven't made a final decision, yet. And thank God your oldest clients haven't asked you too many questions, either. You always took good care of them, pampered them, spoke to them, comforted them in their fears and also pushed them forward, you never caused them too much trouble, even in these last few years when the risk has been considerable. So, why wouldn't they follow you? You were the one to manage their money, not the bank.

But then when you tried to involve the Consob and the Anasf, the Financial Promoters National Association; that's when grief started and you had a few too many doors courteously slammed in your face. Dog does not eat dog. At least, big dog does not eat big dog, for the little ones it's their own business. Come on, you're a good guy, but as simple as a boiled carrot.

Did you really think the Consob would have moved a single finger just to save the ass of a simple financial promoter? Do you have any idea how big Nattan is? Little, all right, compared to the international bank groups, but for sure a million times bigger than you.

Now, time to turn on the other side, otherwise you'll start suffering from bedsores just three days before your hospital dismissal; tell me: wasn't the Consob indifference quite predictable? But do you remember what they told you over at Anasf? That they understood your situation, but taking any action right then, it meant giving banks the

excuse for a turn of the screw in their relationships with the Association members, and that the Association could not afford to take any action that would have damaged the entire member arrangement. In short, to save the other financial promoters they were ready to let one drown. A contorted theory, but interesting. What did they use to say in the '70s? Punish one to educate a hundred. So now, let one sink, to save how many...How many financial promoters are there in Italy? Ah, 80000. So listen, do you really want to be responsible for, among families and the rest, 480000 people?

“Do you want to be responsible, Jack?” Mirko asks you as he enters the room.

“Hi. Responsible for what?”

“Because, to do you a favour, I started working again and don't like that.”

“What are you talking about? Don't make me laugh, please, I feel all my ribs vibrating like guitar strings.”

“I've heard you're leaving soon.”

“Eh, news fly.”

“Yes, but you'd better be careful not to slip on another banana or you'll go flying.”

“Ok. Anyway, what were you saying...what am I responsible for? What did you do?”

Mirko sits down on your bed, but just in time to get up again, cause a nurse passing by looks at him reproachfully. So he pulls a chair next to your bed. “I went to talk to Esposito, something I really wanted to do.”

“Esposito? What came into you?”

“Well, from what you told me, the only thing you did not try to check on, when Nattan screwed you, was to find out if Esposito had said something tricky about you. A good detective would have started right there, not getting n trouble with the police by sneaking into a company computer system in order to illegally receive their mail.”

“I know, please, you all told me it was a stupid thing to do. Although I did get to use it.”

“Yeah, to send you to a hospital.”

“Come on, tell me about Esposito.”

“Well, you are not gonna believe it, but when he saw me he acted like he didn't have a clue.”

“What do you mean? How did you introduce yourself as?”

“As an inspector from the Consob who had been informed about some unfair competition done by a so and so Mr. Jack Fly, and since he had met you, I wanted to ask him everything he knew.”

“Did he believe you? Did he really believe you were from the Consob?”

“Listen, I know this from experience: if someone stops you on the street and asks to see your documents, most of the time, even if you haven't done anything illegal, you don't think of asking to see their badges. You just pee in your pants and show your documents. I counted on this, just to see what kind of a man this Esposito is. In fact, when he saw me, he peed in his pants. Maybe, he's got something to hide...

However, he told me he didn't know anything. Yes, of course he knew you had been removed from your position of area manager, and were no longer working in the bank premises, but didn't even know why and I'll be honest with you, I don't think he

really gave a damn. When I asked him if he knew you, he answered that you two had met once in his office, when you went for a visit but spoke about nothing in particular. ‘What did you speak about exactly?’ I asked him then. He looked at me as if I was asking him what he had had for dinner on April 17th 1965. ‘Well, I don’t recall, nothing in particular...’ he repeated. ‘All right, nothing in particular about what...’ I insisted. So he took some time to gather his thoughts: ‘Ah, now I remember, Fly wanted to know the conditions we were offering to our promoters, over at Martani Bank. He was probably running a survey...’, ‘Did he want to join your bank?’ I again insisted. ‘Gosh, no! They are simple surveys, done to feel out how the competition is doing, its strategies, plans. If one wants to move to the competition, it definitely goes differently. One doesn’t ask during the first interview: how much are you willing to pay me if I join you?’ That’s it Jack, this is what Esposito told me.”

“Ah! So, what do you think?”

“Well, I don’t think Esposito will be a witness against you. Actually, look at this.” Mirko takes a micro-tape-recorder from his pocket. “I recorded the entire conversation, in case he wants to consider changing his version, we’ll just nail him down with his own exact words.”

“You’re a genius, Mirko.”

“Thanks, but that’s not all. I still have quite a few friends in the police, and if you want me to, I can ask them to pull over the new area manager’s or Salutti’s car and you’ll see what nice tricks we can play on those bastards.”

“My friend, don’t do anything before telling me, ok?”

Jack, Jack, You see: just a few words and you already feel that the three remaining days in the hospital, which before seemed like nothing, are now an endless time. That’s right, you’ve got tons of things to do, to say, to think about, so many you don’t even know where to start. Why, for example, don’t you go back and talk again to your lawyer? Maybe there’s something you can change in your strategy...

Milan, Pracchi legal office 3.00 p.m. September 25th

Yes, let’s say that it seemed like a very good idea to get an appointment with the best lawyer in Milan specialising in labour lawsuits. After all, these are people who deal with this kind of problems daily. You could have asked Céline, maybe, but after the fight you had that night, you’ve been running after each other with the precise intention of avoiding one another. When you called her, she didn’t answer. She called you when she was sure your mobile was off. You haven’t gone by her house, with the excuse that it wouldn’t have been nice to show up without telling her first. She hasn’t sent you any e-mails and has never come to the little café. After all, neither have you, if not just for that one time that you passed in front of it and quickly glanced in, making sure no-one would see you, so you could say that you *had gone* and she hadn’t

To make a long story short, you went to the lawyer alone. You already had his name, it is one of the first things they teach you in the course ‘How to Survive In an Asphalt Jungle’: always keep in mind the name of a good labour lawyer.

The man is old, he must have seen quite a few things in his life. His calendar is full and he can see you only on Saturday and only for thirty minutes. You tell him all that happened, your way, with all the passion that you feel inside. He however has no reaction but suggests you to leave Nattan.

“Leave Nattan? Like that, overnight? What are you saying? I will be left stripped to the bone.”

“Excuse me, tell me something; how much of your income comes from being a recruiter and area manager?”

“At least seventy percent.”

“What about your office?”

“I left it already. I moved everything home.”

“You see, you’re already stripped to the bone. The situation is quite simple. You must reinforce the idea that it was Nattan that fired you, preventing you from doing your job. But if you continue doing it, it would be as if you accepted the conditions Nattan imposed on you. And as you can see, your argument will lose power.”

You feel you’re on the grill, Jack. This guy is suggesting you to jump from the pan into the fire. It’s true, you have some contacts to maybe change jobs, but so far nothing has come of it. What are you going to do? Break the moorings and goodbye and goodnight or think about it? The lawyer realizes you are fretting and gives you a hand.

“Listen, Fly, think about it carefully. I take for granted that you told me the truth and that you have every right on your side. In this moment in Italy there are nine million pending trials. For civil trials the average waiting time, before the judge decides, is ten years. Here, in Milan, a labour lawsuit is pretty fast but nevertheless we’re talking about at least three or four years. It’s in your bank’s interest to wait you out, they will write on their annual income tax report a foreseeable amount under the heading “estimated costs” which is tax deductible. Do you have all that much time? Are you sure you’ll be able to concentrate on your job knowing there is a pending lawsuit? And are you sure that at the end, you won’t settle for a few bread crumbs, because you want to close the matter, and therefore give another nice present to your bank? You see, it’s never in the interest of banks to find a quick agreement even when they’re dead wrong. If you don’t sue them, they’ll profit, if you do, they’ll profit just the same.”

You feel a bit numb, don’t you, Jack Fly?

“And so?” you almost whisper.

“Can’t you try to avoid suing them and find a quick agreement? Maybe, give up on something, show them that you’re sort of sorry for the misunderstandings and try to get your position back. You know, the reason I’m telling you this, is because, in addition to what I told you before, any lawsuit always presents other risks.”

“What kind of risks?”

“All kinds. You could have lied to me and Nattan could have unquestionable evidence against you. Or, regardless of your rights, the judge could decide that they were right in removing you from your position. At that point, after having quit the bank, you could also be obliged to pay the penalty. “Do you have a million euro?” “Funny, it’s the exact same question Sturli, the lawyer asked me when I signed the contract. Who do you think you are, you lawyers? You can take people’s dignity away and also make money on it.”

Chill, don’t get angry. We’re talking of your own good here.

“In any case, I do have a million euro. So what I am supposed to do? Go to those sons of bitches and beg: please, please, give me back my little office, I’ve been bad, I’ll never do it again. Fuck everybody.”

“Hey, Fly, calm down. Don’t use this language.”

“Sorry, you’re right, I have nothing against you. It’s just that this ordeal is humiliating. They kicked me out of the bank with no respect whatsoever, after having worked for ten years. I can’t tolerate it.”

“Yes, I understand, but rage is not the best of advisors. It could only make things worse.”

“Why are you trying to dissuade me? Don’t you want me as a client?”

“I want you only if you want to be one. Only if you are one hundred percent sure and cold blooded. Because from now on you have to trust me completely and no more messing around.”

“All right.”

“Ok, then. Just tell me one more thing: does Nattan have evidence of your unfair competition? Think well before giving me an answer.”

“No.”

“Ok, so listen to what I suggest you to do. Try one more time to come to an agreement with Nattan and then, if you don’t succeed, quit and come back and we’ll file suit.

Milan, Orsenigo legal office

11.00 a.m. September 27th

“Oh, my love, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“Good Lord! Who are you?”

“Santa Claus.”

“Interesting. Tell me, are you nine months late or three months early?”

You showed up over at Céline’s office one day with a huge red box, behind which you were hiding. Her secretary was looking at you eyes wide open, all the other colleagues in her studio were all giggling. And Céline, well, she never gets embarrassed. She leads you to her office smiling amused and... in love?

“Well, then, what is this all about?”

“Open it, open it...”

She unwraps the box and inside there is another box, inside the second box there is a jute bag, inside the bag there is paper and then straw, and among all this mess, a plastic bag, and inside the bag the synthetic fur coat you bought the week before. She throws herself in your arms: “Its’ beautiful! And exactly the colour I love.”

“How did the shop assistant call it? *Trasudeciu*.”

Céline starts laughing. “Do you know what it means?”

“No.”

“I know more about Milan than you, and you’ve lived here longer.”

“No it’s not that, it’s just that you are smarter.”

“So, do you know the meaning of *tra su de ciu*?”

“No.”

“Drunk’s vomit.”

“Blech, so, not only I’ve bought you a fur coat the colour of puke but, you even like it.”

She laughs. She’s really happy to see you.

“Hey, hey, hey ...something to be forgiven about? It must be real big this time.”

So you make yourself smaller, look at her with apologising eyes and lifting her up in your arms, you whisper to her: “I treated you badly and unfairly. But please try to understand. I’m fed up. I have so much rage in me that I feel I’m going to explode.”

“Look, I understand you and forgive you.”

“Oh, my God!”

“It’s true that I go around lavishing mercy but please do not exaggerate...”

“No, I wasn’t talking about you... I just remembered I have an appointment right now.”

“Ah, you are leaving, then? As usual.”

“Just a little joke! No, I’m all yours, forever. Or at least until tomorrow morning...”

“Listen Jack, calm down, you’re becoming obnoxious. Tell me what’s going on, instead:”

You make her try the fur coat on, you’d love to see it on her naked body, but in the office, better not. Céline laughs, you laugh, you could almost be happy, if it weren’t for that sharp pain sometimes you feel in the middle of your chest. You tell her about the lawyer, slightly embarrassed, but she’s quite generous about it and makes no comments on why you didn’t go see her, not even for advice.

“Since I’m not your lawyer, and if you promise me to forget everything I’ll tell you right away, I’m going to suggest to you something confidential.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“You could try to tape some calls between you and the top executives at Nattan. Who knows, maybe something of interest could come up.”

“Yes, it sounds good,” you say. “I already have all the equipment.”

“But be careful. These things are delicate and can put you in trouble.”

“Yes, your honor! Shall we go have lunch?”

“At this time? It’s only eleven o’clock.”

“Then let’s make love.”

“But Jack, I have work to do.”

You darken just for an instant: “Yes, that’s right, you are not unemployed like me.”

“Don’t be stupid!” Céline kisses you on the cheek on the way to hang the fur coat on the cloak-stand and starts walking back to her desk. “Actually, you had a little job to do for me, remember?”

You couldn’t believe you would, but you had the right answer. After all, you had studied.

“Of course I remember. Mrs. Brambilla, right?”

“Wow, today you really want to surprise me with super bright colours and special effects ...”

“So, listen to what I found out. It’s incredible, Mr. Brambilla opened a trust with its headquarters on the Channel Islands. And now, you are not gonna believe it, guess who the trustee is?”

“No, don’t tell me...”

“Sure I’ll tell you. No, actually you tell me.”

“Nattan Bank.”

“Bingo.”

“How did you find out?”

“It didn’t take much and, so far so good, everything is aboveboard. Anyone can open a trust and the operation itself is not private, somehow it has to be publicly. Only by doing this, in fact, you can take all the advantages related to it.”

“For example?”

“Confuse your creditors. If you have nothing left, your creditors will leave you alone.”

“And on top of that you silence your wife’s claims for her rights.”

“You could put it that way. Anyway I haven’t told you the best part of it, yet. I’m sure that Sturli studio is involved, too. Now, we should investigate into who the trust beneficiaries are. That’s where we might find something interesting.”

“How can we do that?”

“Well, in my current condition of exile and refugee, I don’t exactly know, but we can give it some thought.”

“All right, thanks. What are you going to do meanwhile?”

“Well, my lawyer suggested another attempt to find an agreement with the bank before leaving. I’ve decided to give it a try.”

On the phone

4.30 p.m. September 27th

“Fuck you, Giorgio.”

“Ah, hello Jack. What have you decided? Are you going to accept the position of financial promoter or pay us one million euro?”

“I’m thinking of buying a van, opening a mobile studio and selling funds exactly as you sell veggies at the market. Can I use your logo? And also a contribution to cover the cost of the van?”

“Nice joke. You’ve got a great imagination. I’m sure you’ll do a good job even without any office.”

“Nice joke, too. But, listen. I’m calling you to ask you to reconsider the situation. Don’t you realize it’s a misunderstanding. I never did practice unfair competition, I never even thought of it. And if I actually did practice unfair competition, I’d have to be a real dummy, because I have no other job offers. If I had done it for someone, I would be already working for them, don’t you think? Does it make any sense? Come on, let’s just forget about it and get back to normal. We can tell the other colleagues that it was just a joke, that it wasn’t for real.”

“That’s impossible. It was Mancini who wanted this and we cannot go back now, think of what the others would say. Maybe in a few months, we’ll see.”

“I can’t wait. I’m gonna ask you one more time: are you willing to reconsider your decision?”

“No. And you better be careful about what you do. Since you said you have no other bank offers, well, don’t go look for them.. I’ve heard you are ready and that’s not good.”

“Shut up, it’s only a friend badmouthing me, don’t listen to him, he’s crazy...”

“Now listen to what a friend has to say to you, a real one, you can only quit on legitimate grounds, and you have no evidence to prove that. We didn’t kick you out of Nattan. You can work...No doubt, with some difficulties, but you can still work. No judge will agree with you, so if you quit, you’ll have to pay one million euro penalty.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“Instead, even if you find a judge declaring the bank wrong and you right, you should consider something else.”

“What?”

“Fancy you’ll find a judge willing to grant you a million...? Let’s see, with an income of forty, fifty thousand a year, do you really think he’ll understand why you are entitled to that much money, money that’d take him twenty years of work to make? Those are people used to defending blue collar workers for twenty thousand euro.”

“Giorgio, a judge makes people respect the law, he doesn’t look at their bank account. And what I make I deserve. They are commissions, am I clear? If I make x, it means that Nattan is making twenty times more. I don’t understand, instead, why *you* deserve your monthly cheque.”

“Sure, sure... you make too much money to sue us. By the way, Jack, do you remember Cristiano?”

“Cristiano who?”

“Cristiano Falcetti, a colleague of yours who sued Nattan. He was making two hundred thousand euro a year.”

“Oh yeah, I remember him ...a solid promoter. Where is he working now? For a German bank, I think.”

“That’s right. He sued us, asked three hundred thousand euro and got thirty-two thousand after nine years.”

“Ten percent? After ten years. How disgusting!”

“Do you get it now? Just keep quiet and when Mancini calms down, we’ll call you back to the branch.”

“All right. Thank you for the information. You are always very kind, asshole.”

“Don’t do it, fuck.”

“Really, what do I have to lose?”

“Ok, listen, let’s just forget it, all right. Do whatever you want. However let me know where you keep the clients archive because I have to inform the Consob. It’s the rule...”

“... fucking rule.” You hang up and leave.

Then you check if the tiny recorder inside your mobile did its job.

In limbo

“What do you think?” you ask Mirko. Your hospital room is full of friends, actually not that many for someone who was proud of having the busiest agenda in town. Few, but good. At least so it seems.

“I think that if Esposito hasn’t talked to any of them, either Salutti, or Mancini or Sturli, so they are using him as a puppet and make him say whatever they want.”

“Francesca, what do you think?”

“I agree with that.”

“Giovanni?”

“Yeah, it could be, but the fact that they decided to use him, is still awkward.”

“Why shouldn’t they?”

“What I mean is, bottom line, you had a contact with Esposito, but how did they come to know of your meeting over at Martani Bank?”

“I don’t know.”

“Jack, couldn’t it be that Esposito had an interview with Nattan to start working for them, and might have mentioned something about your meeting?” This is Alessandra Longhigh speaking.

“Then, it could have been Esposito mentioning something, without really meaning it. Maybe as a joke, without realizing the trouble he could have got you in.”

“Maybe to take revenge on the fact that you wasted his time!” Giovanni observes.

“Yeah, great! Do you think I’m the only one who tries to understand the competition using these tricks?” you reply.

“Jack, listen carefully: when did Esposito start working at Nattan?” Alessandra insists.

“I don’t know. I wasn’t even aware he started working at Nattan.”

“Esposito could have had an interview a few months ago, mentioned the meeting with you and then, the day you had the fight with Mancini they called him and took him in on condition that he would say what they needed to nail you down.”

“But why would Esposito have accepted a job offer on such conditions? He was already working, right?”

“As far as we know, yes. But, what if in the meantime, for some reasons things got bad for him, too and he had to leave Martani Bank in a hurry?”

“So what? These are just suppositions.” Giovanni objects.

“In fact, it seems more likely that they have come to know, somehow, that you had spoken to Esposito before signing the one million euro death trap, and have then used this information at their will. Maybe, actually they went looking for Esposito and offered him something we could not refuse.”

“Possible:” Mirko says. “But after speaking to him, I’m not so sure, actually...”

“Actually what?”

“Actually...” Alessandra whispers.

“Hey guys, what’s the story here, what are all these ‘actuallys’?”

“Wait a minute, who did you talk to about the meeting with Esposito? They all ask simultaneously.

“With nobody, I believe.”

“Think carefully.” They all say at once.

You think about it and turn suddenly white.

“I told Cèline. Why?”

Alessandra, Mirko, Francesca and Giovanni all stare at each other in silence.

Milan, Paladino Restaurant

9.00 p.m. September 29th

Possible? Can it be possible that Céline...

It’s true you hadn’t seen each other after the fur coat. Yes, ok, she had been a bitch, but when a man loves a woman, had just gone on holiday to MonteCarlo with her, had fought with her all right, but then apologised ... the best move if you to want to win her over again, is to invite her to dinner. And maybe raise the bidding with a *Breakfast at Tiffany* surprise in your breast pocket.

The restaurant is really the one of a kind place for Milan: outdoor, interesting cooking, not one of those trendy *parvenu* that you, my financial promoter, like so much, but a truly classy one, the perfect place for intellectuals like Céline. You were going to meet her directly at the restaurant. And you, unlike what you normally do, got there early and sat down at the table, waiting. Then when she appeared at the door, you got up.

Touched, so moved you could hardly say hello.

“Hi, Céline.”

“Hi Jack. How are you?”

“And you?”

“You don’t answer to a question with a question, it’s not nice” she says, sitting down opposite you, as you pull the chair back to allow her to sit.

“You don’t ask questions you already know the answers to” you reply. “I’m not well, I miss you.”

“I miss you, too.”

“Good, a nice start. Can I kiss you?”

“It depends.”

“On what? Didn’t we make peace? You didn’t like the fur coat?”

“Yes I did, but I haven’t heard from you since. And to tell you the truth, even the fact that you went to another lawyer, without even asking me first, sort of bothered me. It is as if I have money to invest and go ask someone else.”

Oh, come one, are we already at point zero again? All right: “Please Céline, sorry for what happened. I’m really going through ... actually better, I’ve ‘gone through’ a real tough time. I must have lost my mind. Now I’m back, I’m myself again. And as I found myself, I’d like to find you, too.”

That Night Céline was gorgeous. She was wearing a soft silk dress, transparent here and there. One of those dresses that can drive you crazy, around her neck the amber necklace you had given her. You are a financial promoter, a top class seller, you should be able to see through signals, right? So, why, did you send everything to hell once more?

Let’s say, that right then, you both agreed on a temporary ceasefire. You started eating slowly, taking your time. How were things, how was Céline’s work? News from the family? Missing MonteCarlo? Until, slowly, you began to approach your problems again.

“Do you want to know the latest news?”

“Listen, I don’t want to know anything, I’m just too involved and on top of that it’s really not my specialty” she says.

Come on Jack, a little lie would be perfect here. “You see, that’s exactly why I went to the see Pracchi without telling you. Of course, I had wondered if you’d be interested in taking my case...”

“Jack, you don’t have to try to sell me a pair of shoes, just relax! Pracchi has got quite of a reputation. I fully agree with your decision.” On Céline’s face a smile, that sends you straight to Heaven and then goodbye! But you, you’ve got something in your breast pocket that can send you both to Heaven, don’t you? It’s that diamond ring you just bought today at Anaconda? Do you think it’s the right moment to take it out?

“Céline listen. I don’t know why we fought. I don’t know how we managed to stay apart for so long. I’ve realized these days how much I miss you, how much I...”

“How much you...?”

“Well, you know... You know I have a hard time saying it, but you know.”

“Know what? Tell me, what should I know? Don’t be shy. You know you can

tell me everything” Céline says, with that touch of irony you’ve always both loved and feared. But for you, saying ‘I love you’, has always been more difficult than solving an intricate equation, and so even in that moment you tried to turn the corner. “Well, actually there’s something you don’t know, I’ve been on the go since the day after the catastrophe. Do you know I went down to Rome?”

“Rome? Why?”

“I went to visit Imperiali, an area manager, I don’t know if I told you, but I did something worth the name of Jack Fly?”

“Worth your name? Let’s hear...” Céline is still smiling. She plays along with the change of the subject, she probably understood, that in reality, you just want to take time in order to tell her something important, really important and wants to humor you.

“Well, I went to his office, I asked to use his computer with an excuse and now, without him knowing it, I’m getting all the private Nattan mail forwarded to me. If they thought of getting rid of me, of attacking me from the rear, now it’s me who can anticipate all their moves.” You laugh, satisfied. You’re so proud of yourself. But Céline has turned almost to ice.

With her glass halfway lifted and her smile dying on her lips.

“Excuse me, I don’t think I understood. What did you do?”

“I’m getting all the Nattan private mail addressed to the area managers rerouted to my computer.”

Céline puts down her glass and visibly tries to control her rage.

“And you come and tell me, I’m a lawyer!... Do you realize you committed a crime? That I could...*I should* report you?”

“Céline, what crime are you talking about? I had to do something, defend myself, after all it’s my life at stake here!”

“And do you really think you can defend yourself by breaking the law? Is this what you are thinking of doing?”

“But it’s nothing, they won’t even find out. And then, wasn’t it you who suggested taping my calls with the executive at Nattan?”

“It’s got nothing to do with it. First of all, it was something informal I told you, and in any case, we are talking about your conversations, I didn’t tell you to spy on other people’s mail!”

“Yes, but...”

“Listen, Jack. I can’t support these kinds of actions. I can understand you had no idea of what you were doing, but you’ve got to absolutely do something about it now. If Imperiali realizes that his mail is rerouted to you, he could report you on the spot and then, forget about a labour lawyer. You wouldn’t be able to find any lawyers, not even the one the Court gives you.”

“Come on, stop it Céline, nothing like that will happen.”

“It could, trust me. I’ve seen similar situations. You’ve got to go down to Rome immediately and put a stop to it.”

“No way. Actually, I can’t wait to get home to check the Nattan mail.”

“Listen, you don’t fool around with this stuff and I’m not joking. I have no intention of having a criminal as a boyfriend.”

Right then, God forbid, you both lost it.

“Are you calling me a criminal? Are you crazy or just a bitch? They treat me like shit and you, instead of being on my side, you call me a criminal?”

“That’s not the point, Jack. To obtain justice, not all means are legitimate. And for sure you can’t take the law in your own hands.”

“I’m not taking the law in my hands. I’m only trying to gather information. Why can’t you understand?”

“No, I don’t understand and let me tell you. I hate these things, as much as I hate who does them.”

“Are you telling me that you hate me?”

“What I’m saying is that I want nothing to do with someone who’s an outlaw.” As she said that, Céline got up, picked up her purse and looked you straight in the eyes:

“So, what’s your decision? Will you go to Rome and settle everything?”

Was there challenge or just worry in her eyes? You’ll never know, Jack Fly. Because you, staring back at her, simply answered: “No”.

And so she left, leaving you at the restaurant, all alone. Actually, not really all alone: with a stupid, useless diamond ring in your breast pocket.

In limbo

She can go fuck herself, her and all her manias, too. Who fucking cares if she thinks I’m a criminal. I’m not a criminal. I and the people I care about know that. The people who are really trying to help me, not like those that with a stupid excuse, thought it’d be better to disappear.

How many times have you repeated this mantra, Jack?

How many times, since that day, while downloading the mail and reading all the bullshit by Imperiali; (how many fucking web-sites has this jerk visited? he’s got more porno films in his mail box than a hard core cinema) you thought that Céline was right, you shouldn’t be risking jail for such bullshit. Until, one day, you downloaded a message from Nattan you couldn’t read. Fuck, it’s a coded message, you thought. And also thought that Céline might have been right when she got furious at you for having rerouted Imperiali’s mail, but maybe it had all been worthwhile. Or maybe, actually, Céline got so mad at you because she didn’t want you to download that very e-mail.

So, when you opened a drawer in your desk and took paper and a pen to write whatever you could read of the message, you spotted the letter that, just before committing suicide, Luca Santini had given you.

You took it, wrote down the e-mail fast and left your office.

Concorezzo (Mi), Santini's house
5.00 p.m. October 6th

It hasn't been easy, after such a long time, to go back to where Santini used to live, has it?

"Hi Giovanni. How are you?"

"What are you doing here? What do you want? Go away!"

"Wait, don't shut the door. Let me in for a minute."

"Nobody's home, My mom's out."

"Better. It's you I wanna talk to."

"And it's you I really don't wanna talk to."

"Come on, please. Let me in. Let me explain." You don't give him the chance to think twice, and as the great vacuum-cleaner salesman you are, you've already moved your foot inside, as if someone had told you: "Please, come on in."

And so you sat down, always looking Giovanni straight in the eyes. Open heart. "I know you think I'm responsible for your father's death, and maybe, somehow, you're right. So the reason I'm here is, first of all, to say I'm sorry."

Giovanni is looking at you with sealed lips, cold. Your introduction seems that by shaking him up, to have caused him to stiffen even more. He's silent and this means you have to use this advantage in order to go on.

"You see, I'm sorry. I really want to tell you how much I appreciated your father and I really would have wanted to do something to help him. Maybe, if he hadn't lost all his hopes, maybe we could have done something."

"Stop this shit. If my father killed himself it's because he had no choice. You tried to fool him, as much as you're trying to fool me now, but he didn't believe you. And neither do I..."

"I'm not asking you to believe me, Giovanni. I know how you feel."

"No, you don't!"

"Yes, I do and maybe one day I'll tell you... But now I'm here because I need your help."

"My help? For what?"

"You see, your father is dead and I lost my job. This Goddamned bank is treating its employees, its promoters and its clients really unfairly and always seems to get away with it. They play real dirty and with your help we can try to clean up a little of this mess, wouldn't you like that? I need your help to avenge your father's memory and get back what's due to me. And then, I would like us two to be friends."

"That's impossible."

"I wouldn't be the only one who wants it. Please read."

And you give Giovanni the envelope.

"What is it?"

"It's from your father. He gave it to me the night he...Read it."

Giovanni takes the envelope with just his fingertips, as if fearing that the mere touch of it would give him more pain. But he's also curious. So he slowly, carefully opens the envelope, he takes the letter out and starts reading:

“Engineer Fly, in order to avoid having the house taken away. I have no other choice but to kill myself: I have four life insurance policies, at least one will pay! Please do not leave Giovanni alone. He’s a good kid, and he might need a father, someone, who’s not a loser like me. I don’t really know why I’m asking you...perhaps, to cause you trouble, perhaps because I, somehow, want you to feel obliged to give something back to my family and me for all the pain you caused us. Goodbye.”

After reading he looks up at you, and you are smiling: “I want to take care of you, Giovanni, I want to follow your father’s wish. I’m not thinking of taking his place, not in the least, but I owe you.”

Giovanni is silent. He’s still holding the letter in his hands and bites on his lips, unsure. You continue: “I’m also in trouble because of Nattan. I need your help. I know you’re a genius in computers and I’d like you to help me decode some messages from the bank. If you help me, you’ll do something real to honour your father’s death. Please: accept my help and give me yours.”

Giovanni answers you scornfully: “And how, by helping you, would I honour my father’s memory? Just think, until five minutes ago I thought the best way to do it was to kill you.”

“I wasn’t the one to kill your father, believe me. I appreciated him. The system killed him, and Nattan is a ruthless bank, careless of people, interested only in profits at any cost and willing to get rid of all obstacles. This bank, today, is willing to do anything to reach its goals. I wanna do something about this. I want to bring some justice back into this world... I don’t know if you can believe me, but please, try me out. I want to show you that I’m more and more on your side.”

By now, Giovanni is visibly disoriented: “More and more: why did you say that?”

On your face, Jack, embarrassment and surprise: “No, nothing, I don’t know:”

A boy cannot hold so much tension without showing it. Giovanni is all tensed up, until, suddenly, like a light bulb been turned on in its head, he seems to recall something: “It’s you then who sends me one thousand-fifty euro a month, right?”

Jack, what are you going to do now? What are you going to say? You don’t answer, you just look at him in the eyes and repeat: “Giovanni, please: accept my help and give me yours.”

Clearly it isn’t the right move. Giovanni blushes, tears fill up his eyes and he starts yelling: “First you kill my father, now you want to buy my forgiveness with money. Get out, you make me sick!” He throws himself at you and pushes you out of the door. And you? You try to clam him down, stop his rage and not show your own temper.

“All right, I’m going. But think about it. Lets’ try to give a meaning to your father’s death.”

In limbo

“Giovanni, did I thank you?”

“For what?”

“You know, when you are sick, in bed...”

“Hanging between life and death...”

“Well, it’s not that bad...”

“I know, it’s just that lately you’ve been kind of melodramatic and so, I like making fun of you.”

“Am I getting soft?”

“Excuse me, how old are you?”

“Thirty-eight. Why?”

“Well, just yesterday I was reading on the Internet that a man your age, has more or less ten years ... before permanently softening, losing it, and with what has happened to you, I thought your time might have gotten shorter.”

“Fuck you, awfully cocky for someone who doesn’t even shave yet! Come on, boy, cut it out. I don’t need someone to depress me even more. I’m already low enough.”

“So, you see, I was right... you are down!” Giovanni burst out in laughter. “So, leaving aside the jokes, what did you want to thank me for?”

“Because when I came to your house to ask you for help with the Imperiali’s e-mails, you threw me out. And that did me good. You see, regardless of what had happened to me, I was quite sure you would have said yes and accepted right away, that I would have won you over. Instead, you blew me off and I understood that you have to fight for something. Fight for real and I mean it.”

“It’s true. I threw you out. But then I thought about it.”

“I know, but why?”

“I told you already.”

“I know, but tell me again.”

“It was my mother who convinced me to give you a chance. You know, after my father’s death we really had a hard time. When someone commits suicide insurers always find tons of excuses not to pay your settlements and, without your one thousand-five hundred euro they would have taken the house.”

“And so you decided to come and visit me.”

“No. Right away I told my mother not to accept your money. I told her I would work, and either keep studying in the evening or quit.”

“Your turn to sound melodramatic, now.”

“My mother was adamant. She told me she didn’t even want to talk about it. If I really didn’t want to accept your help, we would have found something else. She would have found a job or sold the house, but no way would I quit school.”

“A real gloomy drama, indeed.”

“Oh, come on, stop it now.”

Fly’s house

11.00 a.m. October 12th

“Ah Francesca, little Francesca, be happy. You’re set. You don’t have to worry anymore.”

“Ah, did you play lotto on my behalf without telling me and won?”

“Better, much better. I have a job interview.”

“Does it mean that after all I won’t end up begging for a living and you’ll pay me my arrears.”

“Yes, my lady. And maybe there’ll be something also for this young fellow here” you finish and softly slap Giovanni, who’s hunched over the computer, on the back of his neck.

“Wow!” the boy says without even moving his eyes from the monitor.

“By the way, any news?”

“No, nothing so far, Jack. I can read normal messages, like this one, saying that they no longer work with two promoters from Turin, because they didn’t want to sign the non-competition agreement.”

“It’s always the best who choose to leave. Who would want to stay in a bank that keeps you as a prisoner all your life?”

“And throw away the key, too. A real Alcatraz Bank.”

“Yes, correct. Great definition: Alcatraz Bank, good for you Giovanni.”

“I can see the commercial all right: long shot, on the background the island of Alcatraz, also called the Birds Island. While the camera approaches it, a voice over saying: “If you want your money to be in a theft-proof safe, a storm-proof fortress, give it to Alcatraz Bank. A bank from where nothing and nobody can ever escape. Not even the cashiers.”

“Nice. You see, how smart young guys are these days? Who’s gonna stop this one here, eh?” you say, smiling, unable to restrain your pride.

“Who’s gonna stop me? I’m already stalled. I can’t seem to make any progress.”

“No progress on the coded messages? Well, take it easy and don’t worry. You’re comfortable here; Francesca has turned this house into an office even better than the one I had at Nattan. If you need anything, just ask. We have time.”

“You know... I also have to study.”

“Yeah, that’s right... How did you get your schedule organised?”

“I think I’ll be able to come more or less every afternoon for a couple of hours. I’ll just get back home a little later.”

“What does your mother say?”

“Don’t worry, I’ve already taken care of that. Everything’s under control.”

“If you say so.”

“Well” Francesca resumes talking, asking you, “Why don’t you tell something more about this interview?”

“Nothing much, a so and so Mr. Cabrini, from Friendly Bank has contacted me again. He sounds like a good guy and he’s also interested. And besides, he is one hundred percent native Milanese, a real rarity these days.

“Well, you always say you get on pretty well with people from Milan.” Francesca remarks.

“Right. Maybe I’ll have my chance for revenge...”

“Anyway, what are you going to do with Nattan? Did you quit or what?”

“Francesca, I have to find another bank with an offer first. And I’ve already spoken to everybody I can think of.”

“What did you decide with the lawyer?”

“We decided to file a lawsuit. We’ll support the fact that the bank has unilaterally and substantially changed what we had agreed upon, and therefore have invalidated the entire contract. It is as if they had fired me, and so they owe me one million euro, and all it’s due to me by the law, just as bonuses and benefits are. In case the judge doesn’t grant me this, we’ll then ask to be granted the right to cease my working relationship on legitimate grounds, because the new conditions the bank has forced on me prevent me from doing my job. As far as they are concerned, they’ll have to explain why they are accusing one of their promoters of unfair competition and still keep him employed in the bank.”

“That’s true. It’s pretty awkward, in fact” Francesca remarks.

“Yes, but the lawyer’s been clear. If they find people who testify that I wanted to steal promoters from Nattan and take them to Martani Bank, then I’m screwed.”

“They would have to find someone willing to swear falsely.”

“It seems that finding false witnesses is what makes you win or lose trials.”

“So, bottom line, what are your expectations with this Cabrini? Will he take you in?”

“If I’m not able to move his feelings, then I’ll tell him to do it for you.” “Let alone the jokes, you’ll see we are going to succeed. If you have your clients with you, you’ll always find a bank that wants you. It’s only a matter of time, but unfortunately time I don’t really have. The lawyer informed me that I have to start with the lawsuit within 30 days from the change of conditions, that is by October 22nd. After that, it’s too late. I only hope that rushing this won’t make me slip up again and run into other scumbags like the ones over at Nattan.”

“I hope so, too.”

In limbo

Who knows if Francesca was right in hoping, eh? What do you think, Jack?

As of today, things aren’t going very well. But, as you think back to last October, well, things were probably even worse then. Yes, of course, Cabrini had given you a job and you’d been able to take some of your most important clients with you. But nevertheless, when faced with such phone calls as the one you had with Defrancesco, you felt as if you were in a canoe on the Amazon River, just a few hundred metres away from the waterfalls.

“Doctor Defrancesco, good morning, this is Fly, I’m calling....”

“Ah, good morning Fly, I was just thinking about you. What the hell are you up to?”

“Excuse me?”

“Is the trial over?”

“Excuse me, Doctor Defrancesco, what are you talking about?”

“Many of your colleagues have come to see me...”

“Sorry....I don't know what you're talking about.”

“What do you mean you don't know? I'm talking about the lawsuit for fraud Nattan has filed against you.”

“I haven't been accused of any fraud. What on earth are you thinking of?”

“Listen, Fly, I don't get easily shocked. You always made my money grow.”

“Doctor Defrancesco, please, there is no trial. Listen: I've simply changed banks and wanted to know if you were interested in following me to my other firm.”

“Fly, let's not go too far here, I'm telling you I won't judge you, but I wouldn't feel safe to give you my money after what I've heard.”

How many phone calls just like this one have there been? Those from Nattan were spreading rumours around, first in a sort of joke, then lowering their voices as if they were telling you a secret. And naturally all the clients believed them. You would tell Francesca and Giovanni everything and they wouldn't know what to answer you. One night, Giovanni asked you if even his dad had received such a treatment when he left BNI. And luckily you were able to find just the right words. “No, Giovanni, don't get the wrong idea. This world is not as horrible as it looks. We just ended up with a bunch of scumbags, but they are not all like that.”

“Some are even worse” Francesca said smiling.

Like that jerk, for example, who stopped your credit card, yes, just like that, overnight. Why? Because they were saying you didn't pay. Or better, that an insolvency risk existed.

You hand over your credit card to pay for gas at the gas station and they tell you that your card has been rejected. What the fuck does it mean? The credit card was from Nattan, so you immediately call to ask what the problem is. You want to speak to the branch manager and they pass you Salutti on the phone: “Bravo, Jack! You look for another job and so far so good, but looking for a lawyer...”

“Who are you? Who am I speaking to?”

“How come, you don't recognize your old friends anymore?”

“Not easy when they forge their voices.”

“Come on, it was a joke. It's Giorgio. The were telling me you have problems with your credit card.”

“Yes, it seems it's been cancelled.”

“Yes, I know.”

“What do you mean you know? Why the fuck have you cancelled my card?”

“Because you could be insolvent.”

“What are you saying? Me, insolvent?”

“Yes, yes, you know, things can change. Actually you still owe us one million euro. How do we know you have it?”

“What is this? I owe you nothing. You haven't won, yet.”

“It's only a matter of time.”

“Go fuck....”

“Listen, I also wanted to tell you that right now we are a bit short of cash, so as for the rent you must be a little patient.”

“I’m not fucking patient. Pay the rent or leave my property.”

“All right then, send us the eviction paper. It’s gonna take you roughly about a year. In the meantime how are you gonna manage with the mortgage? Do you remember you opened the mortgage with us, don’t you? And us, when we want something, we are quite a bit faster than the bailiff. After the third unpaid instalment, it is our very right to draft the legal documents to take the property back from you. And your instalments are monthly! Don’t you find it all so interesting? We don’t pay you the rent and we save. This prevents you from paying the mortgage and we take the property away from you and at that point we won’t need to pay any more rent.”

“You are real fuckers. For the time being I’ll send the eviction paper, then if I can’t pay the mortgage off, I’ll sell the property after the second unpaid instalment...”

“We’ll see about that, we have a first class mortgage arrangement on that property. Listen, let’s do this: let’s start from scratch. You send us a fax agreeing to stay at Nattan with the position of financial promoter and forget about taking any legal actions...”

“Sorry, I have another call...” A few beeps and then again you’re on the line: “Yes, sorry, tell me: and you?”

“We’ll take you back and reactivate your card.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to? You want to start a war only because you think you can get away with it?”

“Very well Jack, as you wish. So, listen, as I was telling you before, we are a bit short of cash right now, so you must give us back all the advance bonuses we have granted you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing so obscure for you, dear little Jack. You just have to give us back the bonuses we have given you in advance and they will be available to you at year-end.”

“But I can’t. It’s my money.”

“It’ll be in January, my dear. For the time being it’s still ours. And you are kindly being asked to give it back.”

“Impossible. I bought shares with it... I only have less than half left!”

“Poor Jack. Even you a victim of the itch to invest in the Stock Exchange, eh? Why didn’t you go to a good financial promoter? All right, then we can try to help you out. You send us the fax I asked of you before, and give up on the idea of suing us, stay at Nattan and we’ll let you keep the two hundred-eighty thousand euro.”

“Sorry, I just want to make sure I understood well. If I don’t come back and work as a financial promoter for you, I’ll have to give you back all the bonuses I’m entitled to and that you have prepaid me, you won’t pay me the rent you owe, and won’t activate my credit card. Did I understand well?”

“Exactly.”

“It’s blackmail, then?”

“No. It’s our right.”

“Can I give you back the two hundred-eighty thousand euro in instalments?”

“Unfortunately, we need it in three days time, otherwise we’ll have to report you to

the Risk Bureau over at the Central Bank of Italy, as insolvent and no banks will give you any credit, actually if they have already loaned you money, they'll likely ask you to pay them back right away."

"You perfectly know that in order to pay you back I'd have to sell even my ass..."

"You know, you can't have everything in life. But if you send the letter and stay with us..."

"No, I never want to see your face, again. You know what, when I told you I had another call, I turned on a tape recorder installed in my mobile and now I'm gonna report you for extortion. I really want to see if even this time you'll get away with it."
Click.

In limbo

You know why I've always liked you, Jack? Because you're the kind of guy, that the more they beat you up, the more you get back on your feet. Like that Ercolino Sempreiniedi, it seems as if you need to be beaten up to get recharged.

You wanted to report Salutti for extortion. After all, you had the recording and it all seemed quite natural. Then your criminal lawyer told you that you didn't have any great evidence to report him with. It would have been a thousand times better not to tell Salutti of the tape. You could have waited until Salutti came to testify in your labour lawsuit, and then if he denied that phone call in front of the judge, you could have presented the tape and reported him for false testimony. Right now, you've only added one more enemy. Come on, have some self-control!

In the following days, you took your clients' folders and your archives and moved everything from your house to Friendly Bank, which luckily in the meantime, had given you a job. Then, you poor innocent soul, even tried to involve the Consob. After all, each financial promoter pays 144 euro dues to the Consob in order to do this job: eighty thousand financial promoters come to about ten million euro; they'll have to listen to you. And then, throwing mud at you means also damaging your clients, the savers, right? Nattan was restricting their freedom of choice; following you or not to your new firm, giving up on you, think about it; spreading false and tendentious information. And those at the Consob, very kind indeed, show you a very simple way. They can't do anything, but you can: first of all, you must write to the petition office, three copies, then gather all the evidence, have a lawyer ratify it, involve the IRS...and you, you'd better make sure that your evidence is irrefutable! At that point they would then evaluate what to do further.

Do you see that I'm right when I say that a good beating does you good? The nothing you got from the Consob gave you the right energy to go see your new general manger, good old Roberto Cabrini, and ask him to give you an advance on your commissions.

"An advance? Sorry, what kind, Fly?"

"I need two hundred-thousand euro."

“I see. Just a few pennies. Why, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Because Nattan want me to pay back the advances on the commissions we had agreed upon.”

“Ah, I see. How much do they amount to?”

“Two hundred eighty thousand euro. But they’ll give it back to me in January.”

“Um... If you are suing them you won’t see a single penny until the trial is over.”

“In ten years.”

“Less I’d say, but two hundred eighty thousand euro is a big chunk of money. You were getting pretty good advances.”

“I was getting pretty good results.”

“Yes, this confirms my feeling that I was right when I took you in.-“

“Thanks.”

“But, if you don’t mind me saying this, you’re a bit of a dummy.”

“What?”

Roberto Cabrini is a man very much unlike you: short, with a nice round belly, fair complexion and two smart eyes. His office is altogether anti-technological. Of course he’s got a computer, but somehow it’s hidden behind a Benjamin tree. And he’s not in the least ashamed of his attitude. He notices you’re a bit annoyed and he smiles at you.

“Come on, don’t take it personally, I like you.”

“Because you like me, then you call me a dummy?”

“Yes, because I don’t think you fully realise the situation you’re in. Excuse me, what did you *really* do over at Nattan, to make them kick you out overnight?”

“They didn’t kick me out, I left.”

“All right. It doesn’t make much of a difference. So, what did you do?”

“I told you. They had offered me a contract...”

“Yes, yes, I know that. But then?”

“I didn’t get on with the general manager.”

“Mancini. I know him. He’s not the easiest guy in the world, but still it’s not enough. There must be something else.”

“Well, I wouldn’t know.”

Cabrini scans you with his smart eyes. “Are you sure?”

“They were selling products I didn’t like.”

“Ah, interesting. So, you are not always a team player?”

“No, I’m the kind of guy who wants to understand things. Someone, who before selling has to buy. Someone, who before taking a stand, would like to know which side to stand with.”

“Which side is more *convenient* to stand with?”

“No, which side is *right* to stand with. And normally the right side is also the more convenient, too.”

Cabrini’s face opens in a large smile: “When do you think you’ll be able to give me back the two hundred thousand?”

In limbo

So, all you've been able to get after your call to the Consob, was just another nice inspection, this time in your new office over at Friendly Bank. In fact, do you remember? It was October 28th. They inspectors from Friendly Bank had told you it was the Consob, following a Nattan request, to have your archives checked, and so they started rummaging in your folders, and guess what, the first thing they found was a folder with the name "ESPOSITO" written on.

Fuck, Jack, you are a real idiot.

They opened it in front of you and inside there was a lot to spark the imagination. A true collection, so complete as to be even more comprehensive than the one between Saint Paul and the Thessalonians.

Naturally, the fact that you'd left it right there, on your desk, didn't make them suspect of anything.

Well, after all, they were only inspectors from the internal bureau of Friendly Bank, not FBI agents.

The whole story was getting pretty heavy. They were not FBI agents and it wasn't your general manager's duty to doubt them. What would have happened then, when in a matter of no time, the inspectors would have told Cabrini, then the Consob and then the file would have ended in Mancini's hands?

It took you just a week to find out.

One day, on your way back to the office, after a visit to a client, you found a note on your desk: the general manager, Doctor Cabrini, was looking for you.

You picked up your briefcase and went straight to his office. Did you ask yourself where you would find the boxes for another move? When you looked around for them last time, when you moved your office from Nattan home, over at the Esselunga supermarket they had invited you to go back on Mondays for more.

Milan, Friendly Bank

9.40 a.m. November 5th

"Please, engineer Fly, Doctor Cabrini will see you shortly."

Seated in front of the closed door, you started counting the minutes that were left until your inevitable execution. At this point, nobody would have hired you. Who would want someone who leaves two banks in a few months? By the way, have they opened a shelter for lepers? No? So, you've got to do the best you can. You could ask Gotti, the guy who was fired a while ago, if he'll subcontract you in his place as a substitute glass-cleaner at traffic lights.

On the wall in front of you, in a rather old frame, you can read a statement by Luigi Einaudi. Who was he? Come on, you know... you're only 38 years old, and you haven't gone to one of those schools, that consider anything that happened before

1994 as ancient history. He was the second president of the Italian republic. You can even learn the statement by heart, now. You've got time. Cabrini is making you wait.

“Thousands, millions of people work, produce and save, regardless of everything we may invent to molest, prevent and discourage them.

It is a natural gift that pushes them: not the mere hunger for money.

The enjoyment, the pride of seeing one's business grow, acquiring a reputation, and trust from a wider and wider clientele; enlarging its premises and embellishing its offices represent motivations as powerful as profit itself.

If it were different, there would be no explanation why, some entrepreneurs who in their companies invest their own money and receive profits sometimes much smaller than what they would surely and comfortably obtain in other ways”.

How strange this Cabrini is, hanging such a statement in a bank. What does it mean? They would all giggle over at Nattan. ‘A motivation as powerful as profit’? Well, fucking a gorgeous slut or having the power to destroy someone's life, these can be motivations as powerful as profit, but ‘acquiring trust’, ha, ha, ha! Sure, acquire trust from your neighbour so you can do a better job screwing him. The fact is that when you trust someone, they can just screw you that much more easily. You see the mote in your brother's eye but not the beam in your own. Exactly like it works with the promoters: one works his ass off because of the law saying, you can't do this, you can't do that. For example, you can't take cash from a client. So, if you are a promoter, and by chance deposit some cash your sister's given you to invest, and they find out, they suspend you for five years. And everyone says: “Well, you know, after all, the law is the law, one can't just think of doing what the fuck he wants...” Instead, if a general manger forges the yearly balance, cheats on the IRS, well, so what?: he can't be punished for that, it's minor stuff, they might even give him a promotion in another bank. He didn't pay the dividends, actually he lost money? Well, so what? Let's move him to a different bank, a bigger one, where he can find himself more comfortable and perform even worse. Did he play with junk bonds? Good for him! A very creative manager, indeed, these are the kind of people we need, because we always have to find new resources, increase our profits, especially when there are none. We have the tools to avoid scams and fraud, the laws exist, the oversight institutions are competent... hmm, this may be a problem, but you'll overcome it. After all, art needs obstacles to express itself at its best. What would be the excitement to making huge money if you could do everything honestly and openly? What would be the merits? Cabrini's secretary is seated at her desk. She's an average woman, she works with no distractions. You can tell they hired her because she knows how to do her job well. But, is she any good at blowjobs? In Nattan Bank in order to get a job, you had to present your former boss's credentials. “Great at blowjobs; her ass may be she'll give it to you, but slowly. Suggested salary: two levels below the maximum”.

Well, what's wrong with that? You don't really want to exclude from a honest job

selection a beautiful girl, with a hot body only because she knows how to give blowjobs and give her ass to the boss? Are you a racist? Or a communist? Or maybe gay? The law doesn't forbid it. What does Céline say? In Italy we have seventy thousand codes: find me a single one that forbids hiring beautiful girls just because they are hot and open-minded. Hey, guys, we have to give everyone the same opportunities, and then it's clear, who's on the fast-track. It's the market. Is it more difficult to give a good blowjob or take care of the bookkeeping? But, are we kidding here, or what? What's really difficult (and you need art for this) is to get rid of the junk and make money doing it. The junk bonds, for example. It's not easy to sell them to clients, but you clean up the bank and make a good profit. After all, profit is not a crime. Hey, are we kidding here, or what?

After three quarters of an hour, letting your brain go numb and facing the metaphor of your life-to-be, a long endless row of closed doors, Roberto Cabrini opens the door and lets you in. Then, wasting no time in chit chat he says: I've received the internal bureau report. Apparently you've committed one of the worst crimes in our business: unfair competition. Have you got anything to say?

"Do you know what they're basing those accusations on?"

"They found a written correspondence between you and a so called Esposito. You know Mancini has been calling me for the last few days? He's been telling me to fire you, because someone who's been unfaithful once, will be forever. What have you got to say?"

Pieces of shit, you thought. They came up with false evidence, but you didn't give up.

"Doctor Cabrini, I'm a honest man and I'm not afraid. Between Esposito and me, there is no exchange of information. If they found it, it means they made it up. I met Esposito just once and only to understand what his bank was offering for a promoter. It's Mancini who wants to destroy me. They declared total war and I don't know why."

"It's not true you don't know why. I already asked you this question before, and at the end we found an answer, do you remember?"

"Yes, you're right. But if the problem was my unwillingness to sell their junk; well they got rid of me. So, why do they insist on continuing this war?"

"I find it odd, myself. But I believe you've got something on your conscience."

Jack, do you know innocent people never have an alibi? Those who fret when stopped by the police. Those who cannot hold up under cross-examination, but also the ones, who at some point, just get up and proudly say: "No, Doctor Cabrini, you're wrong. I've got nothing on my conscience. But you have to take me at my word: keep watch over me, if you want, and if you find out something, then do whatever you think is best."

"Mancini keeps asking for your head. What shall I do?"

"Sorry, Doctor Cabrini, it's not up to me to tell you what to do."

"No? So, listen up to what we'll do." Cabrini picks up the receiver, turns the speaker phone on and calls Mancini.

"Hello, Hi Mancini. This is Cabrini."

“Ah, are you calling me to tell me you fired Fly?”

“No, not yet. But I’ll keep an eye on him.”

“What do you mean keep an eye on him? We have evidence of unfair competition, you have seen it, too. What more do you want? Listen, Cabrini, you’re making a terrible mistake. People like Fly must be kicked out, and the sooner the better, before they infect someone else.”

“Don’t worry about that, I’ll be careful.”

“Careful, careful about what, Cabrini? He’s gonna make a fool of you right under your own eyes.”

“Are you calling me a fool?”

“I’m only telling you to kick him out. Otherwise...”

“Otherwise what?”

“Otherwise, I don’t care about how much money it’ll take, but I’ll steal all your best promoters, even if I have to pay them fifty percent more.”

“What is this? Are you threatening me? Just before you were concerned about my bank and now you want to steal all my best men? It sounds as if there’s something personal between the two of you.”

“Don’t you dare, Cabrini. Between me and that piece of shit there is nothing else but contempt.”

Jack, I can see you already sizzling, you’d want to step into that discussion, but just when you’re about to snatch the receiver from Cabrini, he gestures you not to, and signals you to sit down and shut up. “Wow, thank God there is nothing personal between you two. In any case I’m not going to change my mind. I’ll keep an eye on Fly, but no way I’m going to fire him right now.”

“Ok, you’ll regret it, then.”

“If you talk about the damages that Fly may cause to me, don’t worry I’ll take care of that before it happens. Instead, if it’s you who wants me to regret it, let me tell you something, even if you try stealing all my promoters, I won’t move a finger to stop you. Here, at Friendly bank, anyone is free to leave when they want. We don’t make people sign CIA-style contracts.”

Mancini hangs up abruptly. You and Cabrini look at each other. You feel very emotional: “Thank you, Doctor Cabrini. I owe you.”

“Forget it Jack. Just don’t make me regret it, please.”

You wouldn’t, right? But you would keep on trying to make those at Nattan pay, although, Pracchi, your lawyer, and probably Cabrini too would be telling you not to.

Fly’s house

9.30 p.m. November 9th

The program for the evening: watch a good movie, have a glass of white wine and a few games of chess on the Internet. You deserve it, instead, you receive an unexpected guest.

“Who’s there?”

“What do you mean... It’s Edoardo, your colleague. The one whose ass you saved so many times. Can I come up?”

Look who’s showed up. You are happy, it’ll be something a different. After all, spending an evening at home can be pleasant, but a bit of a bore, too, especially for someone used to going out every night. So, it’s all for the better if you can share it with a friend.

“Hi Edo. What are you doing here?”

“Well, I came to visit an old buddy!”

“I’m glad. Please, come on up.”

And there he is, Edoardo Corradi, your ex colleague, coming up with a box of your favourite chocolates, Leonidas.

“Thanks! Shall we open it?” you suggest.

“You can eat them, no?”

“Sure, I don’t have diabetes.”

“Wow, you look great!”

“Well, let’s just say I’ve made it.”

“What exactly happened to you? I’ve heard some many different stories, you know...”

“Nothing worth talking about, Edoardo. And you, how are you doing at Nattan?”

“What do you want me to say? The usual: you eat a lot of shit and shit a little money. And you? I know you went to Friendly Bank. How is it?”

“How do you know?”

“Giorgio told me.”

“I see... Well, different people, altogether. At least until one has proof to the contrary.”

“Yeah, that’s right. This is one of the first things they teach you at the company survival course: trust someone, but only until one has proof to the contrary. In any case, I owe you an apology.”

“Ah, really? For not having called me to ask how I was doing?”

“Yes, well, no... In fact I did not call but... it’s just that I had my phone out of order for a week. Listen, it was crazy... I had to make all my private calls from work.”

“And not such a good idea to call me from work, right?”

“Right, you said it. But I wanted to apologise for something else, too.”

“What?”

“Well, do you remember the Bitto case? The guy who didn’t want to sign the order for the Niscagi?”

“Yes, sure. One of the cases the lawyer Mr. Satanasso successfully solved.”

“Exactly. Well, to be honest with you, real honest, I think we were a bit at fault, too. Bitto, at the beginning didn’t exactly want to invest on the Niscagi. Well, I knew he was interested in that market, but not in the Niscagi in particular. I was the one to suggest them, actually impose them on him.”

Suddenly, you don’t feel at ease any longer.

“And you’re telling me this, now? But the order, at least, did he place it or not?”

“No, no.. oh ...yes... Well, he wanted to invest that kind of money that exact morning, but I was the one to sell him the Niscagi. That’s why he was shilly-shallying. I hadn’t been clear and he was a bit ambiguous, so...”

“And so you made me look like an extortionist”.

“Come on, you know, over at Nattan everyone was going nuts about those Niscagi bonds and we had so much pressure to sell them.”

You Jack; act as if it’s none of your business. Don’t get pissed, or better, get pissed but don’t show it. See if you can get some more information...

“Yes... well. I understand. They’re talking about them even at Friendly Bank. But the itch Nattan has got for this company is unheard of, it seems like there may be something more to this...”

“No, I don’t think so. But I know for sure that the next bond they’ll place is from Luxemburg.”

“Oh, really. So no-one has to print the informational prospectus.”

“It just means it would be useless. It’s such a safe bond, so safe it needs no presentation.”

“So this is what you tell your clients?”

Corradi smiles, with that smart look that doesn’t suit him at all. “But I don’t suggest it to my clients. A bond with no prospectus can only go into special management and so the investors interested in it can only be institutional.”

“Such as poor Bitto, eh?”

“I see we speak the same language, Jack. You always were one of the best.”

Yes, Jack, one of the best, a real maestro. A master in the little things, a master often misunderstood, and even more often deceived, but still a master. Even Corradi was in your class. Even though, in terms of bullshit, he has overcome you big time.

“So, lets’ toast the Niscagi! Whats the total of the issue?”

“Well, it’s no secret, Jack. 300 million euro.”

“Shit! Not even Deutsche Bank will be able to come up with that kind of money. How does little Nattanush think of doing it?”

“I don’t know, Mancini keeps saying it’ll be all very easy. To be honest, it’s not that easy for us. However, they’re counting so much on it that they’ve even decided to subdivide the stock.”

“What?”

“Yes, do you remember the stock they froze just before summer? Well, they reconsidered it, and told us that the bank reserved 15% for management and 10% for the best financial promoters, if the shares go up more than 12 euro by the end of December. You know, the day they released this news, the value went up to 11,45 and today it’s worth 13,10 and there are less than two months to the 31st.”

“That means that management and the area managers will get over 20 million euro if the value of Nattan goes up more than 12 euro” is your comment.

“Yeah!”

“So, why are you so happy about it, Edoardo? You’re not part of management... you are not even an area manager.”

“No, but not for long, Jack. I haven’t told you the greatest news, yet. Let me pour you some more wine, let’s make a toast.”

“A toast? To what?”

“I’m gonna take your place, you know. Yes, I’ll become an area manager. I hope you are happy about it, and since you’re my friend, I want to tell you a secret: Nattan has no intention of letting you take a single client from them. They want them all for themselves. And to have that, they are willing to use anything, legal or illegal to prevent it. Personally, I don’t know what you did to Mancini. But now, if you tell me that you’re not going to resist, you’re not going to try to take clients away, or better that you will help me keep them at Nattan, I could give you a percentage on each one of them, well, a small one, of course. But, you wouldn’t run any other risks, and could be at ease with the fact that with me, your former clients will be in good hands.”

How do you feel now, Jack? Of course, you knew this asshole would take your position, but now, hearing straight out of his mouth that he’s gonna wipe his dick with your own towel, it’s really getting to you. What assholes! Not only did they kick you out, but they even sent a drudge to ask you to bend over, so they could slide it in more easily.

For a short while, seated on the couch, you don’t move; your chest bent forward and your arms leaning on your thighs,. All your life scrolls down in the matter of an instant. Then you get up, take the glass from Corradi’s hand and put it down on the table, then you take the chocolate box, close it, stick it under his arm and say:

“Edoardo, go fuck yourself, ok?”

“But, Jack, what do you mean?”

“Out, right now, asshole!”

“But...”

“Out!”

Edoardo moves slowly and so you push him roughly toward the door, handing him his coat and scarf. The cover of the chocolate box comes loose, and Edoardo has a hard time trying to keep it closed with all the stuff he’s holding.

“Jack, don’t you understand I’m giving you a chance? Listen, you’re gonna lose your clients anyway.”

“Out!”

“But Jack...” Now Edoardo is on the floor landing, his face flushed and congested.

“Jack, you’re gonna pay for it. The bank is huge. It’ll crush you.”

You call the elevator and while pushing him inside you hiss to him: “So yeah, the bank is huge? All right, it means that from now on, I’m turning myself into a jack-hammer. Fuck you all.”

From the elevator you can hear Edoardo’s swearing and the sound of the chocolates falling to the floor.

The day after

8.00 a.m. November 10th

The morning after, you woke up feeling like a brand new man, Jack. You made yourself a huge breakfast, as if you needed all the energy possible to climb K2, direct with no supplemental oxygen and no base camp. In front of you a piece of paper, size A4, on which you are listing all the things you need to do:

- Francesca will look up the phone numbers of all the clients in your area, using the latest Nattan database now in your possession.
- Giovanni, alternatively, will take from the national roll all the names of the financial promoters working in the region of Lombardy, with employment details so that they can be reached through their company e-mail.
- Francesca will call all Nattan clients and make you an appointment with them.
- Giovanni will send an e-mail with the list of all Nattan clients to those financial promoters working in Lombardy.

In limbo

You then started convincing some clients to follow you. You presented Nattan the first requests for money transfers to Friendly Bank, but Salutti didn't act right away, instead, he actually called the most important clients personally, and to retain them, offered such great conditions that the bank was practically losing money on them. And for those who followed you anyway, Nattan demanded, before the transfer and depending on how important the client was, that they pay an amount from one to ten thousand euro to cover what they called 'transfer commissions'.

You, even called the police, but unfortunately, apart from reporting what was happening, couldn't do anything to make those money transfers from Nattan correctly made.

Don't you know you can't fight something that's much bigger than you? Why make things worse? And speaking about making things worse, it's enough to run into new temptations and new flatteries, subtle or open seductions. Exactly like what happened one day when Giovanni shows up triumphantly with a piece of paper and a few words scribbled on it: *"Esteemed area managers, we are happy to inform you that effective Monday, Nattan Suisse, a new associate of ours based in Lugano, is fully operational"*.

"So? What is this?" you ask.

"What do you mean what is this? It's the first decoded message from Imperiali's mail" Giovanni answers.

"Oh! Tell me, tell me."

"I'm not going to tell you what I did to decode it, you wouldn't understand anyhow. But listen to what happened: as soon as I pushed "print" the e-mail self-destructed. Luckily I had copied the message on a piece of paper before it happened. I only have

this one right now. They seem to always use the same code system but they keep changing the keys. Probably they gave a copy on paper to all the area managers. In fact, for the last password digit key, they ask for the result of the combination between a number and a letter. A bit like that game 'Battleship'. Well, if I could get my hand on Imperiali's code-card, it would be much simpler, you know, every time I have to find the new combination. But I'm pretty sure I'll be able to find the *pattern* in a couple of days."

"Great, well done" you say, taking the paper with your fingertips, as if you feared that piece of paper could turn into dust. "What I don't understand is all this privacy for something anyone can read in the papers."

"I don't know" Giovanni replies, "I decoded it, now it's up to you to understand it."

"I know, but have you got any ideas?"

"Well, maybe the words have a different meaning. Like 'The new branch in Lugano is operational' could mean 'The new heroine shipment to Bologna has left'.."

"Um... pretty farfetched. I could believe almost anything these days, but Imperiali, after all, doesn't look like a drug dealer."

"Then, it means exactly what it says. What's incredible is that they announce it."

"I don't get it."

"Well, let's say, we are planning the robbery of The Gioconda and I'm your accomplice. If I write to you: 'The famous painting *The Gioconda* is going to leave the Louvre on the 15th of this month, for an international touring exhibition to the biggest museums in the world', what does that mean? Either that the painting is really leaving the museum, and that it could be the right moment to strike or maybe postpone it. Or else that the robbery really is scheduled for the 15th. So, it's up to you to understand what I've written, whether what's written is true in itself and there is not need to decode it."

"Wow, you know a thing or two, don't you?."

"Thanks. It's just that I am young and on the ball and you are getting up there. Flexibility, intuition, coolness, that's what you're lacking."

"Hey, hey, slow down. Actually if things are like this... I've got to think about it. Why should a financial promoter be so interested if they open a branch in Switzerland? By law they can only operate in Italy."

"Well, then I don't know..."

"I should talk about it with someone..."

"Why don't you call your girlfriend?"

"My *ex* girlfriend, you mean."

"Why, did you two break up?"

"It's a long story" you reply, thinking back to that dinner and the ring that was left in your pocket.

"She's a lawyer, after all, and pretty smart, too."

"Smart, yes, she's smart... but she's not just a lawyer, she's a female lawyer."

"So what?"

“It means that she does her job as a female and not as a male, and that the word comes from Latin and has a feminine gender... it’s all very complicated and she’s the only one who understands it. Anyway, I don’t know if calling her is the right thing to do. Maybe she doesn’t want to talk to me, she could hang up on me.”

“Or maybe she just can’t wait for you to call.”

Fly’s house

12.00 a.m. November 26th

“Hello Céline, umm, hi, it’s me...”

“The asshole?” she answers.

“Well, you used to always call me *groscaillù!*”

On the other side of the line a soft giggle: “No, no: *gros jaloux, big time jealous*. It’s different now, that was a different time. Back then you were jealous, now you could care less.”

“No! It’s not true, I care.”

“So, why do you do everything you can to make me think otherwise?”

“Because my life is a freaking mess right now and I don’t know what to think anymore.”

“Well, at least you admit it. Let’s say it’s an improvement.”

“Let’s say that I love you.”

“...”

“Hello, are you still there?”

“Yes, yes... but I should say, you really took me by surprise.”

“Then hold on strong, are you ready for something else?”

“Let’s hear it.”

“No, no... now that I think of it, I’d better tell you when I see you.”

“So, you’re gonna see me?”

“What do you think?”

“Well, I’d say yes... but I’m leaving.”

“Where to?”

“Hey buddy, none of your business!”

“Sorry.”

“No, come on, I was just kidding. I’m going to a conference for a week to Menaggio.”

“When are you leaving?”

“Today.”

“Ok. But can you give me just a minute? I need your opinion on something.”

“My opinion? Um... maybe. How are you going to pay me back?”

“As usual. With my clothes off.”

“That might not be enough.”

In limbo

It'd been nice talking to Céline. Even if it was for the last time. When you were done telling her everything about the new inspection you had in your office, of Nattan's boycott, of the conversation between Mancini and Cabrini, of Imperiali's e-mails, she told you something you did not like: "Jack, I had warned you that reading your colleague's mail was dangerous."

"What did she mean?"

Milan South Belt Road 9.00 a.m. November 27th

Hey, Jack, tell me: what's better than a sunny, quiet Saturday November morning, when, after a long working week, you know you've done everything you had to do? You, like you do every Saturday, will go jogging in the park.

Yes, of course Céline is not around, but, never mind. What counts is that you got in touch with her. Yes, true, it's been a difficult time, a time of misunderstandings, arguments, but you told her you love her, and she loves you, too, you know that, you felt it in her voice. Maybe it's all for the better not to see each other right away. A week's wait is not too bad, after all, it's a week to dream about the meeting, to savour the sweetness of desire. And here you are, just for the sake of saying one of those subtle things you like so much: in a world where everything is consumed in a hurry, from your morning yoghurt to marriages, it is a rare privilege to rediscover the pleasure of waiting.

And so, everything's fine, actually great. You're going to see Céline next week. Or maybe you'll go unexpectedly to see her at the conference. It's not that far, after all. Menaggio is only two hours away from Milan. Well, you've got all the time in the world to think about it. In the meantime you send her a text message. And you caress her with words: "I love you, Grosocialù."

After jogging you take your car and leave. Thanks to a friend of a friend of one of your clients' friends, you've found a recording studio which has offered to put all your old Super8 films on DVD. You'd been thinking about doing it for the longest time. Those films, that you once in a while watch, are the only tangible memory left of a childhood, that you don't even know whether to consider a happy or a doomed one. The only memory of your parents. Films your father started shooting in the States and continued once back in Italy. You always feared losing them. A tear or an accident... the projector could burn them and film itself wears out with time. It was months you have been thinking on having them in a safer format. Today was the big day. You placed all the films in a big cardboard box, sat it on the seat next to you, as if it were a VIP passenger and left. Direction Paullo, a little town south-east of Milan. You drive slowly, easy going down the half-empty road. The people from Milan sleep in on Saturday mornings, but you, you've always woken up early, and now at

nine-thirty, you feel a bit of an alien. The car goes as straight as a missile. You think, everything is going to be all right. It's got to be! No doubt. You haven't done anything bad. You've done nothing to deserve what happened to you. Actually, you've always tried your best. Céline understood that. And now, you found someone else who believes in you and what you do, Roberto Cabrini. For once, you found somebody who stood by you, who openly took your side. And this feels just great, but careful, you must take a right turn here. Gosh, there's really nobody around. No, wait, there's a car in the middle of the road. What happened? A man standing in the middle of the road is frantically gesturing for you to stop. You then notice two cars, there must have been an accident, for the doors are open, and inside, on the driver seat, there is someone, a still body draped on the steering wheel. You don't know whether to stop or not, you never know these days. But, have they been able to call for help? You must slow down anyway, there's not enough room to pass. The man approaches your car and beckons that he wants to talk to you and you roll down the car window.

He violently grabs your head and smashes it against the door. Then he opens it and drags you out. It takes a while for you to even try to react, and in the meantime, you feel something blocking your right arm and a blow right to your kidneys that takes your breath away. You are lying on the asphalt. The gravel burns on your cheek as they drag you, belly down, by your legs. You want to fight back, but the blows are coming from all directions. Why so much pain?

"I have nothing with me... Take my watch, my wallet." you cry.

You seem to hear them giggling. But how many are they?

Then you hear a voice, from faraway, yelling: "Hey, look what's in here?". They turn you around and you see something flying at you. It's one of your films. "No, leave that stuff alone, Goddamned you!"

It's always a mistake to show what you care about, always! You try to get back on your feet, to get rid of that rabble shit. No, they've got to leave the films alone. You're standing now and in front of you a jerk is laughing, the box with your films at his feet. You are about to jump on him, when another blow make you fall to the ground again. And they resume hitting you, while the jerk, still laughing, holds a lighter in his hand. The flame touches the films, which catch fire right away. You want to get up but they push you down. You feel nothing but a terrible grief and your heart breaking into pieces, while the entire box catches on fire. And then you smell the tobacco smoke on the breath of the jerk who comes closer and whispers to you: "See what happens to people who don't mind their own business?"

In limbo

That's how you ended up in hospital. Two broken ribs, black eyes, a couple of teeth left on the asphalt and countless bumps and bruises. And you were lucky, you know? They could have smashed your spleen, broken your legs, scarred your face. They

could have chopped off one of your hands. But they took your car all right. And burnt your films. Clearly they are professionals. They know how and where to hit. Know how to break one's desire to fight back, without breaking too many bones. Know how to scare someone.

And maybe what you feel today, as Francesca helps you pack your bag to go home, is true fear. What's gonna happen now? Well, Cabrini called to tell you to go back to the bank as soon as you feel like it. But he never came to visit you. Was it just a coincidence? Maybe it's not the bank policy to visit its promoters in hospital, even if they are called Jack Fly. Or *actually because* they are called Jack Fly. But then, again, what's the meaning of "See what happens to people who don't mind their own business?" How can you be sure you're not minding other people's business? Do they know about the e-mails you get from Imperiali? Could Edoardi Corradi have gone so far, just to show off to those at the bank? Or maybe Mancini? What's behind all of this? And if, instead...

Knock-knock.

"Hi, Jack."

"Hi Mirko. Where is Esposito?"

"In the other room. I did what you told me. As soon as he left the club I gave him some drugs, put him in my car and took him here. He keeps saying I got the wrong person. Hey, where does that gun come from?"

"It's the one that killed my father."

"You're not gonna use it, I hope. You're not being serious."

"It's time to get serious, real serious."

"Come on, cut this crap."

"Take me to him."

And there he is, in front of you.

"Jack...? Jack...? Jack...?" Esposito mutters.

"Straight with your back against the wall and chin up."

"Jack, you're strangling me... what do you want? They forced me! Jack... please!"

"Stand still!"

"Jack..., I had no choice. Don't you understand? I didn't know anything. It was Sturli who wrote my statement... I only signed it. Jack... please, forgive me. No! I don't wanna die... Noooo!"

"Open your mouth, I wanna see if the gun fits..."

"Oghh, usf... ggrubb..."

"... yes, yes, just perfect."

"Argh... sgronf..."

You let him breath.

"Jack, please let me go."

"What's the hurry? Have you got something to do?"

"Of course I have, what do you think? I work."

“Ah, so, you work eh! And tell me, did you work today?”

“No, Jack, not today! There was a fire.”

“I heard something on the radio before coming here to say hello to you. What happened?”

“An attack.”

“What do you mean an attack? They mentioned something about a short circuit.”

“That’s what we told the press. Actually we think it could be terrorists.”

“Well gee! You’ve become really important, I see. And tell me, how come your bank has become a target for terrorists?”

“I don’t know. But it was an attack.”

“Couldn’t it have been your clients?”

“Our clients? What are you saying, Jack...?”

“You know, those people you fuck over every day. Maybe, they all got together. Anyway, was anybody hurt or dead?”

“No ... nobody. I told you it must have been...”

“Me.”

“Wh... what?”

“Listen. The cameras outside the bank are on from 7.00 a.m. to 10.00 p.m., correct?”

“Yes.”

“And the security system doesn’t detect the introduction of flammable material under the doors.”

“No, it doesn’t, the main concern is robberies during the day.”

“You know, just 4 litres of gas were enough... I poured it under the door... And when the fumes had filled up the entire place, well a spark had been plenty to set up the entire bank on fire, and as for me, I stayed safely outside.”

“But...”

“What a show! You missed it, you know. Even without a flash, look how well the pictures came out.”

“You’re crazy!”

“I sent them also to the editor in chief over at that monthly financial newspaper you receive at the bank. You can see the gas tank, too. And no news on TV. Isn’t that interesting?”

“Well Jack, what are you surprised about? With all the money Nattan invests in advertising, they choose what the paper writes about.”

“Yeah, right. Nattan runs everything, owns everything, including you.”

“Yes, it’s true...”

“So, by doing something bad to you, then I can finally do something bad to Nattan as well.”

“Come on Jack, all right, we went too far, but I didn’t want to!”

“You know I have never killed anyone...”

“Don’t start with me, then!”

“I can’t imagine how my gun would mess your face up from this distance.”

“Please don’t!”

“Sorry. I’ve got to kill you, you do understand, right? You have killed me. Eye for an eye. And now, you know too much.”

“I’ve got nothing to do with it. It was them...”

“Goodbye, financial promoter.”

“Noooo...! Jaaaack...!”

Click!

“Did you like my little joke?”

“Son of a bitch, Jack! Let me go!”

“All right. Who sent the guys who beat me up?”

“I don’t know, I swear it.”

“Last chance. Tell me who informed you about the e-mails I get from Rome.”

“If I tell you, you’ll let me go?”

“Start talking!”

“The lawyer, Daccò.”

“Céline?”

“Yes, Céline Daccò. She told Sturli everything.”

“Why did she do that?”

“Jack, we have all gone too far, I agree, but we have been forced. Please, don’t kill me!”

“Are you a fan of Inter or Milan?”

“Why do you wanna know?”

“Because killing you or not depends on the answer you give me.”

“Juventus! I’m a fan of Juventus, I’ve always been!”

“You know I don’t like people who make fun of me.”

“Jack, I’ll do whatever you ask of me. Anything!”

“Ok... then. Down on the floor and hands behind your back. Now I can talk to you.”

“Augcht ... you’re hurting me!”

“Listen, you asshole. Tomorrow you’ll quit Nattan Bank and find a different job. Is that clear?”

“Clear.”

“And, are you gonna report me to the police?”

“No, Jack. I won’t... believe me!”

“All right then. But if you report me or do anything stupid, I’ll know it, and then Mirko will put a bomb in your car, not powerful enough to kill you, but tear your legs apart and leave you in a wheelchair for the rest of your life.”

“No, I won’t do it! I’m not gonna report you, I swear!”

“Do you really think that a fool’s oath is worth something? Hey, give me that bag!”

“Oh... Jack! Fuck, watch it or we will blow up!” Mirko warns you.

“Right, Mirko. Please, just wait for me outside, will you? Let’s get back to our business, Esposito. Have you ever seen these onions?”

“Yes... the markets are full of them at Christmas...”

“Yeah, but you’ve never seen one this big, have you? In fact I had it made for me.”

“What is it for?”

“If it blows up, the four walls of this room will come crashing down... just imagine what it will do to your balls. But, what to be worried about? You have no balls.”

“Stop! What do you wanna do?”

“You see, it is connected to a quicksilver switch, you know, like the ones that trigger car alarms when you touch them.”

“But...”

“Look, it’s simple. I’m gonna stick it with some tape to your waist, just where your crotch is.”

“No! Why are you doing this to me? Let me go!”

“Eh, eh ... don’t be foolish. No sudden movements. Just chill out and later I’ll call the police. The firemen will come and it’ll be a breeze for them to free you.”

“No, I don’t want it, please. I can’t take it anymore!”

“I told you, don’t move. And if you really want to shit in your pants, well don’t push too hard... If the quicksilver moves, it’ll blow up in three seconds... Oh shit, you’ve already started... how disgusting!”

“No...”

“A bit of good advice: behave now and make sure I never see your face again.”

“You bast...!”

“Hush, hush ... not so loud or it’ll blow up!”

You join Mirko who’s staring at you.

“Jack, what will we do now? We can’t let him go. He knows my name.”

“I’m only a financial promoter not a murderer. I just want to clean up the market a bit.”

“Well, he’s not gonna be able to stand still for long.”

“Don’t worry, it won’t blow.”

“How come?”

“Because the onion is filled with 00 flour, that’s why.”

“What?”

“If he stand still until Monday, the students will find him and call the fire department and worse comes to worse they’ll all die from the smell of shit...”

“What about if he moves...?”

“Well, I think he still got the idea.”

“I do, too.-”

“- And now, what’s next?”

“I have to pay a visit to a lawyer who owes me more than just an explanation.”

“Jack, Jack.. What’s the matter?” Francesca says.

“Where am I?”

“In the hospital! Where else?”

“Oh, it was just a dream...”

“What?”

“Nothing, nothing. I’ve been having nightmares lately...”

“Come on, we are leaving today!”

You recall the guys that beat you up. They could have killed you, and if you keep on fighting, it’s very likely they’ll come back. You are afraid. Afraid of what exactly, Jack? As you are about to get dressed, you feel the urge to lay back down, just for a little, as if a huge tiredness has just fallen over you. Are you afraid of finding your house in pieces? Or step into your office and not see your desk? Or are you afraid that it could have been Céline, yes, Céline who turned you in?

Just yesterday you again asked Francesca and Giovanni if they had heard anything, if they had been able to track her down. What are you going to do tomorrow? Will you stop by her house, or not?

Or you could pay a visit to Esposito first. Yes, that son of a bitch. You lay down on the bed, still hurting. Mirko had told you that the first thing to do was to go and see him, forget about having Imperiali’s mail rerouted to you... Even Céline had told you that. The only thing, so far that the two of them had agreed on...

“I’d like to speak to engineer Fly” a voice behind your back says.

“It’s me” you reply turning around, still holding a pair of socks that you were about to put in your bag.

At first you don’t recognize her. You can only see a pair of huge sunglasses and a head of short fire-red hair. Then, you smell a familiar perfume, a perfume you can’t forget and you understand it’s her.

She takes her glasses off and looks at you in such a way that says it all, if you are able to see through.

Francesca is the first one to have a reaction. “Céline, is it really you?”

“Of course it’s me. You almost couldn’t tell, right?” Céline gets closer to Francesca, gives her a hug and a kiss. With the corner of her eye she keeps looking at you. And you, you don’t know what to do.

Are you going to get out of limbo, or what?

Out of limbo

Fatebenefratelli Hospital

5.00 p.m. December 3rd

“Well, look at you...” you say while continuing packing and pretending a total lack of interest.

“Who, me? I don’t look good or you just don’t like me?” Céline asks you.

“I don’t like you.”

“Nice of you. Well, you should. I’m dressed exactly like those chicks you see at *Planet Woman*.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“You don’t seem very happy to see me.”

“In fact, I’m not.”

“I am. I missed you.”

“Hard to believe. You didn’t even come to see me once. But, I’ll be honest with you, after what you’ve done I’m not surprised.”

Now you are facing each other, you and her. Like two wrestlers before the fight. Like two duellists a moment before taking their pistols out. Francesca thinks she’d better find shelter: “Hey guys, I’m gonna go get the prescription from the doctor. I’ll leave you two alone, you have a lot to talk about. Just one more thing Céline, if you really want to beat him up, please be careful, he’s still in pieces.”

“Thanks Francesca, don’t worry. I’ll see you in five minutes.” you hiss.

Now you two are alone and Céline asks: “Are you ok now?”

“As you can see, they’re sending me home. Your friends didn’t want to hurt me too badly.”

Céline who was coming closer to you, suddenly freezes. “Why are you saying that?”

“You’re asking me? One day I call and tell you all my problems with Nattan and the next thing I know they beat the shit out of me. Then you disappear, nowhere to be found. You’re not home, you don’t answer the phone. If you’re not good at drawing conclusions, then remember, I’m a genius.”

“I’ve been away. I had a conference. I told you.”

“Yeah, the conference. A week long conference...”

“I missed you.”

Céline smiles and her arms open in a hug. But you move away, abruptly.

“Hey, you are serious, then? Do you really think I’ve got something to do with this?”

“Why, you don’t!?”

“No, Jack, I don’t. I’ve got nothing to do with it. And it’s not what you think.”

“Oh really? So, I should believe you then, just like that?”

Céline sits in a chair, crosses her legs, leaving her thighs visible and causing in you an upsurge of desire and a touch of damned jealousy. Then she takes an MP3 player with twin headphones out of her tiny purse and hands you one, without saying a single word.

“What is it? What I am supposed to do?” you ask.

And she, always smiling, gestures for silence. Then she turns that gesture into a kiss and invites you to wear the headphones, she wears her set, too and turns the device on.

Hi Jack, my love,

today I’ve decided to surprise you with special effects. I hope, at the end, you’ll like it. Actually more than liking, I hope it’ll be of some use. I understand you are confused right now, and since I know you well and I’m perfectly aware of what kind of a raging animal you can be, I’m pretty sure that your bewilderment is already turning into rage. But before triggering your metamorphosis, please give me five minutes. First of all, why this MP3? Because I want nobody to hear what I’m going to tell you. I have reasons to believe that you have been spied on, maybe a

microphone listening and recording your conversations. So this way what I'm going to tell will only be heard by you. Smart, eh?

After your phone call, that Friday, the day before leaving for Menaggio I was very happy, but also concerned. I felt a sort of omen and something kept bugging me. I couldn't understand why they were so mean to you. Let's assume that they knew you had Imperiali's mail rerouted to you, because contrary to what you think, nothing done with computers is fully safe, it always leaves a track somehow. So, why didn't they report you? And, in case they did not want to, why didn't they do something to prevent you from reading Imperiali's mail?

The morning after, as I was driving to Menaggio, I kept brooding over that. I thought about Esposito, Mancini and Salutti. And then I wondered: what about this lawyer, Sturli, who is he? Honestly I did not know him, regardless of the fact that I'm a lawyer myself. But there are so many of us and we don't all know each other, and after all he's specialised in labour law... Anyhow, I said to myself, I'll check on it once I'm back.

Meanwhile, thinking about the Lugano bank, the branch Nattan opened in Switzerland, it occurred to me that I could do something for you. Menaggio is not that far away from Switzerland. You only need to cross the Intelvi Valley and you're right there. So I thought I could run by Lugano in the morning, before getting to the conference and make it on time for the opening party.

I could not imagine, that, just as I was about to cross the border, you were being assaulted, and didn't come to know of it until a week later.

But slowly, one thing at a time.

Once in Lugano it took me quite a while to find the branch bank. Nobody seemed to know where it was. At first, it didn't strike me that much, after all it's a new branch, just opened, the fact it was still unknown was perfectly feasible. What surprised me more was, after having looked for a long time, where I found it. You see, it's not located in the bank district, where all the other banks are, not in any residential areas and not even on the hillside with a view of the lake. I had to go all the way behind the main passenger station, near the freight docks, and find with great difficulties an old '50s style building. At that point I had to take the freight elevator to the second floor of a run-down sort of warehouse.

The second floor looked much better than the rest of the building. A clean hallway, with a thick carpet, light coloured walls and a row of mahogany doors with different sizes brass name-plates on them.

So, I begin looking for the one with "Nattan Bank" on it, but it's nowhere to be found. There are many name-plates, but all of them blank. I'm just about to leave when the last door opens and a fat man, with no jacket on, comes out. At first he stares at me looking as if he wants to strip me naked, and then asks me what I'm looking for. I reply to him that I'm looking for the Lugano branch of Nattan Suisse and he, then, opens in a smile and begs me to follow him and that in fact he was waiting for me. As I step inside his office, I glance at the name-plate on the door. No sign of Nattan. But wait, wait a minute I wrote it down: ah, here it is, CBT SA.

The fact that the branch of a bank could be in such an isolated place and that they were waiting for me seemed absolutely bizarre and farfetched. Yes, I can see your face all right, and what you're thinking: where is she going all by herself? It's dangerous, what will you do if that guy turns out to be a sex maniac? Where are you, how did they screw with you... ? Don't worry, I had the same thoughts, too, but I was already in the middle of something and so, I went in and sat down. At that point the guy introduced himself as, guess who? As Salvatore Esposito.

He keeps going: 'Doctor Salutti sent you, right?' And I, obviously, reply: 'Yes, correct.' For sure he's mistaken me for somebody else. After a little formal chit-chat, he tells me that Salutti has already informed him that I have money both in Italy and Switzerland. He starts explaining to me that, with very important clients like myself, they want to offer the possibility to invest directly, even abroad, avoiding all the problems with taxes, endless waiting, and other fetters of Italian bureaucracy. Then, he keeps on talking and tells me we are the ones who make the economy fly and that, in Italy they want to clip our wings, that we would be more willing to pay taxes if we knew that our money was used well, but since we already know that our money would just be flushed down the toilet, we were right in trying to find different methods and so on and so forth...

Can you imagine me in this situation? You are perfectly aware of how much certain things just piss me off... I was fuming. But I kept quiet and kept on smiling and nodding.: 'Sure, sure...'. Then he says: "How much money were you thinking of investing?'. And while I was considering how much to say, if a hundred-thousand euro could do, because a hundred-fifty just seemed too much for me (and I don't have that kind of money, anyway), he volunteers: 'Ah wait, I see the note Doctor Salutti left for me: five million euro. So, listen, I want to give you one more option. And he stares at me as if he wants me to pay, for that extra option with sex. So I think: 'This Goddamn pig is going to unbutton his pants right now and ask him for a blowjob for every thousand euro he saves me. And guess what I do?'. Oh, come on, don't make that face, mister jealousy! One can't even joke with you... Anyway, you know, I was in the game and had to play along, so I cross my legs, smile an irresistible smile and say: 'Please tell me, tell me, interesting...'. And so he, lowering his voice as if he had to tell me a secret, whispers to me: 'Over at Nattan Suisse, commissions are rather high. Instead, Salutti and I, already work with other groups which offer much better deals'.

"Oh, really? I didn't know that an executive already working for an Italian bank, could also work with other banks, and abroad, too".

And he, as if to change the subject, says: 'I apologise! I did not offer you anything... Coffee, a drink? Just a minute, let me call'.

I decide for a coffee, he calls a coffee shop and I wonder how long it will take to bring it up, in view of the desolate and god-forsaken place we are in, but I make sure he understands that I'm still waiting for more information.

He sits down, and still carrying on with that private manner, which really gets on my nerves, says: 'I'll be honest with you, we shouldn't be handling things this way. But,

do you find it right that a client in Italy, who is getting along fine with me over at Nattan, here in Switzerland can't do business with me, but must use some nobody, just because the Consob doesn't allow it? Or be followed here by Nattan Suisse with commissions that would kill him? In Italy they do everything to make your life harder and stop free enterprise'. So I answer him: "Yes, but please, let me understand: you are suggesting a bank different from Nattan Suisse right here in Switzerland, and you are also an employee of Nattan Bank in Italy?"

"Yes, but Salutti already explained everything to you, no?"

"Everything about what?" I say.

Jack, calm down. I know exactly what you're up to right now, even if I'll see you only in a few days. You're fuming, can't stand still and feel like jumping in your car, or a plane or an helicopter, taking a bazooka with you and go smashing his face. But you'd better stay calm. You are still missing the best part of it.

To make a long story short, Esposito goes on telling me more details.

'As far as Switzerland is concerned, Salutti and I don't do anything with Nattan. We prefer working for CBT, I have a lot of friends there. With CBT I can manage your money wherever you have it: UBS, Credit Suisse, Nattan Bank. So you see, you don't even have to move your money'.

He explains me that, no matter which Suisse bank I have my money with, by signing a contract to manage it with CBT SA, the company can operate on my behalf directly in my bank, without having to transfer it. Salutti and he, probably without Mancini knowing it, are offering this service to the best clients. Instead, if I were to become a Nattan Suisse client, I would have to move my money to Nattan Suisse and be treated like any other client and have his account invested in a company share he very much dislikes. The Niscagi.

"All right, Doctor Esposito. Just out of curiosity: where are the offices of Nattan Suisse?"

"Right here, in this building. On the upper floor, there is Nattan Bank and Niscagi. It was our friends at CBT SA who found us this convenient place, very close to them' Esposito answers. 'In Italy, instead' he continues, 'it's simple, you only have to open a so-called special managed account over at Nattan Bank...'

He tells me that by opening such a special managed account, nobody else will touch my money, but him.

In this way, I'd have only one person investing and managing my money both in Italy and abroad. 'You see' he tells me, 'doing it this way you have less third party involvement, and so, less commissions to pay and therefore more profits. And then, if you'd like to move everything abroad with CBT, all for the better, as I have a company I can get you in touch with, which takes only 1% commission on any sum of money moved in or out of the country'.

'Alright' I tell him, 'I'll think about it'. I have no words to describe to you how disappointed he looked when he realised I was not going to write him a cheque, but he made the best of a bad bargain, and so I left. I went on to the conference and kept thinking about it. On Sunday I tried to call you, but couldn't find you either home or on your mobile. Now I know you were in the hospital, but back then I thought you just

wanted some peaceful time alone, certainly not that they beat you up like this. However, at the conference I met someone very interesting... yes, yes, interesting, why? Do you think you're the only interesting one? Well, anyhow, I meet this interesting guy, a lawyer specialising in problems related to computer-system safety, and I ask him, just like that, conversationally, if he thinks it's easy to put a tap on a mobile without even touching it. 'Extremely simple' he replies and explains me how they do it. I understood zero but if we need it I can find him. He insisted so much on giving me all his addresses and phone numbers and e-mails from all over the globe. On Monday morning I give my speech. In the afternoon I decide to go to Milan. You've taught me something, too in these years: that pretending to be someone else is easier than one thinks. You just have to believe it.

So, I went to one of those machines over at the Station, where you get your business card printed in no time, and I made myself a business card for Wells Fargo Bank... Do you recall that time you mentioned something about it? And yes, I become, a head hunter for Wells Fargo, about to enter the Italian market and on the lookout for smart executives (just imagine, they couldn't wait to meet me, those greedy bastards!). And I meet Giorgio Salutti.

You know, it was a good move not to introduce me to your colleagues. They might have seen me once in the past, but nobody remembers me and I did my job perfectly. We chat a little, he does nothing else but licks his feathers and tail, like a real peacock. He's clearly the type of guy, that if you let him talk, he could go on forever. You just need to ask him the right questions: 'The biggest problem in Italy is related to the difficulties in overcoming certain bureaucratic fetters and some legal restrictions...

'From this viewpoint, you see, we're looking for skilled people, 100% honest but a little open-minded as well, if you understand what I'm saying'.

What kind of bullshit you taught me, Jack. Like saying the whole truth, and at the same time its exact opposite. "Sure, honesty and managerial strictness, are our first priorities and because of that, we are deeply interested in finding always new ways to combine strictness and profit'... What does it mean?, if not simply, that we are looking for safe strategies to avoid the law and cheat the IRS. All right, it wasn't you who taught me this... After all, I am the lawyer here! However, it took Salutti a minute to take my hint (how naïve men become when faced by a pair of thighs, especially those men who think they are smart) and then he tells me: "From this perspective, Mrs. Arslan (do you like it? It's sort of in between the Gerovital inventor and the author of Emmanuelle) 'you'll find in me an executive who is both skilled and perfectly tuned to your needs'.

'Tell me more' I press him.

"For example, I can tell you, we have found, utilising these special management arrangements, a way to provide our clients with the products they desire while guaranteeing better profits for the bank, all without them knowing it. The promoters with these special management arrangements, don't have to get any orders signed by the clients, they can buy on their behalf what they want, which is, bottom-line, what the bank wants, otherwise they're of no use to us'.

'Um, interesting. So, what remains unsold, you manage it in such a way that the clients would find it in these special management arrangements, and the financial promoters are the only ones who can be blamed for it?'

"Correct. For example, we are going to place another bond soon. Our clients already have it in their dossiers. It's useless to try to sell them more. So we make their promoters buy it through these special managements, without the clients knowing it'.

'Boom!' I say, excited, and lean over so he can peep down my cleavage. 'What's the name of this bond?'

He takes a minute to consider whether to tell me or not (somewhere, deep down, he may still have a touch of professional dignity left). Then he says: "Its' a Niscagi bond we will place on the market this coming January'.

'Interesting. Do you think I should buy it?'

"Sure. Here at Nattan we are all one hundred percent confident in it'.

At this point it occurred to me that I could try to gather some information about you and add: 'All of you?'

And there I see his chest swell: 'All. At Nattan it's a condicio sine qua non to comply fully with management decisions. In fact, I had to kick an area manager out, just because he wanted to make his own decisions and was a bad influence on the others'.

'Really?'

'He was also ill-tempered and violent. It' unacceptable for a bank to have someone inside who isn't a team player. But we succeeded and without having to pay him a single penny'.

"Well done' I say, 'and how did you do that?'

Finally he becomes a little more cautious, but he can't help saying: "Well, you work for Americans, you should know their methods better than me. If I want to get rid of you, I'll find a way'.

Then I went back to Menaggio, just on time for a risotto with fish. In the following days I've been busy fulfilling my new job as a detective. I called you again but your phone was off..., so for a few days I didn't think I had any reasons to worry and simply thought you were away or taking a break. I met every single area manager in the country, from Edoardo Corradi in Milan to Silvano Parodi in Genoa, Totuccio Prestigiacomio in Palermo, Augusto Imperiali in Rome, Gennaro Cocuzza in Naples, Carletto Rodari in Turin, Stefano Mazzoni in Bologna, Giuseppe Polimeni in Reggio Calabria, they were all happy to meet me and told me the exact same thing. The Lugano Nattan branch was used to move the money of Italian clients from Italy to Switzerland, that through these special managements they were forced to sell the stocks the bank wanted, that is the Niscagi There was even a meeting in Lugano with all the Nattan area managers, Nattan bank and Nattan Suisse top executives. So they all knew and should have reported the unethical behaviour and corrupt management to the Consob. But nobody seems to give a damn about the Consob.

All right then, this is it. I have recorded all the interviews on the MP3, so we have them all in a clear and permanent form.

Once back in Milan I found no messages on my machine from you. Your mobile was still off, and I started seriously thinking something could be wrong, so I called Francesca who gave me a full report. I put on this wig, just in case, by chance, someone from Nattan was in the hospital, and here I am.

As for the beating, this is what I think. Someone over at Nattan was listening to your conversations on the phone, and when they understood you had decoded Imperiali's messages and were about to act, thought the time was right to give you a good lesson.

The recording is over. Céline, winking at you, takes the headphones back and removes her own, put everything in her purse and looks at you. "What do you think?" It's your turn to speak and you'd like to say a million things, but she makes you understand it would be better to meet somewhere else. But one thing, just one thing you can tell her: Céline... oh, Céline... How can I have been so stupid? You risked your own life and I ..."

"Hush" she says and seals your mouth with a kiss. How sweet she is. Who knows why, but right at that precise moment, you recall a famous Zen story: 'A man was walking in a field when he ran into a tiger. He started running chased by the tiger. When he got to the edge of a cliff he grabbed the root of a wild vine and let himself hang over the edge. The tiger was smelling him from the top of the cliff. Shaking with fear the man looked down, and at the bottom there was another tiger waiting to devour him. Only the vine was keeping him alive. Two mice, a white and a black one, started gnawing slowly at the vine. The man spotted a beautiful strawberry close to him. Holding onto the vine with just one hand, he picked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it was!'

Now Céline gets up, you get up, too and you are facing each other. There's still a slight embarrassment in you. You'd love to take her in your arms, kiss her, make love to her right there, in that exact moment, in that hospital room, but somehow there's something stopping you, as if she were a new woman, someone you don't know yet, someone whose love you haven't won yet. You just smile at each other, not knowing exactly whether or not to say something.

"Jack, I'm gonna go now. You have to finish packing and I have to go to my studio. How do you plan to get home? With a taxi?"

"No, someone should come and get me ..." you look over her shoulders and see Mirko approaching, "... a friend of mine. Here he is, let me introduce you."

Mirko, on his way to the room, sees that you're back on your feet, all dressed and smiles, happily. Then he realises you're not alone, that there is a woman with you and curiosity arises.

"Céline, this is Mirko, an old friend of mine I ran into, here at the hospital. Mirko, this is Cèline, my girlfriend."

"Ah, the famous Céline! Mirko exclaims, stretching his hand out.

"Famous? Why?" Céline also curious asks .

"Because I've heard so much about you from Jack."

"I hope only good things."

“Well, let’s say, that now that I know you in person, I have the feeling he’s a bit confused.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing, really.... I just had different idea of you. Jack, are you ready?”

“Yes, almost. What about Francesca?”

“I ran into her on my way here. She’s ready, she got your medical file and is waiting for us in the lobby” Mirko answers.

Céline is slightly dumbfounded. Mirko’s approach has taken her by surprise. You, as usual, are too distracted to notice. Now, you just want to get out of that hospital and go home. When you look up from your bags, Céline is gone. Mirko turns to you, he’s perplexed and asks: “Didn’t you tell me she had dark hair?”

“Yeah” you reply. “But things change.”

Jack Fly’s house

2.00 p.m. December 4th

“So guys, what are we up to?” Alessandra asks.

“Well, first of all take the cake out, and if there is no cake then someone better go and buy one, then we’ll see” Céline replies.

“Right, we must celebrate. You don’t get dismissed from hospitals every day” Mirko says.

“Well, thank God.” you point out.

“Do you mean you wanted to stay longer?” this is Giovanni speaking.

“Yeah, Giovanni ‘Bad Joke’ Santini has spoken” you say.

“Anyway, we already have the cake” Francesca tells them, stepping into your living room, holding a chocolate cake with a blue candle on it. “We bought it over at Cova. We had to get a loan to pay for it, but we’ll manage.”

“Hey guys, watch your money, it’s pretty unsure we’ll succeed in getting any more easily. Any news from Friendly Bank?” you ask.

“Yes. Cabrini had his secretary call and to say he never wants to see your face again, even on a picture” Francesca replies.

“What? What did you say?” you, Céline, Alessandra ‘Longhigh’ Durante, Giovanni and Mirko ask simultaneously.

“Nothing, I was just kidding, come on! Let’s have the cake” she says relaxing the entire group. “And let’s make a toast.”

And so you do. Then, all together, you try to understand where you are at. But first you ask Mirko: “Have you checked if there are any listening devices around?”

“Yes, this afternoon, Giovanni and I turned your house up-side-down. You’re clean.”

“Giovanni nods and Céline starts speaking: “First of all, I think we have Esposito in our power. Mirko has verified he knows nothing, and this means that Nattan is the source of all the evidence itself. And this was, indirectly, also confirmed by Giorgio Salutti. But even if Esposito knew something about what they wanted to do to you,

and would want to testify against you, what kind of credibility do you think a witness like that can have? Someone who illegally takes money out of the country on behalf of an Italian bank, and once in Switzerland competes with his own bank, by turning its clients to another one.”

“Well, not a good one. Unless he denies everything.”

“If he does, then we’ll have all our taped conversations” Céline points out, looking around for Mirko and Alessandra’s approval.

“That’s right, if we were to go in front of a judge, Esposito would have to justify his creative business dealing and, if he were to falsely testify, he’d make his situation even worse” Giovanni concludes.

“Yeah, but even Salutti would have lots of things to explain” you say.

“Which things are you exactly talking about?” Alessandra asks.

“A bank executive should keep track of what his financial promoters are up to, instead Salutti organises a meeting in Switzerland with all the area managers and invites them to bring clients to Nattan Suisse.”

“That’s true.”

“Besides, how do you think these financial promoters, who bring clients to Nattan Suisse, are paid?” you continue.

“How?” Giovanni asks.

“Obviously off the book, on Suisse bank accounts. Salutti has given each single financial promoter the opportunity to cheat the IRS. A very legit way to check on them...”

“Sure, and then Salutti and Esposito seem to have agreed to take their clients to different banks than Nattan, either because they are paid better doing it or have something Mancini has no control over, and therefore they are less vulnerable” Céline says.

“What a mess!” Giovanni cries out.

“This is called disloyal management ... or if you are lucky enough to find a committed district attorney, it could even be considered criminal conspiracy” Céline says.

“So, as far as the labour lawsuit is concerned, I think we are pretty settled” Francesca comments with a smile, and looks around for the others’ approval.

“Are we really sure about it?” this time is Mirko speaking.

“Why, what’s wrong?” you ask him.

“What’s wrong is that you don’t have someone whacked for something like this: a bank doesn’t get its hands dirty for such a little nuisance” Mirko objects.

“Well, maybe yes” Céline hurriedly steps in, well, she’s not particularly keen on Mirko and doesn’t hide it either. “Don’t forget that, if Jack wins the trial, that could trigger a chain reaction among all the other promoters. It could induce them to ask personalised mandates, and thus refuse to sign or objects to the CIA-style contracts Nattan had made them sign lately.”

“So, in your opinion, Nattan first decides to screw Jack, counting on the fact that he won’t do anything, like most of the screwed financial promoters. Then, when they see

that Jack, instead, counterattacks, the decide on a more tangible punishment and have him beaten up.”

“Yes, more or less. What do you think?”

“It seems plausible” Giovanni comments.

“I agree,” you step in, “but, by the same token, I agree to what Mirko thinks, there must be something else.”

“Like what?”

“Like the Niscagi.”

“Niscagi?” Giovanni asks, suddenly showing great interest, “My father used to talk about them...”

“What did he say?” Alessandra asks him.

“He was saying that it was because of them that all bridges were burned at Nattan.”

“This tells me that my intuition was right, when I went around asking questions about it,” Alessandra says.

“Yes, there’s something real strange about it” Céline resumes “Don’t forget that in Switzerland, Nattan and Niscagi are in the same building, too:”

“That doesn’t mean much. Nattan has just opened, it’s normal to share space, they do it to save money,” is your comment.

“With the same company who is issuing and overseeing the bonds?”

“Sure. If they are on good business terms, maybe those at Nattan have been able to get a better deal on the rent” you observe.

“So, if the bond allocation is a flop, they can kick them out like they kicked you out of your office?” Francesca says.

“Please, let’s not bring up painful memories.”

“Anyway” Mirko shakes his head, “I’ve already told you, Jack, and I’ll say it again, I think we should just forget about it. There is something truly fishy here, and I believe risks are higher than possible benefits. After all, you’ve found a new job.”

“Yes, but Nattan has tried to get me fired even from there, don’t you remember?”

“Yes, yes , but I don’t think that was what they wanted. In my opinion it was a sort of last warning. And, from what I know, Cabrini trusts you. Given what we know, Nattan doesn’t seem to have many more cards to play, and I believe that if you stop now, they’ll give in, too.

“What about the money they owe me?”

“How much is that?”

“The two-hundred-eighty thousand they asked back from me...”

“Well, they’ll give that back for sure.”

“And all the commissions I have earned, the damages I suffered...”

“Listen, Jack, let me tell you as a friend, and someone who knows about this sort of thing. It’s ok if you give in on something in order to get back your life and peace of mind. I understand you’ll suffer damages, but they won’t change your life. I have the feeling that if, instead, you continue, it could be your very life at risk.”

“Are you telling me there is no justice in this world?”

“Caution comes before justice.” Mirko insists.

“As if caution and justice were two different things.”

“They are” Alessandra intervenes. “Actually, sometimes they are not simply different, but the opposite. What’s your opinion Céline, as a lawyer?”

“A *female* lawyer, please. You’re somewhat right. In Italy we have seventy-thousand codes just to say simply this: don’t kill, don’t steal, don’t do to others what you don’t want to be done to you. In fact, you can’t expect anything to be solved expeditiously.”

“Yes, but that’s so unfair!” Giovanni jumps in. “It means that, just for the sake of understanding something, you’re forced to go to a lawyer. And it’s all very convenient, isn’t it?”

“Especially for the wealthy who want to get away with everything. They know perfectly that if someone is poor he has a much harder time fighting back.”

“Yeah, but it’s also convenient for the lawyers.” Giovanni insists.

“Hey, don’t touch my Céline, all right? I’m the only one here who can say that she exploits public naiveté” you say, smiling and hugging her. “The truth is,” as you go on “that when a sleazy swindler begins ruining your life, he counts on the endless time justice will take, on how much money is involved, on every-day and unexpected delays and loopholes and so, it’s very unlikely someone will do something in the end. Even you journalists, to be blunt, have your own responsibilities,” you finish by looking at Alessandra.

“That’s it, let’s talk about us, then” she replies, “So, tell me, what should we be doing different from what we already do?”

“I don’t know, you should run campaigns to unveil the *shit* these bastards are covered with...”

“Campaign to unveil these bastards’ *shit*?” Francesca repeats.

“Yes, correct. *Unveil the shit and hang them*. Journalists should run black lists with all the names of dishonest bank executives and write about them in their columns. At least then, you are not gonna find these scumbags, after a couple of months, occupying a different position, with the chance of causing even more damage. Instead you do a little follow-up...”

“Hey, big talk here.” is Giovanni’s comment. “And in your opinion, all this blubbering should make Jack decide, to give in or go on?”

“To give in!” both Mirko and Francesca declare with firm belief.

“To go on!” Céline and Alessandra simultaneously say.

Giovanni then takes out some pieces of paper and hands them to everyone. “Jack, I have, in the meantime, written down all the damages you’ve suffered.”

List of damages suffered by Jack

- *Loss of job with no warning and no compensation.*
- *Loss of office with no warning and no compensation.*
- *Unpaid office rent.*
- *Immediate and mandatory return of bonuses.*
- *Negative report to the Risk Central Bureau .*

- *Credit card cancellations.*
- *Libel to clients.*
- *Loss of clients with no compensation.*
- *Ambush and beating*
- *Super8 Films destruction.*

“They hurt you badly, Jack” Giovanni says. “And I left out my father’s suicide.”
 “Wow, Giovanni” it’s Céline speaking, “Seeing them like this, these abuses are quite impressive. Don’t you think a man’s tolerance has a limit and Nattan has gone a hundred times beyond this limit? Don’t you agree that there are plenty of reasons to fight back?”

“I believe these are reasons to step back.,” Mirko insists. “They proved they can hurt you pretty badly, Jack, and so far, you haven’t been able to do much, apart from taking some clients with you.”

“Well, let’s put it this way, so far they’ve punched me in the face and all I’ve been able to do is give them a little lip in return,” you say Jack, with a sour taste in your mouth.

I didn’t realize you have such a great sense of humour, Jack.

Alessandra gets up, goes over to the wine and pours herself a glass. Then she sits right in front of you, next to Mirko. She looks you straight in the eyes and, after a sip, she begins: “Nattan is thought to be a very dynamic bank. Everyone believes it’s going to grow in the medium-term. The top executives, and in particular Mancini and Salutti, are considered quite smart, and there are rumours about them being pretty unscrupulous. As far as Mancini goes, everybody stresses the fact the he supports Inter, as if it should be an amazing insight. A colleague of mine, who writes about economics, told me that for someone who has performed so many ‘creative’ financial transactions, to be an Inter fan, that is, to back a loser, is rather strange. It seems that in the ‘80s Mancini was working for Colucci Bank. Even at that time, if you recall, the stock market was booming and seemingly he made a lot of money... a lot more than one would expect. I haven’t found much about the Sturli studio. It’s quite well known in legal consulting. They take care of everything, both civil and criminal law. But mainly they’re known for the fees they present their clients. I don’t think there is anything special, except that Sturli and Salutti went to university together.”

“At least this explains why they know each other” Céline intervenes. “I had no idea Salutti was a lawyer. Did you know that, Jack?”

“He isn’t a lawyer, in fact” you reply. “He never graduated.”

Alessandra seems thoughtful: “Maybe he went to university for a couple of years and then quit.”

“That’s it” you say.

“However, getting back to the subject of Bio Niscagi, I found out something quite interesting. It is a company doing research for the treatment of colon cancer. They have a drug called CINGISA. They have been experimenting with it on some patients and, if the results are positive, they’ll immediately ask the Food and Drugs

Administration for the authorization to market the drug. The share has been doing ok, but if the results are promising, it'll be absolutely expected for it to go up 400% or even more. The testing on humans started, but it will be only in 2006 that the drug should become available.

"This means that until then they need money to fund the research." you say.

"Research is expensive and State funds are less and less available. They need money, but they are sure they'll recover all their investments. This is why they want to raise a bond subscription. No sign of contacts or deals between Nattan and Niscagi, if not for this Sapone who's part of the board of directors of both companies."

Something clicks in your head. You interrupt: "Sapone?"

"Why, do you know him?" Alessandra asks you first, with the others chiming in.

"No" you answer, thoughtful. Then, after having given it a second thought. "Maybe yes, it sounds familiar. Wait."

You get up and go over to your bookshelf. In your eyes a sort of uncertainty that you put into words. "If I can only find them..."

"Find what?"

"Articles from newspapers I cut up and save. Wait..., ah, here they are!"

You take a plastic folder from the shelf and start rummaging through it. "This Mr. Sapone was involved, starting already in the early '80s, in a few rather dubious transactions. He had his clients sign up mandates for him to manage their money in several banks in Switzerland. Money that then ... poof... disappeared. There was a scam I remember pretty well: for years his brokerage company had sent positive statements to clients who had their money kept in Switzerland. In fact he had the mandate only to manage it."

"Like Esposito?" Giovanni asks.

"A similar structure but Esposito is far more stupid."

"And so, what happened?"

"One day a client of his, instead of going to the brokerage company, he went directly to the bank to make a withdrawal, and he was told he didn't have an account with them. 'What do you mean?' he enquired. 'I mean you have no money in this bank' they confirmed. Practically speaking, what happened was that Sapone's company had been sending false statements. The client then took legal action against him, the news was released in the press, and a lot other clients started asking for their money back, but, it was too late."

"Wait a minute... what was the name of that company? Giovanni asks.

"Here it is: AGIS INC. Then there were also a few cases of what nowadays we call 'creative finance'. Many of his companies ended up with problems with the law for falsified balances, swindles, but..."

"But?" Alessandra asks, who at the time this has occurred was not yet a journalist but probably a lap-dancer in clubs, although lap-dancing was not quite popular back then.

"But he was never found guilty. He must definitely be one of a kind, very averse to publicity since no-one has ever been able to take a picture of him, and very skilled in avoiding the trouble he himself creates. Actually, what they say is that he's never

been found guilty because he was ...”

“Bribing judges?”

“No, something better.”

“Tell us...”

“It seems he has always been someone who’s done tons of charity. He always succeeded in demonstrating that most of his companies profits were used to finance projects in depressed and underdeveloped areas, both in the South of Italy and other parts of the world. In one sense, something quite unusual... It seems that even... ah, here is the article that really struck me, it dates back 1989: ‘... all the companies, where Saponi was involved in, contain in their statutes, the obligation to devolve a consistent amount of their profit to charity, or works of public interest, whose identity is proposed annually by the board of directors during the share-holders meeting.’”

“Wow, how interesting!” is Mirko’s comment. “Do you think he might have included this condition in the statutes in order to have the judges on his side?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he did great things in his life, or maybe, as you say, he already knew what he was going to do and thought of saving his ass.”

“What are the names of these companies?” Giovanni asks once more.

“Well, they don’t say it here...” you observe.

“But, lets’ see... we have AGIS INC, NISCAGI...” Céline says.

“So, you don’t notice anything strange?” Giovanni inquires.

“What is there to notice, eh Joey...? Don’t start with your riddles.” Alessandra says, joking, as she leans toward Giovanni, who blushes violently.

“First of all Nattan is a palindrome word.”

“That is?”

“You can read it both ways, from left to right or vice versa, it’s always NATTAN.”

“So, what does that mean?” you all ask in unison.

“I don’t know. But that’s not all. The names are all made with the same letters.”

Giovanni takes a piece of paper and start listing them.

AGIS INC.

NISCAGI

CINGISA

Al of a sudden you turn pale. Then you regain control immediately and volunteer a comment: “It’s true. It must be a pattern then”.

“What’s the matter?” Céline asks you, as she realised something had affected you.

“Nothing.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I had the feeling something was...”

“No, nothing” you cut her off.

“Well, an innocent pattern in my opinion” Alessandra resumes.

“Anyway this Mr. Sapone...”

“He could be laundering money” Giovanni jokes as he interrupts her.

“... owns the majority of Bio Niscagi which is, from what I’ve heard, a solid, honest, and daring company but, as often happens to modern corporate structures, has a lot of debts. The new bonds are, yes for the research, but there are also rumours that they need them to pay back other bonds that are about to come due.”

“Sorry, Jack” Francesca steps in the conversation, “can’t you get an idea of what’s going on from the informational prospectus?”

“Yes, unless they are fake... and faking them is not that easy. But the next Niscagi bond will be issued in Luxembourg, and no prospectus is needed. But listen now, if there is no prospectus, the bonds can only be bought by banks or mutual funds.

Nattan Bank makes its financial promoters buy them through these special managements, without needing anything signed by the client, so officially it is the bank buying them. Practically speaking, with these special managements they can buy as much Niscagi as they want.”

“And with no risk someone will find out,” Francesca observes.

“Nattan through these special managements, is having its promoters be the ones responsible for managing the money, but in reality it obliges them to buy the Niscagi bonds. If the Consob were to know what’s happening, it would expel the financial promoters, but the bank would be saved. Do you get it?” you ask.

“Sure. The bank places risky or uncovered bonds, makes its clients buy them via its promoters, then if everything goes well, the promoters will make some money but the bank will make a load more of it. If things go wrong, the promoters will be held responsible and the bank will come out clean.”

“What a bunch of crooks!” is Francesca’s statement while she serves herself another piece of cake.

Céline slightly elbows Francesca and tells her: “You’re so worried that you need to have another piece of cake?”

“Yeah, when I’m nervous all I do is eat.”

“I’ve always been rather sceptical in suggesting this type of investments. I’ve never suggested them to my clients” you intervene.

“Ah...” Céline says.

“What?” you ask her.

“That’s why Nattan didn’t want you to know anything about this bond placing. They knew you wouldn’t have gone along with it.”

“Yeah. They tried to hide it from me right from the beginning. With the e-mails all my other colleagues were getting but none for me... It’s true I’ve never wanted any of the special managements. Too risky. If the internal control bureau finds out, it’s over with and then, try to explain it was the bank obliging you...”

“However” Céline resumes, “if it’s understandable the advantages for Niscagi of placing a bond if they are so desperate for money, what is not clear is what kind of interest Nattan has in guaranteeing such a risky transaction?”

“Money... a lot. Top profits for the special managements, commissions on the Niscagi bond placement, transaction commissions. Isn’t it enough?” you reply.

“But why does Niscagi use Nattan specifically, when there are plenty of other banks in Italy?”

“I have no idea why,” you say.

“If I were you, I’d try not to investigate into it...” Mirko suggests.

“What’s wrong with you? Why do you keep taking this negative view?” Céline’s voice has suddenly become sour and she looks aggressive. “Why do you want to avoid causing any trouble to Nattan? I think that more than being Jack’s friend, you sound more like one of theirs.”

“Yeah, what about you, then, why do you keep on wanting to ruin Jack? What’s the story with you?” Mirko replies and his statement cracks like a whip in the room.

“What’s the story with me? I love my man and I want him to have justice. You, instead, what’s your relationship with Nattan?”

“Hey, Céline” you step in, “don’t you dare talk like this. Mirko is a friend and I trust him.”

“Well, too bad.”

“We’ll see. I’m gone, Jack. Just think about what I told you and we’ll speak about it later... just you and me.”

Mirko gets up and he’s about to leave. You try to stop him but he won’t. “Forget it Jack., I wanna go for a walk and blow off some steam.”

He leaves, slamming the door behind him.

Five, I mean *five* seconds of silence follow, then Francesca gets up. “Hey guys, anybody cares for some juice?”

“Yeah, just make sure it’s not steaming hot,” you utter.

“In any case” Alessandra resumes, “I don’t think Mirko is completely off. They must be engaged in something really big. I have a bad feeling about it, and when top-notch interests are at stake, it isn’t such a bad idea, after all, not to get too involved. So...”

“So you’re telling me to give in, too?”

“Not exactly. I think we should do something, but we have to be extremely careful. Here’s what I think. Nattan has got into this Niscagi business to make a lot of money. The top executives have realised that Jack would have been against it right from the beginning; and since the deal is big, they thought at first to hide everything and leave him out of it, but since Jack is the kind of guy who’s never liked to be left out, they fired him.”

“So far so good.”

“After all, they were trying something similar with my dad,” Giovanni says.

“Yes, but he didn’t have any way to fight back, since he’d just started working there, he had no clients on hand and no financial resources to back him up” Alessandra comments.

“Yeah, with my dad it was all too easy for them.”

“But with Jack, they underestimated the situation” Alessandra goes on. “Because in order to fire him, they had to forge a false accusation that could turn into a double-edged weapon. At that point, they realised that Jack would not stop and had even succeeded in gathering private information addressed to Imperiali, so first they

threatened him and then had him beaten up.”

“And then?”

“And then... I see no limits to what they could do. They have all the right instruments to get rid of him, without anyone suspecting it and, in my opinion, they could start thinking seriously about it.”

“But it’s not true nobody would suspect them” Francesca replies. “We do.”

“That’s right, but if you look at the situation from the outside, from the viewpoint of a police detective, for example, if we told him everything, he would think that this whole business makes no sense.”

“Well, actually, really no sense at all I...” Francesca dares saying.

“Yes, I agree but...”

Every one of you is concentrated on Alessandra who is doing the talking, she’s standing, in front of the couch where you and Giovanni are seated, whereas Céline and Francesca are sitting in the armchairs. Each one of you, while looking at her, is engaged in different kinds of thoughts. You and Giovanni often get lost eying her legs, besides listening to her words. Céline, once in a while, takes her eyes off of her and looks at you, who most of the time doesn’t even realize it. Francesca shakes her head as if she had far too many times seen such situations.

“And so, Alessandra, what do you suggest Jack should do? To give in and flee to a different country, hoping to leave no tracks behind? And what are you going to do? Join him?” Céline asks with a smile ten times more poisonous than that of a coral snake overproducing its lethal venom...And you, Jack, can feel another fight coming. Why is Céline so angry at everyone? As if something was bothering her. Francesca leans forward and, winking at her, takes Céline’s hand in hers.

Alessandra sips on her orange juice and resumes: “No, I’m not talking about giving up, now. Maybe afterward, we could organise a nice long vacation, somewhere exotic like the Caribbeans for example. For the time being, Jack, what I suggest you do is to go back to Friendly Bank and check things out. Then call Salutti and talk to him clearly and with a straight forward manner, but not give away too much.

“What do you mean?”

“I’d go see them and say: “You’ve stepped on a very big piece of shit by kicking me out on the evidence of false accusations and false witnesses. Not only does Esposito have nothing on me, but I know he’s a very untrustworthy witness. It’s obvious, I have no interest in coming back to work with you, but, excuse me, I care about my rights. It will take two years, ten years, but in the end the law will prove me right. I’m willing to spend what’s needed, for I’m sure I’ll get it all back from you in the end. Instead, if you want to avoid running into all these expenses, I only want what you owe me: the allowances I’m legally entitled to and the penalty for the agreement you broke”. Afterwards, you’ll see what they have to say.”

“What if they say no?” you ask, after having kept silent for all that time.

“If they say no, you raise the bet. But only then. You must make them understand that you want only what’s due to you, that you don’t try to play smart, but you play by the rules.”

“Raise the bet? How?”

“You make clear that you know something is fishy about these transactions. That you haven’t just been waiting and twiddling your thumbs, that you have information and will use it in court.”

“It sounds like blackmail.”

“No, it isn’t. It would be if you were to ask for something in exchange. But you’re not. You tell them what you’ll do, how you will react in case they might choose to reject your offer. What do you say, Céline?”

Ah, here is Alessandra Longhigh’s strategy. Make a friend of a rival. Céline doesn’t answer her right away. She takes time to think about it and then mumbles: “We must be very careful. These people know their business.”

“Well, if that’s your worry, why don’t you Céline, go with Jack? Francesca intervenes. “You’d give him the right legal support and suggest to him what to say or not to say. It could be an idea, no? What do you think, Alessandra?”

“Hmm...” Both you and Céline are staring at Alessandra. Each of you has your own reasons to wonder what the answer will be. And then Alessandra, looking thoughtful as she begins: “It could be a great idea, if only...”

“... if only they hadn’t seen you, Céline, but they did” Giovanni steps in. “They’ll recognize you right away: they saw you when you introduced yourself as the head-hunter for that American bank.”

“Yeah, that could be a problem” Céline sighs, disappointed.

“And who says?” Alessandra replies. “Hey, just a minute: actually it could be exactly the right move.”

“In which sense? Céline asks.

“”In the sense that you could represent a silent but persuasive proof of Jack’s allegations.”

“You’re right, Alessandra. Think of it, Jack: I’m there with you, you introduce me as your lawyer and they recognize me, they understand I know everything, I know about the dirty businesses they described during those meetings. You wouldn’t even need to talk that much: they’d smell the rat immediately.”

“Hmm... But we absolutely have to protect ourselves,” you point out.

“Sure, that’s not hard. Giovanni, you’ll make copies of all the recordings Céline made, and all of Imperiali’s e-mails. I’ll keep one copy and you ... you have a safe, don’t you Céline? If something happens to me, you’ll tell the police where to find them.”

“The only one missing is the one Mirko recorded of his conversation with Esposito” Giovanni says.

“That’s right. Wait, let me call him,” you say, Jack, but both Céline and Alessandra stop you. “No, wait”.

“There’s no hurry” Céline goes on. “Mirko’s tape could become handy later on. For now, I would forget about it and wouldn’t say a word to Mirko about what we decided today.”

“I agree” Alessandra says.

And now you look around yourself and can't quite decide, if you are more unlucky to have been kicked out of Nattan, or more lucky to have all of these people caring and thinking about you.

Yeah, but are we really sure that all, I mean all of them, really care about you?

Giovanni, meanwhile, has called you aside: "Jack, I wanted to tell you that we are no longer receiving any e-mails from Nattan".

"What?"

"Yes, no e-mails from Imperiali, and this has been going on since the last few days you were in hospital."

You start scanning the names of all the people you told about Imperiali: Céline, Alessandra, Mirko and Francesca. "What do you think happened?"

"Well, it could be that Imperiali hasn't turned his computer on, that he's on holidays, or that he's changed computers or realised that his mail was being rerouted..."

"Yeah... probably one of them. We'll have to do without Imperiali's e-mails, then!"

Jack Fly's house

6.30 a.m. December 6th

The year goes by rather swiftly, without giving one minute to think, without giving anyone, I mean anyone, a moment to breathe. It's only the beginning of December and this year, just like the last few, the snow has come early. And everybody has already forgotten how much they were complaining about the lack of snow, and instead, start complaining about the dirty slush, the cold, the humidity, the delays, the traffic jams. In short, they start complaining about themselves, how now that they are adults, can't take pleasure in anything else but a hard, deep, dreamless sleep. A sleep that is almost a coma.

You, Jack, don't belong to this category, the category of the eternally unsatisfied.

When you wake up with Céline in your arms, you don't think about what waits outside. You sink your face in her hair, breathe in the smell of her skin, and you get immediately hungry, *and not only hungry for you*, as poets used to say, but you feel capable of doing anything. Even setting a meeting with Mancini and Sturli. "Hi, sweetie, I brought you breakfast."

"Hmmm..."

"It was great last night. Thank you."

"Ple...ase. But... what time is it?"

"It's..."

"No, no, don't tell me. Or, yes, tell me, but slowly."

"Six-thirty."

"Oh no... Hum ... what's your job...I mean your real job!?! Can you tell me, please?"

"You know. I'm a financial promoter, when they let me do it."

"No, I don't think so, anymore... I think you're a newspaper boy: starting work at 7.00: The *Corriere della Sera* must be delivered to the houses of all the families in Milan. How many damned financial promoters are there in Italy?"

“About eighty thousand.”

“And how many... wake up at 6.00 in the morning, every morning?”

“I don’t know.”

“Shall I tell you?”

“Tell me.”

“One... the one I go out with.”

“Well, you know how to pick them, then.”

“No, not really. I end up picking someone who busts my chops. And you, well, I spotted you right away. Come here, let’s chat a bit before getting up.”

And you, Jack, curl up next to her under the covers.

“You spotted me right away, eh? What are you talking about? It was me who was coming on to you all the time during the sommelier class...”

“Ah, ah... *wine tasting*. Oh, come on, you were there just to get smashed, confess.”

“Of course not! I was there to learn about wines for my business lunches. Well, to tell you the truth, I had the feeling some of my classmates could just be winos at heart and I could have gotten pretty drunk, myself. I’ll be honest with you, the first few classes I left my car at home. You, instead, I think you were on the quest for adventure.”

“If that’s the case, how lucky of me...!”

“When I first saw you my feeling was... Well, it almost hurt, you know?”

“Why?”

“Because I wanted you so badly and was afraid I couldn’t have you.”

“How strange. Instead you first gave me the feeling that you were a braggart. You sat next to me and started coming on to me immediately.”

“Really? I don’t recall it like that..., I thought I gave you the feeling I was shy. Well, you really went to my head before even a sip of wine. Then they were making me taste the wine, and asking me all kinds of questions, if I smelt the scent of grapes, tangerines, freshly cut hay, violets, fresh wood, and I, well, I could only smell you.”

“Hey, look, I take tons of showers.”

“Are you sure? When I’m near you I only smell sex.”

“Because you’re crazy.”

“Because I’m in love.”

“What?”

“You heard me. I love you. But please don’t change the subject, I love remembering those times. So, they were asking me if I could smell the scent of wet wood, and I was smelling the scent of wet little pussy... They were asking me if I could smell the scent of figs, and I...”

“Forget it, I get it.”

“But, what was driving me crazy, was when you would taste the wine. I think you knew I was interested in you and you were playing along.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Come on, you know. You were always putting too much wine in your mouth, and you were letting it wash the inside of your cheeks, and then you were inhaling, opening your nostrils...”

“But Jack, you make me sound like a monkey. You’re kind of insulting!”

“Don’t get offended. You were twisting your body...”

“That’s not true! I wasn’t twisting anything!”

“...and I was getting horny. And then when you were swallowing the wine down. Well, I...”

“Stop it! What a pig!”

“Why, didn’t you know that?”

“Yes, yes, I knew. But let’s get back to what interests me more. So, you’re saying, you love me?”

“Yes, I shall confess... It’s since then that I’ve been trying to deny it. Since that wine tasting teacher... what was his name?”

“Cernuschi, I think.”

“Good for you! Yes, yes... I even tried to find out if he had money to invest...”

“You never change. He was a very nice man, and handsome, too. Fair hair with a beard. Your exact opposite.”

“Ah, now I see. He was after you and you were playing along.”

“Oh, stop it! But he wasn’t bad...”

“Yeah, yeah. Forget it, I was totally confused and couldn’t tell the difference between a Muller Thurgau and a Cannonau because I had a crush on you, and you, you were after the teacher.”

“It’s not true I was after the teacher. I was after you.”

“You liked it when I gave you that bottle of wine with a personalised label, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I loved it. *Céline Vin Rouge*.”

“Yeah, *Céline Vin Rouge*: French red wine, fruity with a scent of...”

“Come here, you idiot... every day you wake me up at dawn... I must learn to stay home for my night’s sleep, otherwise I’ll wake up with black patches under my eyes and you won’t like me anymore.”

“I always will, be sure of that. I have you inside of me.”

“It’s very beautiful what you said” Céline replies, lowering her voice. And you go inside of her, while thinking you know practically nothing of each other. But it feels just right: its meaning keeps unveiling, looking for one another.

And then, after making love, the same exact thought takes up a different nuance, a darker one: yes, that’s right, you know nothing of one another. You know nothing of her, after all, you even thought she cheated you, she turned you in to Nattan.

“One day, are you going to tell me how many people have tasted the *Céline Vin Rouge*?”

“No way. The fact that I love you should be plenty of information, my Othello.”

“You think so? I’m not so sure. Sooner or later I’ll give you some pentothal, then you’ll give me the list of names, and on earth there will be no-one left who can say they tasted the *Céline Vin Rouge*.”

“Oh, here we go... the hot-blooded southerner speaking...”

Céline doesn't want to play this game. She hugs you and caresses your chest. “The past is past, Jack. What counts is now.”

You don't want to give in and keep going.” Yeah, sure, it's easy to say. Very convenient.”

There's something, deep down in you, that won't just quiet down. And so Céline frees herself and moves to the far end of the bed, looks at you in the eyes, and in a voice both threatening and persuasive, whispers: “Tell me, what happened between you and Alessandra?”

Now, Jack, it's you on the spot for an answer. You slowly get up and go to the kitchen, without saying a word. Yes, right, what happened with Alessandra that night, the night she came to see you after you met at *Planet Woman*? You know it quite well. A one night stand, a night of sadness and distress.

You know Céline is different. But Céline, what does she know about it? Nothing, and there's nothing she should know. So, did she sense something then? Or maybe she's just bluffing. Maybe Alessandra and she had a talk. While drinking a glass of water, you overhear Céline calling from the bedroom: “Can you bring me some water, too Jack?”

Can you see the difference between you, Jack, and women? She knows everything about you, even that you're having a glass of water without having seen you pouring it. And you, what do you know about her? So, you first pour another glass of water, then put the coffee on, paying attention not to make any noise and then you go back to the bedroom. On your way back, you decide to do nothing and leave it up to her. Céline is waiting for you, seated on the bed, with naked breasts and a smile on her face: “Come, troublemaker. Thanks for the water. Coffee was a good idea.”

“But... but. How the fuck do you know I put the coffee on?”

“How do I know? I know it's that simple. Why, isn't it true?”

Sorry, dear, old Jack.

“Did you call Mancini?”

“No, not yet.”

“When are you going to do it?”

“I don't know. Maybe tomorrow. So they may give me an appointment by Friday.”

Céline smiles. She's all happy, you can tell. You, instead, are still thinking about something: “Listen, I'm not sure I'm gonna call.”

“Why?”

“Because I don't feel at ease.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I don't know if it's a good idea.”

“I do, Jack. I think Alessandra had a great idea.”

“Did you speak to her about it?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Yet, I'm not sure. You know me, I'm a man of peace.”

“Yeah, but you don't have to declare war. After all, any ceasefire must bring good results. Otherwise, it's called a defeat.”

“You’re pretty positive about this.”

“I am. But you... what’s going on, really?”

“It’s just that... no, nothing. All right. I’ll call Mancini..., tomorrow.”

Jack Fly’s house

9.45 December 6th

Finally an evening at home by yourself. The first one after the hospital. The last one, instead, before the hospital, had been anything but pleasant: that jerk, Edoardo Corradi, had come to ask you to give him your clients. But, enough of that, just for a single evening, you don’t want to think about unpleasant stuff. Céline is having a business dinner, you’re not waiting for anybody and can instead enjoy the pleasure of total relaxation in complete solitude. It’s true, even at the hospital, you were often alone, especially in the evening and later at night. But it was a different kind of solitude, an imposed and heavy one. It was full of ghosts. Today, instead, it feels good to be back home. The programme for the evening is simple: have a bite, watch a bit of TV, then may be, listen to some music, make a few calls to friends, and perhaps, even read a book. Think of nothing until you feel ready to focus on only positive thoughts.

As you move around the kitchen, looking for cans of tuna, you haven’t yet opened, you think of who could have informed Nattan of Imperiali’s e-mails. You think of Céline. You unfairly doubted her, even cheated on her. How funny, afterwards, with Alessandra and her legs, nothing happened, you hadn’t sought each other out and when she came to see you at the hospital, it was because of her work. She’s an interesting woman, she gives herself to others, without letting anyone own her. She uses her body as a trade commodity. She could double-deal for a scoop, for a good fuck or for money. It would be easier to fall in love with her than make her love you. But, after all, even falling in love wouldn’t be, she’s just too obviously in her various desires. About Céline, you were wrong, no doubt. And Giovanni? He’s a smart kid, yes, but has he completely forgiven you for his father’s death? But after all, he was the one to tell you about the e-mails. Why inform you then? And Francesca? What if Nattan had offered her a great job as a bank employee, like they did with Esposito? What would she do? No, no, she’d never betray you. Or maybe so? Let’s talk about Mirko now... Well, Mirko is a friend. He even went to see Esposito and taped the conversation. Céline doesn’t like him. Well, too bad for her. She’s wrong about that. But, then again, the fact that Mirko ended up in the hospital exactly when you were there is a rather unusual coincidence. What the hell, a good stroke of luck can just happen sometimes, right?

This all comes to you as you clean up the tray, put everything in the sink and pour yourself another glass of Anna Maria Clementi: the thought of it just won’t leave you alone. You thought you understood human nature, but realise you don’t. You were wrong about Santini when you recruited him, thinking he’d do just fine and instead

he's dead. You were wrong about Mancini and Salutti, when you thought you could keep them quiet and still work at Nattan. Let's not even mention your colleagues, who, you believed would support you, instead... have you seen any of them? And in the end this name 'Sapone' made its appearance, and these companies whose names are all anagrams of one another. And that reminds you of another tricky anagram. Of a name you would have never wanted to hear again... Maybe, it's got nothing to do with things. But, what about if it really is him?

The mere thought of him makes you shiver. Ghosts coming back, pain with the same intensity as thirty years ago. Uncle Scignia. The uncle who stole your parents' money, caused your father's suicide and then, sent you to school, out of pity, charity... or perhaps sadism. Nothing has been heard of him. Come on, no, it's impossible that it's him. Speaking candidly, though, he's always been involved in big stuff and not always that legal. But, who knows...

Well, tomorrow you're going to call Salutti and ask him for the money they owe you, no doubt about that,... will you be able to do it? And then all these people giving you all sorts of advice... could you be wrong about them, too? For sure, Nattan smashed you, but maybe Mirko wasn't totally wrong when he told you to stop. Tat that very moment the phone starts ringing. You barely hear it, as absorbed as you are in your own thinking.

Stop... After all, you have another job. What difference would this money *really* make? The phone keeps ringing. All right: your pride has been hurt. But it's over now... And the phone keeps ringing... with Céline things are fine, and a pleasant night... Hello, can you hear the telephone or what?... like tonight. With time your wounds will heal. And the phone keeps ringing. Something must have happened... and your pride will hurt less. Telephone!

"Who the hell can it be at this time? Hello?"

"Hello, my name is Oliviero Sturli. I'd like to speak to Jack Fly."

What are you gonna do, Jack? Swallow the pill or puke your answer right on his face? No, better just answer, you'll make a mess on the receiver.

"Speaking. Good evening lawyer. Your call is quite a surprise."

"Good evening Fly. Don't be so surprised. We have something to talk about."

"What's there to talk about?"

"Many interesting things."

"Interesting for who?"

"Interesting for you, Fly."

"Oh, thanks. So, I'd better book another couple of weeks over at the Emergency Room, then."

"I don't know what you're talking about, but I can't tell you I don't like it. You always talk too much. Anyway, I don't think talking on the phone is a good idea."

"Why? If there's someone taping my phone calls, that's you."

"In fact."

"In fact?"

"In fact, I must meet you in private. When?"

“I don’t know, let’s see, today is Wednesday...”

“Tomorrow, then, for lunch, at Sadler’s, in one of their private rooms. Make the reservation.”

“What about if they’re full?”

“Don’t worry, tell them you’ll be having lunch with me. See you.”

“See y...”

“Oh, and Fly, bring the stuff.”

“What stuff?”

“The stuff.”

A minute later, not taking into consideration what Céline told you, you call Mirko:

“Listen, I have to meet Sturli tomorrow!”

“Who’s he?”

“Nattan Bank’s lawyer. He wants to speak to me: we have an appointment for tomorrow in one of the private rooms of a restaurant. What do you think?”

“Well, he’s not gonna kill you.”

“Ha, Ha. Funny, But I’ll be honest with you, for a minute I considered it a possibility.”

“What does he want to talk about?”

“I don’t know, really. What’s more surprising is that I was thinking of calling Nattan Bank tomorrow but I think I’ll put that on hold for now.”

“Yeah, good idea, see what he wants first.”

“He wants the stuff.”

“What do you mean?”

“He told me to bring the stuff.”

“Didn’t he say anything more specific?”

“No.”

“Well, he must be a real hard nut to crack.”

Milan, Sadler Restaurant

1.00 p.m. December 7th

At Sadler the food is good but the ambience a bit cold. At least, no Babylonian brass-plates, and for sure you don’t feel like you’ve stumbled into Tutankhamen’s tomb, but no doubt that with this décor you feel like you’re still at work. In fact, now that you think of it, you’ve come here almost always at lunchtime, the only time for dinner, was with who? Ah, yes ... with the haughty Daniela, the manager of an emerging-markets fund you sell.

Come on Jack, tell me something about it. Please... Thanks...

The first time we went for a drink, she wanted to pay. I could do nothing to make her change her mind. She forbade me to even touch my wallet. Personally speaking, I’m old fashioned, I pay when I’m with a woman. But, it would have been rude to argue and so I let her pay. What a personality, I said to myself.

The second time we saw each other, it was for lunch and she absolutely insisted on paying her half. “Oh, no! Let’s share, Jack” And so we shared, they weren’t profits we were sharing, after all.

The third time I took her out, I had made a reservation here at Sadler. But she went on and on about work. Not only that: her mobile keep on vibrating all the time, and she was answering in Italian, then French, after that English, German and God knows what other languages I couldn’t even recognize.

At the end, I felt I might as well have had dinner by myself. “Oh, I had a great time. Such a quiet place, the food is fantastic and if they call you, you don’t even need to turn up the volume on the cell.”

The check comes and she grabs it.

“Hum... It’s 115 euro each. How do we do it? Shall I pay with my credit card and you give me cash?”

“It would be a pleasure for me if I could offer you dinner tonight, Daniela.”

“And it would be a pleasure for me if you let me pay my half: I want to be on top of what I do.”

As far as I’m concerned I thought, you can stay on top off whatever you want! And if you need any advice about when or how to sell your funds, ask someone else!

“Where are you, Fly? Sturli’s voice wakes you up from your daydream

“Excuse me, what?”

“No, I was saying, you look a bit absent-minded.”

“Oh, I was just remembering the last time I was here. I didn’t know they had private rooms.”

“Do you like it, or maybe you’d prefer something more rustic, some red and white tablecloth trattoria?”

“I would, with a good Neapolitan mozzarella on a piece of toasted bread with garlic and tommatoesss” Yes, exactly, that’s what you said, *tommatoesss* with three ‘s’ and two ‘m’s’ dragged out peasant-style, and Sturli, the lawyer made a wry face, while taking from his breast pocket a stainless steel pill box and removing a pill.

“I’ll be honest with you, I could start feeling nauseous.”

“Why? You don’t like garlic?”

“Thanks, I’d rather live.”

“What about onions, then? The ones from Tropea are just wonderful, as big as melons. When one is about to peel them, one should warn the entire neighbourhood, that within two hundred metres, gas masks will be needed. Do you know that in the ‘70s, during the student riots, they used them as tear-gas shells...? Well, nowadays, they even make ice-cream flavoured with them... Things really change...”

Sturli looks suddenly pale. “Hmm, interesting. Can we change the subject, please?”

“Yes, sure. But you didn’t tell me if you like them.”

“No, I don’t. Let’s order, shall we? The waiter is here” Sturli says, looking up with needy eyes, to the waiter who is standing like a statue by the table. “What will you have, Fly?”

You look over the list and choose the *'tasting menu'*. Obviously.

"For me" Sturli says, "a plate of boiled potatoes."

The waiter, who has class, you can tell that right away, hardly moves a muscle on his face, but you, you've never had that kind of class and can't wait to make fun of Sturli: "What's this 'boiled potatoes', Sturli? We're in the best restaurant in Milan and you order boiled potatoes. If I had known, you could have come to my house and I'd have prepared them for you."

If Sturli were a llama, he would spit on your face. Or maybe not, for he would be a llama with a chip on his shoulders. But he is a cobra and so, instead, he hisses: "Well, well, Fly. It's the boiled potatoes that indicate the quality of a restaurant, didn't you know that?"

You smile, he smiles: better get down to business. "You're playing dirty, Fly."

"Oh, please don't say that, or I'll choke on my wine."

"Come on, don't be so clever. You illegally read the mail of one of our area managers, stealing private information, Then, you had your lover pretend to be someone else, sticking her nose in our executives' business. You know I could report you?"

You smile. Suddenly you feel comfortable. Just a slight twinge of concern. How does he know all of this, who told him...? Today, once more, you know someone has deceived you, but, after all, the fact that Sturli knows suits you ok, at least you can play with all cards on the table. Why did he want to talk to you? He hasn't said, yet. So, you ask.

"Excuse me, who informed you about all these nice little details?"

"Private sources, of course. But you know that practically speaking there's nothing you do with computers that doesn't leave a track., I told you. I could report you."

This last sentence sounds familiar, you must have heard it somewhere before, but this is not the right time to try to remember. Better to counterattack.

"Report me? And why? That person, that woman you mentioned going around questioning your men, it's not someone I know. Anyhow, sorry, but did she grab their balls and squeeze them until they spoke, or rather did she simply pose questions your men just as simply answered? No, well then, in that case I think you should report your, wait, wait, how do you refer to them..? Ah... executives! And as far the e-mails, I have no idea what you are talking about. But, if you want to report me, please, go ahead. You should show these mysterious secret messages I'm supposed to have cracked. Are you ready for that?"

And now Sturli, the lawyer smiles at you. Maybe, hearing you speak like that, he thinks you are two of a kind. For sure he doesn't know that your heartbeat is going a thousand beats a minute and you are all tensed up, as any other honest person would be in such a situation. Bravo!

"Listen, Fly. I came in peace and somewhat in an unofficial fashion with the goal of straightening things out. You have proved to be unreliable, ill-tempered and potentially dangerous. But, we also made a few mistakes, I have to say that. I think it's time to settle it once and for all. What do you say?"

“I say that I agree, on principle. I’m curious to know if we have the same opinion on how to do it.”

At this point, Sturli wipes his mouth with the napkin in a very super-formal way and keeps staring at you.

“As I was telling you before, this is a personal idea of mine. I was the one to tell the bank I wanted to meet you. They, I’ll be honest with you, not only didn’t agree with me, but they advised me against it. But I told them: ‘Let me give it a try. Is it really possible that no-one seems to be able to get through to this person?’. So, here’s what I can offer you. First of all, you guarantee that you won’t try again to sneak into our email, secondly, you give us back whatever you have downloaded and won’t make it public or use it against us; you won’t practice any unfair competition, like trying to steal our clients, and last, you promise not to take any legal action against Nattan Bank.

And we, in return, we promise to immediately pay you all that’s due from us, which comes to ... wait, let me look... 275000 euro. As for the *ad personam* contract, let’s both of us forget all about it. We abandon the idea of suing you, and also ask the one million euro penalty, and you, obviously, guarantee us you won’t take any legal actions against us.”

Sturli stops, has a sip of his wine and looks at you. You, after a few moments in which you look back, damned serious and centred, reply: “Well, it doesn’t sound like a great deal. You’re not offering me anything more than what’s already due to me by law and ask in exchange a lot I’m not obliged to. You perfectly understand that, if I have private information, and you don’t want it to be made public, you should offer me something more than the bare minimum, that is if your aim is really to convince me.”

“You have the information, then?”

“What kind of a question is that? I didn’t think you were so naïve.”

The lawyer is abashed. Such a question shows he’s concerned and that’s a potential weakness. But he recuperates fast: “You’re right. If you have it, you have it, and if you don’t, I wouldn’t be the one to tell. But you see, you might have made a little mistake in running your figures.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, somebody over at the bank might want to make sure you’re not bluffing. And when I say make sure I’m not using a metaphor.”

“A metawhat?”

“Sturli smiles. He thinks he has the situation under control. “You know all too well.” Of course you do. But today, finally, you are again the good old Jack. “Dear lawyer, I’m not the one who has to tell you if I have the information or not, it’s you who has to make up his mind if you want to risk its disclosure or not.”

“Honestly speaking, I don’t risk anything, nevertheless, there’s a still a little uncertainty and because of that, I’m willing to give you something, in exchange for complete certainty. What do you suggest?”

“What about three million euro?” Sturli, the lawyer has a start. “Well, I don’t think I’m authorized to offer such a large amount of money.”

“What do you mean authorized? So, you do have an authorization from Nattan’s management. Didn’t you say it was your personal idea?”

“Fly, we are talking three million euro here. Of course I need an authorization. And, this amount is out of the question, anyway.”

“All right, I see. Well, let’s see each other in court, then.”

“No, wait. I said out of the question, but there’s still room for discussion of the exact figure. Maybe not that much, but, well... In that case I would need to be 100% sure you won’t have the possibility of damaging us anymore.”

“You have my word.”

“That might not be enough. I need something more.”

“Like what?”

“I have to be sure that you have no other copies of the stuff you’ll give me. Can you guarantee me that?”

“I can’t. You see, you’re teaching me that it’s fundamental to diversify, and to have copies of the information is inevitable. For example, in order to reduce the risk of losses, I always suggest to my clients a variety of stocks and funds.”

You are pulling the rope a bit too tight, now, Jack. Let’s see Sturli’s reaction. “This, however, may complicate things.”

“How?”

“Well, I’m not willing to pay for information of which there’s not an original copy and of which several untraceable copies could still exist.”

“I see. So what do you want? You should be happy that I’ve been honest enough to tell you. This should make you think that I have no intention of exploiting it.”

“Coming from you, Fly, these reassurances are unacceptable. It troubles me.”

“Well, it shouldn’t. You see, Sturli, you and your fellows over at Nattan can get rid of me any time. And you proved it. I’ve been in the hospital for two weeks.”

“I still don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You know, you know... However, it’s clear that it’d be better for me to keep quiet. You see, I’m going to say, that of the information I might give you, I have extra copies. I might, or I might not. If I had, it’d be my life insurance, in case something happens to me. But, as long as I’m fine and healthy, it’s exactly as if I didn’t have them. And so you can relax.”

“Practically speaking you’re blackmailing me.”

“Not at all. I’m simply trying to avoid further expenses to the National Health System, or worse to the cemetery. If you don’t mind, I care about my life.”

“Don’t be so melodramatic, Fly, it doesn’t suit you. All right, let’s cut it short: what’s the deal, then?”

“I promise to give in on the labour lawsuit I filed against you; not to sue you in any courthouse on any grounds. Moreover, I’ll give you the stuff I have about you, in exchange for the guarantee that you won’t make any attempts against my life and, additionally, for the sum of three million euro.”

Sturli stares you in the eyes, as if trying to evaluate how far you are willing or *able* to go. Right then, the waiter comes with the check and hands it to him. You, rapidly snatch it: “Dear lawyer, if you don’t mind. It’s on me.”

“Why so?”

“Well, the lunch has been interesting and I enjoyed the extra show.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve never observed so closely a terrible predator feeding itself only on boiled potatoes.”

Sturli slightly smiles. Congratulations, Jack, you’re very good at finding unusual compliments for people.

Out of limbo

That night, you didn’t have a good night’s sleep. How did Nattan Bank know about Imperiali’s mail? And Céline’s recordings? Was someone in your group really betraying you? Maybe they found out through Imperiali’s computer. That’s what you wanted to believe. You wanted to believe that no-one in your group of super loyal people could deceive you. Well, it could be a mistake you’ll end up paying dearly for.

Milan, Sturli&Sturli law firm

8.30 a.m. December 16th

The man walking fast out of Sturli Studio is you, Jack. In the briefcase, two and a half million euro. I said, two and a half million. Practically 5 billion of the old lira, as that guy on TV says. They are all in 500 euro bills and they gave it to you in exchange for a 250 Mb UBS key, filled with information and a simple statement, declaring that you won’t sue them for any reasons in the future. They gave you the money: actually it was Sturli who *gave* it to you. His studio was deserted, not even the secretary was there, and obviously neither Mancini nor Salutti were present, even if their names were written on the copy of the statement the lawyer gave you along with the briefcase and the money.

After reading the statement you lifted your head toward Sturli: “I see there’s no mention of the money you’re giving me.”

“Why, do you want to pay taxes on it?” the lawyer hisses.

“No, but I recall that in the bank when I had to borrow a pen I had to sign something.”

“Please, don’t be cute” Sturli replies. “We didn’t mention the money because we don’t want people to know we paid a promoter off.”

You said nothing, but a shadow of resentment ran across your face. ‘We don’t want people to know we paid a promoter off’. Yes, that’s right: you don’t pay a pariah, a slave, a serf, an untouchable. This is what a financial promoter is. ‘We don’t want people to know we pay our slaves off’. Today, on your way out of Sturli Studio you’re still a slave, but you’ve become free. And it was Nattan that paid for your freedom. Your friend Mirko is waiting for you. It’s eight-thirty in the morning. The

city is still half asleep and Mirko is outside waiting for you in the car. When you get in the car, you are ecstatic and show him the briefcase.

“Great! Congratulations, Jack!”

“Thanks. But this is only the beginning. Take me to Friendly Bank, now. Let me call Giovanni, wait, I’ll put the speakerphone on, so you can hear it, too.”

“Hello... hi Jack!”

“How do you know it’s me?”

“Oh, come on, you’re really from the Jurassic era! Don’t you know your name comes up on the mobile display?”

“Yeah, but I chose not to be identified.”

“Oh really? Then, I’m smarter than you. I have a programme capable of reading all numbers, even those that are blocked.”

“I had no doubt you’re smart. So, have you been able to encrypt my conversations?”

“Of course. When you call from your mobile, nobody will understand a single thing, either what you say or who you call.”

“You’re amazing, Giovanni. I’ll give you a raise.”

“Oh yes, nice, but since when do I receive a pay check?”

“You don’t. You have to study, forget a pay check! So, are you ready?”

“One hundred per cent.”

“Tell me what we are going to do.”

“Yesterday I went into the Consob web-site and downloaded the names, surnames and the banks of all the financial promoters in Italy. Then, it was easy to get their e-mails. After, we wrote... no, actually we had it written by Alessandra... an e-mail informing them that Nattan Bank had to pay back a financial promoter who had been unfairly fired with a three million euro buy out...”

“You must correct it... It’s two and a half million. Then you can send that one right away.”

“Does that mean you have the money?”

“Exactly. You see, it’s possible, after all, to escape from Alcatraz banks. Then, what else?”

“Wait, let’s see, well, I haven’t told you yet but yesterday I was able to complete the transcription of the addresses of all the clients contained in their last databank, the one you gave Francesca.”

“Great! So, now print the labels and put them on the envelopes, then stick the second letter in and send them out.”

“Wait, which one is that? I don’t want to make mistakes.”

“It’s the one informing them that Nattan spends their money trying to settle disputes with their financial promoters. Repeat that passage, please, the one I adore...”

“Come on Jack, we read and reread it a million times yesterday.”

“Hey, soldiers. Never question my orders!”

“Yes, General. Here it is: “No you can finally understand why Nattan, when it invests your money, has always made you pay commissions higher than any other bank’s. Not because they are better or offer a better service. Not at all! It’s merely because they need to put money aside more than any other banks in order to face the

lawsuits they incur from their former financial promoters. Because they, like any other criminal organization, have to make the best lawyers happy by paying their fees, who, nevertheless, can do nothing against the law..."

"Enough, enough, I'm getting too emotional!"

"Yes, yes, me too!" Mirko says, as he keeps on driving toward Friendly Bank. "This is true Leopardi poetry!"

"What Leopardi! A leopard is too small. I'm a sabre-toothed tiger, and if I could, I'd tear them to pieces with their suits and ties on. Let's move to point number 3, you order Giovanni.

"Point 3 is about crossing letter 3 for the clients and e-mail 4 addressed to the financial promoters. In the letter to clients, they are advised to leave Nattan, because anywhere else they end up going, they'll find better service, higher profits and less expenses. And then, we add also to pay attention to the Bio Niscagi, and the special managements created by Nattan, just to steal more money from their clients. And then, if Nattan make them pay any penalties, in case they want to change banks, to report it to the market and fair competition authorities."

"Fantastic. What about the financial promoters?"

"We're sending them the names and addresses of all Nattan's clients, inviting them to touch base. By the way, Jack, I added something to the e-mail..."

"What?"

"I added for each Nattan's client a profile containing their investments which I found in the bank data and also instructions on how to proceed with the reimbursement application, specifying that a copy of the letter must be sent to the authority for fair competition. I found all the information on the Nattan web-site, it took me no time to download and attach it."

"Good job."

"That's not all... I did something else, but I can't tell you on the phone, you must see it."

"What's it about?"

"I can't tell you. Do you trust me?"

"Of course, I trust you. You're great. I said you were great right from the beginning, it was you who didn't believe me," and you start laughing. "All right, so, send everything and keep me posted, ok?"

"Ok, Jack. See you!"

So you end your conversation and wasting no time you say: "So, Mirko, the first part of the plan is complete. But, don't worry, there's work for everybody. Have you succeeded in finding out where Nattan is having its Christmas dinner party?"

"Yes, of course. At the *Petit Prince*. By the way, I also have that address for you..."

"You like playing the detective, don't you?"

"And you like being the commander in chief, don't you?"

"You can bet on that."

"You got the addresses of both the people you know I...?"

"Yes, both."

"Great. All right, let's call Céline now."

“What is she supposed to do?”

“Inform the control offices.”

“But, sorry, didn’t those at Nattan ask you not to say a word?”

“Sure, but I refused.”

“What do you mean you refused?”

“I signed nothing stating that, I only agreed on not suing them.”

“What are you saying, Jack? And the money, then?”

“The just gave it to me. Just like that, no strings attached.”

Mirko’s face suddenly becomes stiff in his unsuccessful attempt to understand.

“Listen, do you intend to keep the terms of the agreement or not?”

You are all excited: “Which terms? Which terms? There can be no terms between me and those bastards, wait and you’ll see. I’ve got to call Céline now. Listen, let’s see if it all becomes clear to you... Hi, sweetheart!”

“Hi Jack. So, who’s gonna pay for the weekend?” she says.

“Me, honey!”

“Yahoo!”

“Hey, don’t forget your reputation as one of the most serious lawyers in Milan. So, ready for part two?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Oh Gosh, it’s really getting to be a habit,” is Mirko’s comment.

“Who’s there?” Céline asks.

“Nobody, just Mirko, he’s here with me. The speaker phone is on. We’re on our way to Friendly Bank.”

“Hi Mirko. What did you mean? What habit?”

“You’re already the second person today who answered Jack with ‘Yes Sir’.”

“You’re wrong. Giovanni called me General” you correct him.

“All right, forget it” Mirko replies.

“Don’t be surprised, Mirko. Success is going to his head” Céline says.

“Just stop it, both of you!” you yell.

“Yes, Sir!” say both of them simultaneously.

“All right, now that you had your fun, can we talk about something serious? Do you have the envelopes ready?”

“Yes, of course. I just need to write down the amount. How much?”

“The truth? Two and a half million euro!”

“Wow!”

“So, read what you wrote.”

“What, over the phone?”

“What are you worried about? Giovanni did something to my mobile. Nobody can hear us.”

“Yes, the mobile, but... you’re not alone...”

You look at Mirko begging him to be patient and understanding. “I told you, I trust Mirko as much as I trust myself.”

“Céline, never mind what Jack says. If you’d rather speak to him in private, we can turn the speaker phone off or you can do it later,” Mirko steps in.

“No, absolutely not,” you say. “I want Mirko to know what we’re doing. I need his help.”

“All right, then, as you wish. Listen, I’ve prepared three identical envelopes. They contain the files with the e-mails and the conversations I had with the several Nattanians, besides a copy on paper of the same. We also included our theory of what had happened. For the time being, the recording of the conversation you had with Salutti and the one Mirko did with Esposito, are not fundamental to what we want to do right now, so you can keep them... Are you sure nobody is listening?”

“Come on Céline, since when are you paranoid?”

“Um, ok... Here it is: ‘Nattan Bank pushes the Niscagi bond on private clients, regardless of the fact that this bond can legally be bought only by professional investors, thus cheating the clients themselves and the control authorities; it does that through its special management arrangements, so that it looks as if it’s the bank itself buying the bonds, when in reality it is the financial promoters who, obliged to buy the Niscagi bonds by the bank itself, are the only ones to have full and direct responsibility. Why? We can’t exclude the possibility of joint-ownership between Nattan and Niscagi. Moreover, we have evidence that some financial promoters over at Nattan, upon request of the executives of the bank itself, illegally took some of its clients’ money abroad’.”

“Perfect!” and you, Jack, turn around now and look for Mirko’s approval. But what you find is a pale and uptight profile. “What’s the matter, Mirko?” you ask.

“Nothing. Go on, I’ll tell you later.”

“All right. So, Céline, please continue.”

“The envelopes are addressed, one to the internal control bureau of the bank, one to the Consob and the third to the Board of Directors of Nattan. Then there is a copy for Alessandra to give to her chief editor.”

“What are you going to do with the envelopes?”

“Send them by mail, except the one for the internal bureau which I’ll deliver personally this morning.”

“You’re great. All right, now let me go, I’m almost at Friendly Bank.”

“Hey, are you gonna leave me just like that? You know how long it’s been since you have told me something sweet?”

“All right. Wait... sorry Mirko, now I really do have to turn off the speaker...”

Milan, Friendly Bank head office

9.00 a.m. December 16th

You’ve just stepped into the bank with Mirko. You’re proud to show him that his long time companion had considered everything in the pursuit of justice.

You then ask to see the branch director, and both of you go to his office. He’s quite surprised to see you. He’s hardly ever seen you, but knows who you are. When you tell him then, that you’d like to open a personal account and deposit two and a half

million euro, which you'll later invest on the crash of the Nattan Bank share, he looks at you rather puzzled.

"Excuse me, why are you so surprised? It's nothing special, just a very common market speculation."

"Well, that common I wouldn't say. Nattan seems to be doing just fine. Its value is about 15 euro and you..."

"Excuse me" Mirko steps in. "I understand nothing here. Can you please explain what's going on?"

"You're right Mirko, sorry" you answer him. "Well... I'm gonna bet all this money on the fact that Nattan shares will drop at least to 11,99 euro. Obviously, right now nobody foresees a drop of 20%."

The branch director starts speaking then: "All the analysts consider Nattan share solid and on the rise. Mr. Fly, listen, do you have any private information...?"

"No, only intuition."

"Wait a minute, please. Doctor Cabrini is on his way, do you mind if we consult with him as well?"

"No, not at all, actually I'd be happy to see him."

After a few minutes all four of you are talking. Cabrini gave you a hug when he saw you, and you were happy he did it. Then you started explaining to him your plan:

"I'm sure that the Nattan share has great chances to drop to 11 euro."

"How can you say that? The Nattan share has reached 14,80 euro, and all the analysts foresee it rising to 15,60 in the short term" Cabrini objects.

"Well, often by doing the exact opposite of what analysts said, I made great profits."

"That's true... It is, in fact, very difficult to foresee what will happen. If by December 31st the Nattan share is under 12 euro, Mancini will not receive Nattan stocks, and will have lost more or less more 11 million euro."

"Wouldn't you like to enjoy the show?" you ask him.

"Let's..." Cabrini has no time to answer, as you, Jack keep going on: "Also, don't you think that other brokers, if presented with the chance of leaving Nattan management empty-handed, wouldn't take it? Personally, I think that lighting the fuse will be enough."

"You're a bit crazy. How successful can such a thing be?" Cabrini observes.

"Yes, you're right, I'm crazy, but I've found out that in this world, it doesn't matter if you are crazy or sane, honest or dishonest. What counts is to be wealthy. And yes, I want to be wealthy, but I also want to destroy those bastards at Nattan."

"You know perfectly well that it's never a good idea to mix business with personal matters. I want to make sure you're not flushing your money down the toilet just out of resentment. You could be very sorry for that."

"No, of course, don't worry Doctor Cabrini. I know what I'm doing."

"Maybe, but to me it sounds far too risky."

"I know, they could start wondering why someone at Friendly Bank is betting on Nattan taking a dive... Would this be a problem for you?"

"No. You're just an anonymous investor like any other one. No problems for me. But

for you, maybe. The control committees might summon you for questioning...”

“True, but I love risks.”

“All right, then. If you know what you’re doing, I have nothing against it. And then, I’ll be honest with you, since that time Mancini threatened me, I’ve disliked Nattan all the more. If you have any information on a likely crash, betting on it is the good thing for you to do.”

“Not exactly. Let’s say that I also count on the *sentiment* of the market. When the brokers will see that there’s someone willing to bet on the crash of the Nattan share, I hope they’ll start wondering: “How come?” Is he crazy or is there more to it?” I think in order not to go wrong, they’ll just stop buying Nattan and maybe, even start selling it, just to be on the safe side. And for those who know that by selling they will damage Nattan Management, what do you think they will do? There must be some other Nattan enemies around, besides me, right?”

“And then?”

“Well, after that... I think you know. The market makers will start calling Nattan, the Consob could suspect insider trading and, who knows, someone could have the idea of starting an investigation ...sticking their noses in, and if some news about their immoral behaviours comes up, well, it will just be icing o the cake.”

“Well, Fly, good luck! You’ll need it.” Cabrini says turning his handshake into a hug.

“But we must give luck a little push.” He picks up the phone on the desk of the branch director and talks to the secretary, adding at the end. “Here, right here, in this branch, we have one of the best brokers in Italy. I want him to manage this transaction.”

“Archimedes Pythagorean?” the branch director, amused, asks.

“That’s him” Cabrini replies winking at him. “He’s the one responsible for all the Italian stock market financial transactions. I want him to follow you, Jack, in your financial strategy. But only until December 31st.”

You inform Archimedes about the betting strategy you want to trigger. He must place a call order right at 15. That is the right to buy at 15 euro. The market, seeing someone is investing on the rise of Nattan will do likewise, and the share value will go up. If your plan works out, at 15,40, well under the analysts opinion, the two and a half million of rights will be worth 120 million of shares to sell, because you can sell the call shares, and at the brink of 15, you can also sell the ones of the put, being you the buyer at 15. In a couple of days, without the market noticing it Archimedes will collect put strike 12. They cost very little, one hundred-thousand will be plenty... Who will bet on Nattan share to go down to 12 euro from the 14,80 they are worth now, in such a short time? So, while Nattan share is still on the rise, you quietly collect put base 12 euro. Once you bought them, you’ll throw them violently on the market, this will cause a chain effect to feed the dropping of Nattan. Yes. So at 15,40 Archimedes will start selling and if the market follows you, Archimedes, the shares will be worth less than 12 euro and Mancini and his fellows then...

In the car with Mirko

“What a guy that Archimedes is...” Mirko comments. “When you first spoke to him about your project, he looked rather sceptical. But then, when he understood that Nattan was involved, he got all excited just like a boy. He must have something pending with them.”

“More than one, I believe.” You both got in the car but Mirko hasn’t started the engine, yet. You feel the need to talk to Mirko, you have the feeling he’s somehow distant. “He worked at Nattan, too, and also was fired badly and unfairly. Everyone knows what happened to him at Nattan Bank.”

“What?... Tell me Jack.”

“Archimedes was working at Nattan, when he had an insight that the dollar-yen exchange currency at the time would go up to 130. So, Archimedes started betting the bank’s money on this rise. It was August 2000, and the exchange rate was roughly 110... Right then, however, the yen started dropping until it set itself at 102. The bank was losing, at that moment, twelve million euro, so Mancini fired Archimedes on the spot and closed all the bets.”

“Twelve million euro? Well, I’ll be honest with you, had it happened to me, firing him wouldn’t have been enough. I would have skinned him alive,” Mirko says.

“Because you’re a private detective who knows nothing about this business. You would have made the most terrible mistake in your life because, just, a few days later, the yen picked up again and in the following months went up to 135. If the bank hadn’t closed all the bets, they would have made an incredible net profit:”

“Damn!”

“Yeah. But, Archimedes, meanwhile had no more job. But wait, the best is still to come, and if you know Nattan just a little, you won’t be that surprised.”

“Did they tried to get him back? At least, that’s what I would have done.”

“Bravo! Me too. After all, we all make mistakes and try to mend them. There’s nothing wrong with that. But, unfortunately, Nattan is known for having a different style. They are not happy unless they show their muscles. They got in touch with him and came up with a very interesting offer: either he was to go back immediately to Nattan, under the same conditions he had before, or they would have spread rumours around, he had been the one to close the bets. In short, they would have destroyed his career.”

“”What did he do?”

“He said that he would have retired to the top of Mount Athos rather than ever work again for Nattan. And luckily, he found Cabrini, who employed him right away. Do you get it, now? These people at Nattan have always been scumbags. As for myself, everything’s fine right now. Archimedes has guaranteed me he’ll be able to invest everything by the end of the week, even if he has to pay 1% short-term penalty.”

“Well, Jack, you know what I think? I think you’re wrong. You got your money, stop it now. Instead, you risk losing everything. What’s your reward for this war? Are you aware of the risks involved? Are you aware of them?”

“Sure, I am. You saw what they did to me. I know my risks, but I can’t stand these bastards getting away with anything. They cheat both their collaborators and clients with no justice to force them to pay, I can’t accept that. My blood goes straight to my head when I think of it. It’s not just a matter of money. I can’t accept that Nattan can afford to be so disrespectful of the law and still get away with it. If I were a violent man, I’d kill them with my bare hands.”

“Yes, all right, but I can’t afford to have a friend who’s getting into big time trouble without at least trying to stop him.”

“You can’t stop me, Mirko, sorry. I thank you, really, but there’s nothing you can do. But please, if you can, stick with me.”

Mirko will be doing the driving. He looks worriedly at Jack. Then he starts the engine. “Ok. Where to?”

“The police department. The one near Santa Francesca Romana Square. It won’t take me more than ten minutes.”

“You’ve really lost it...”

Milan, Santa Francesca Romana Square Police Department 12.00 a.m. December 16th

“What Mirko? You’re not coming in to say hello to your good, old friends?” you ask him while getting out of the car.

“No thanks. Like what that guy who used to say: ‘No resurrections, please’. I gave what I had, and don’t feel like getting back into it, not even to say hello. You, though, why are you going in?”

“Well, since you don’t want to come with me, I won’t tell you anything. But, believe me, it’ll be a great joke. Shall we see each other later or do you want to wait for me?”

“Call me when you’re done. I’m going to get a drink.”

You enter and walk upstairs to the second floor. Not a single guard, no-one to check. Great, so much for security, you think.

On the first landing there’s a pretty big lobby, full of foreigners and just a handful of Italians, waiting. You approach a policeman, a rather stocky blond guy, who looks at you with a mix of frustration and tolerance, and you ask him: “Excuse me, where can I file a report?”

“What do you want to report?” he asks you with a strong Sicilian accent.

“Myself.”

“Third door on the right” the policeman directs you, and turns as to leave, but then, just a second later, thinking twice about what you said, he comes back and looks you over with some suspicion. “What did you say? Who do you want to report? Yourself?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ok, wait here”. But then fearing, somehow, that you could be out of your mind and about to cause trouble, he corrects himself: “No, actually, come with me.”

You follow him into a room furnished only with a metal desk, a couple of wooden chairs and endless bookcases filled with folders. You take a seat on one of the two chairs in front of the desk. The policeman heads toward a door, opposite to the one you came in from, leans out and utters something to an older colleague of his, who, right after comes into the room and turns to you: "Tell me".

Wow, they let me in ahead of all the others, who knows what they think I'll tell them? you think and then start speaking: "I came here to report myself because I did something, well I played a shameful trick. I realise that now and I'd like to somehow make up for what I did."

The two policeman, perplexed and suspicious, look at one another. Then they gesture you to go on.

"This morning I was with the lawyer Sturli, from Surli&Sturli studio, to sign an agreement for the end of an extrajudicial controversy with Nattan Bank. It's a question of work, they unduly fired me, and there were other issues as well... So, anyway, to avoid going to court we agreed on the payment of two and a half million in cash. They gave it to me, in fact, but I couldn't help teasing them a little, and so I signed the receipt of the payment with disappearing ink..."

"What did you do?"

"You know, those kinds of inks you use to play tricks with? You write something, and it's perfectly clear and visible. Then, after a quarter or half an hour, it simply disappears."

The elder policeman sits down. You've got him quite interested by now: "Ah! And why did you do something like that? What was in your mind?"

"I don't know. Sometimes it happens. It's like an unstoppable impulse to tease. Like that time I..."

"Forget it, you're not gonna tell us your entire life story now..." the other policeman, the one still standing, interrupts you.

"No, no, please, go on" say the other one, the one seated, who clearly has a higher rank.

"One night, like many other nights, I stayed late at the bank to finish some work... you know, I'm a financial promoter. At some point, it must have been ten thirty, I decide to leave, I took the elevator down to the ground floor, and guess who I found in front of the elevator?"

"The janitors?"

"Yeah, sure. Five gorgeous women asking me: "We are invited to Doctor Salutti's party, where shall we go? The password is: *Use all the suckers as cash cows*, right?"

"Come on," says the younger policeman.

"I swear it! I played along, you see, at the time, Salutti was my boss, so I take them to the top floor, which was, by the way, the only one you could throw a party in, for the huge terrace it's got. I have just the time to spot a room full of women, of all races and half naked, when two goons stop me: 'You're a financial promoter, out!' 'Excuse me, are you talking to me?' I reply and try to feign ignorance. 'Yes, and do you see any other promoters, by chance?' they reply. And I: 'I've been personally invited by the director!' 'Oh, yeah! What's the password, then?' they ask me. '*Use all the*

suckers as cash cows' I repeat by heart. "You idiot, that's the password for the women' they tell me. I tried all possible and thinkable ways to bribe those brainless two, they almost killed me: there were five of them by that time, in fact!"

"So you left."

"Yes, but I was fuming from the way I had been treated."

"And so?"

"So, I went downstairs and took a drive through the best streets in Milan..."

"The best streets for what?"

"For transvestites and transsexuals: I brought them all to the party, telling them to say they had been 'invited' by Doctor Salutti and gave them the password."

"How did it go?"

"20 minutes-time and about 40 transvestites were pushing their way into the elevators, with their dicks sticking out, and fighting with the hulking goons, who all of a sudden were a minority and generally much shorter than the transvestites themselves!"

The two policemen are looking at you in rapture. You've won them over, Jack, well done, you succeeded even this time.

"After the last trip with the transvestites I saw that the Carabinieri had arrived... I would have never considered bothering the police for such a thing. Meanwhile, the bank executives, the managers, the financial analysts and the beautiful cunts were all fleeing the building. Too bad I didn't have my camera with me! Then, I paid what I still owed the last transvestites, let them off and went home. Well, I had a lot of fun."

"Wow! A great trick for sure" the standing policeman, honestly in admiration, comments.

"Yeah, a trick that could also, hypothetically, be called a crime: disturbing the peace, at least, if not prostitution."

"Come on, chief detective, don't be..."

"I'm a simple detective."

"Sorry."

"Getting back to us. So, did you tease the same company with the ink trick?"

"Well... yes. They did far too many things to me... I couldn't help myself."

"What do you mean, they did too many things?"

"Well, let me explain. Vexations, injustices, mobbing, corruption. They even had me beaten up... But I repent now and I'm willing to go to the bank and sign the agreement in front of the police."

The officer looks at you, rather perplexed. Probably, he's wondering what the hell you are talking about. There is something in what you say that clearly intrigues him, but on the other hand he nurses the idea that you could just be a fantasist. After having given it some more thought, though, he says: "Give me the phone number of the law office, and the one of the bank, too."

"Of course, here you are."

You write down the numbers on a piece of paper which he takes with him and then leaves the room.

You're left there with the other policeman, who's still standing and looking at you with increasing admiration.

Just a few minutes later the officer comes back. He's rather annoyed: "You are really in the mood for jokes, eh, Fly."

"Why?" you ask, with the most naïve surprised look on your face.

"Don't play the dummy with me, I warn you, you're getting yourself in trouble here. I've just called the lawyer Sturli and ..."

"Did you talk to the lawyer Sturli in person? Oliviero Sturli?"

The policeman glares at you. If he had anything, even the slightest excuse, he'd have you arrested. "Yes, sure, with him personally. He told me he has no idea what you are talking about. I asked him if he thought it'd be useful to call Nattan Bank to confirm it, and he told me not to bother. He even told me that you were fired for poor performance and unfair business practice and they have no intention, whatsoever, of coming to an agreement with you."

"I don't understand..."

The jaw of the younger policeman suddenly drops. The officer orders you abruptly to get up and leave. "Go. I don't know if you are a fantasist or a buffoon, but if you don't leave right away, I'll have my men arrest you on the grounds of perjury."

No, you don't want that, right? You don't want to be arrested for perjury and so, you hurry out of the police building. You look truly shocked and disappointed but that's just a cover up, truly you're just ecstatic. You suspected Nattan would deny having given you all that money and now, you're one hundred percent sure. You wanted everything to be written out in black and white and the officer just did it.

As soon as you're out of the building you call your girlfriend.

"Hello, Céline. Tell me: are you done with everything?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"There is a problem..."

"What?"

"Well, first of all, do you recall my case about the woman who wanted the divorce... Mrs. Brambilla?"

"So what?"

"So, if I had to wait for you to help me investigate that trust, I would have waited forever. So, I did my own research and found out a thing or two. More than finding them out, I made some suppositions, and then sent a letter by certified mail to Sturli studio listing the followings: 1: Mr. Brambilla has created an invalid trust since the beneficiaries of it are companies owned by Brambilla himself; 2: that creating an invalid trust is a legal crime, both a fiscal and financial swindle, in which all the subjects are involved, the trustees, the supporting bank, and the legal studio which has prepared the paperwork establishing the trust; 3: that the trust itself is none of my business as long as they let my client file for divorce with the warranty of seeing her rights secured; 4: that I'll be looking forward to hearing from them."

"Shit! Where did you get all that information?"

“Well, it’s private, I can’t tell...”

“You bluffed your way in, didn’t you?”

“Well, I did once ... but now it’s impossible for me to expose myself personally. I have this divorce lawsuit and can’t get it compromised.”

“You knew that even before, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but you were with Mirko and I didn’t feel like talking ... And then, you see, just yesterday I was thinking we could send the reports anonymously. Instead, we have to sign them, otherwise there’s no chance of somebody even looking at them.”

“I see. So, what are we gonna do now?”

“Have them signed by somebody else.”

“Like who?”

“Well, what about Francesca or Giovanni? Or even Alessandra.”

“No... no, Francesca and Giovanni are out of the question. I don’t want them to run into any more risks. As for Alessandra, I don’t think she’ll be willing to: after all, she’s a journalist, I don’t think she’d want to jeopardise her...”

“Well, then. I wouldn’t know. Let’s think about it.”

“There is Mirko. After all, he is a detective. It would be perfect for a detective to send a report like that. I’m sure he’s already done it plenty of times.”

“I don’t agree. You know, I don’t trust him. I’d rather keep him out of this.”

“Oh, come on Céline, not again, this is pure paranoia!”

“So, is this what you think? All right then, do as you wish. I don’t wanna discuss about it. I’ll leave the stuff with the doorman at my office. Everything’s ready. Just add the signature and the information of the person who will present them.”

Milan, Rossi Café

2.30 p.m. December 16th

“Thank you for doing it, Mirko. You know, Céline, didn’t...”

“Don’t worry Jack, It’s ok. I sent the recording to the Consob, one to the audit company, one to the board of directors. Then, as you told me, I went personally to deliver them to the head of the bank internal control bureau.”

“Who did you find? Lampredi or Fascetti?”

“Hmm... Lampredi, I think...”

“A pretty tall, distinctive man?”

“Yes!”

“That’s Fascetti.”

“Well, yes... yeah, it was him.”

“What did he say?”

“He said he’ll make sure to verify the contents. He told me not to worry.”

“Good, good.”

“Listen Jack, I have delivered all the copies as you told me, I hope you have an extra copy for yourself.”

“Yes, of course. I have a copy of all the recordings at home, don’t worry.”

“For a minute I thought I made a mess... Why did you go to the police?”

“Well, I can tell you now I went to report myself. Those at Nattan, of course as I had expected, denied everything. In short, they declared they hadn’t given me a single penny. Do you understand what that means, they will never be able to ask for the money back!”

Oh, Jack, you are so proud of yourself, and when you feel like that, you become a little annoying, a little vain; too self-centred to be able to look around yourself, to sense, for example, Mirko’s grim look as he attacks you: “Good for you Jack! You’re very proud of yourself, aren’t you? You’re sure you thought it all out, right?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“Well, now, you feel safe because the police are involved and they can’t ask you for the money back. Didn’t you think they could me you spit the money out of your mouth, bill by bill!”

“Wasn’t it you who said that a bank would never dirty its hands with a nobody like me?”

“Right! But now, you’re not a meaningless bug anymore. You are an annoying bug. And you crush annoying bugs.”

“Yeah, you’re right, before I was just Jack Fly. Now I’m the fly surfing through their shit, spreading it around and letting everyone knows what kind of junk they have turned an honest job into. I understand their desire to get rid of me. But it wouldn’t be such a good idea. Céline, Alessandra, Giovanni, Francesca and you... you will not have any second thoughts about telling the truth...”

“Well, don’t count on me for that. You’re just too far out of your mind.”

Yes. This is what is called a real bolt from the blue, Jack. You didn’t expect it, right? You turn around to face your friend and try to understand the reason for such hostility.

Mirko, for his part, doesn’t give in: “You really think you are a kind of Don Quixote, don’t you?”

“Why are you saying that?”

“You really think you’re on the right side, eh?... but you, too, are behaving like a scumbag. You did take the money, after all? You must keep your word, then. If you meant to keep on fighting this war, you shouldn’t have taken the money.”

“Really, Mirko. No, I don’t think so, I don’t agree with you. That money can’t even pay for half of what I should get for all the humiliations I suffered, the beating, the destruction of my films.”

“All right... Then, let’s say it. This should have been a further reason not to accept that money. And then, let me tell you, I would have understood you, been on your side. But like this... You’re only looking for revenge, trying to take advantages of the situation, to speculate on it. You’re not any different from them!”

“Oh, is that what you think? I’m not any different from them? Sure, I also opened a branch in Lugano, just to cheat the IRS, right? I was the one who created the special managements to cheat the clients, the authorities and the market, is that right? Do you realise what you are saying? I’m not only defending myself, Mirko. I’m also trying to tell the truth about this bunch of scumbags. Why can’t you understand it?”

“No, no, I can’t, Jack. And I don’t think I ever will.”

Mirko is about to leave.

Jack, what are you thinking of doing? Will you try to stop him or let him go?

“Bye, Jack. I don’t know what will happen with you, but, good luck. Oh, by the way, here are the addresses you asked me for, I’ve already contacted the girl. I explained everything to her, she said everything’s fine and she’ll be at *Petit Prince* at nine. The other guy, well... you’ll have to talk to him.

“I see.”

You take the note Mirko is handing you. With the other hand you gesture Mirko to wait a minute. You get close to him and give him a hug. Mirko is taken back at first, but then exchanges the hug himself.

“Thank you Mirko, for everything.”

Jack Fly’s house

4.00 p.m. December 16th

Your house has been turned into the general’s quarters.

“Hi guy! How is everything?”

“Hi Jack! We already know!” Francesca exclaims. “I hope you won’t waste it all gambling... my kids are hungry!”

“Come here.” Francesca comes closer to you, and you, unexpectedly embrace her tightly.

“I don’t know what I’d do without you. Thanks for everything... and don’t worry. If things go as well as I hope, you won’t get a raise, you’ll get a new house.”

Suddenly Francesca’s face darkens. You take her to the living room. “Hey, what’s wrong? Quite a weird reaction to good news.”

“I want you to stop. They gave you the money, so enough with this fight.”

“Hey, hey, what are you talking about? Have you spoken to Mirko?”

“No, I just want you to stop. They gave up by giving you the money, it’s not right to persist.”

“Are you crazy? What do you care about those assholes?”

“What more do you want, Jack? Don’t tell me you’re doing this to save the clients who bought the Niscagi. You’re doing it out of revenge, that’s it.”

“No, I’m doing it because I want a healthier financial market, with one less dishonest bank around, at least.”

“Jack, you must stop. I can’t take it anymore,” and then, Francesca breaks up into tears.

“Hey, is there something I should know?” Francesca looks at you as if she wanted to tell you something but lacks courage. “Please, tell me, tell what happened.”

“He called me.”

“Who, damn it. Who called you?”

“Corradi. He invited me for lunch, I went, and he told me to dump you, to go back to Nattan. He promised they would give me a permanent job. And then, he scared me,

too. He wanted me to tell him what I knew exactly, otherwise my family would have run into trouble.”

“You must report them.”

“No, Jack, I have no energy... and I have a family.”

“Did you meet just Corradi?”

“No, also Salutti.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wanted to help you. I told them that there was no way you’d give in unless they gave you the money they owed you.”

“All right, but why not tell me?”

“I don’t know.”

You look at Francesca in the eyes, eyes that are full of tears, and you realise she reached a level of stress she’s not used to.

“Did they ask you about the recordings?”

“Yes, they wanted me to bring them to the bank and, in return, they’d give me a position.”

“And you?”

“I said No. I said I don’t know where you keep them.”

“All right, Francesca, I’m sorry. It’s all my fault. I dragged you into this mess without even asking you if you were willing.”

“I’m worried, Jack. If you don’t stop, they’ll get even worse.”

“I’m sorry, but there’s nothing you can do. I’ll go on because at this point I can’t go back. If I stop now, I’m gonna lose what they gave me, and they’ll get away with what they did and are still doing. It’s up to you to stay with me or not. I need you, but only if you want to stay, otherwise, do what you think is best for you.”

“The point is that you are crazy and I, I’m even crazier to follow you.”

“Listen, let’s do it this way. I’ll teach you how to record the conversations. If they were to call you back and bother you, at least you can record it. Look, it’s simple.”

Francesca dries her tears.

“Where is Giovanni?” you ask.

“He’s in the other room. He’s been screaming all morning because tons of e-mails are coming in and he doesn’t know under what file to save them.”

“Let me see. Have you heard from Alessandra?”

“She left a message. Here it is.”

“Hum... *Call me at the newspaper. The chief editor said yes but he needs the evidence.* Good. And Céline?”

“I haven’t heard from her.”

“So, first thing I’ll call her.”

You sit down and dial Céline’s number on your mobile.

“Hello, this is Groscialù.”

“Hi, dude. I’m in my studio. I saw that someone picked up the package.”

“Yes, I sent...”

“Stop! Don’t tell me.”

“All right, all right. You know you are a real...”

“Oh, really?”

“No, damn it. You’re gorgeous. At least, can I tell you something?”

“Let’s hear.”

“I have an incredible craving to make love to you within let’s say the next 15 minutes.”

“Jack, interesting, but I can’t. I’m having a meeting with a client in 65 minutes.”

“Great! It only takes 13 minutes from your studio to here. Plus another 13 to go back, all in all, 26 minutes. We have at least 39 minutes for a quick one.”

“Jack, I can’t stand you when you talk like this.”

“Well, if we go to your home instead, which is closer to your office, we can save between 5 to 7 minutes. Shall I wait for you there?”

“You’re mental.”

“We are!”

Then, you hang up and head to the door announcing: “Francesca, I’m gone.”

“Wait!” Giovanni’s voice blocks you right on the threshold: “Don’t you wanna know about the mailing list?”

“Of course I do. But hurry. I have an extremely important business meeting in 12 minutes and I can’t miss it.”

“Everything’s fine. We’re getting tons of replies. The clients want more information about the Niscagi and want to know more about Nattan Suisse.”

“What about my former colleagues?”

“Your colleagues are in an uproar. Since they don’t know who’s writing the mails, they tend to be anonymous as well, and they send messages like: ‘Good job, free us from Mancini!’”

“Suggest to them that they send a petition to the Consob in order to call their attention to the Niscagi, and then call the Adusbef, or what’s the name...?, o well, whatever, I mean the consumers association. Find the number on the Internet. Also inform them that, in case they have the special managements, they risk losing everything and being expelled, too. They are responsible as well, and that’s true even if they work or just know about Nattan Suisse.”

“Someone is already talking about creating a defence committee for investors and promoters.”

“Great. Any news from the government?”

“Nothing yet. It’s the only weakness in our mailing list.”

“Don’t worry Giovanni. They’ll join in, too. The last one to join in, as usual, and then they’ll want all the credit, too. But if they help us in destroying Nattan, when it all floats to the surface, I’d be more than happy to give them the credit.”

“Do you remember that little surprise I attached to the e-mails I sent to the promoters...do you wanna see it?”

You’re on burning coals, you want to see Céline, but how can you say no to him: “All right. Let me see.”

“You have to come in front of the computer. It’s a PowerPoint file.”

The time the pc takes to load the file seems endless. But at the end a horrible laughing face with a heading appears on the screen:

Because it's beautiful to work for Nattan Bank

Followed by a series of slides:

Your telephone conversations are recorded.

Everybody knows a great deal about you that you don't.

**You must sell what the bank tells you,
otherwise they beat you up**

**Your colleagues don't give a damn if you gain or lose weight,
But they would be happy to steal your clients**

You are videotaped when you jerk off in the toilet

Everywhere you go you must be brazen-faced people

**You can't take off your tie
even if the air conditioner is broken**

**None of your colleagues at work can make you laugh.
But most of them would love to see you cry**

**Besides shaving your face they ask you to shave
your asshole, too, so they can screw you better**

**If you are 38 and single, nobody gives a shit.
Even if you have cancer, they don't give a shit.**

And now smile, if you still feel like doing it.

Good for you, Giovanni. And you felt suddenly sad, but he's right. You wink at him and run off to see Céline. All right, all right, work is work, but a break once in a while, you deserve it.

As you are leaving your house, you find the note Mirko had given you before going away. You take a look at it, give it that attention you had so far denied to it. It's a business card. On the back, handwritten in pencil, there is a cell number and a woman's name: Annuska. Printed on the front: 'Mariano De Rosa: BEE-KEEPER. And you slightly smile, not even knowing why you are now about to meet Céline and how are you going to continue with the plan you have in mind.

Forty-three minutes later at Céline's house

"Well, it was cold out but we warmed up, didn't we sweetheart?"

"I can't complain. Do you know what I was thinking? Wait, let me move... you're crushing my arm... Ok, that's better. Maybe it was because of the cold, but do you recall the last few Christmas dinners?" you ask.

"Which ones, Jack? The dinners with our friends you had me cancel at the last minute or the ones I went to alone?"

"Oh come on, give me a break, please."

"What? Why? Do you think I'll just forgive you all your sins?"

You hug her tightly, like a little bird, even though you know she's an eagle.

"No, didn't expect you to, not at all. Listen instead, what I thought about this particular Christmas dinner. Well, the Nattan Christmas dinner."

"Ok, but tell me while I get dressed. I'm gonna be late otherwise."

"Do you remember that every year Nattan throws a Christmas party but never invites the financial promoters?"

"Well, every single year, hard to forget. But in the last couple of years, since we started going out – we can say we're still together, right? – you've always organised your own alternative party."

"Yes, exactly. Anyway, it happens in many banks that for the Christmas dinner, all the employees are invited, including the errand-boys and the janitors, but not the promoters. Only at Friendly Bank, they told me, do they let the promoters take part in the dinner, too. But you know, Friendly Bank is a different story..."

"And so? Sorry to hurry you. Can you come with me to the bathroom while I put my makeup on?"

"All the other years, my party has always been the best..."

"Yes, yes... I know perfectly what you mean: hookers and decorations..."

"Oh, come on, you're so puritan. Well, I know, you're a feminist and femin... Ouch! Are you crazy throwing your brush at me?"

"Go on, *my little piglet, my cochon*... Real men never complain, don't you know that? Please go get my brush, will you?"

"Anyway, last year my party was memorable. First of all there were no hookers, but only simple girls, *Planet Woman* style, dressed as 'Santa Clause's little nieces', and then, do you remember I even came up with a password to be used to allow them to take their masks off...? Whoever pronounced 'Jack Fly' could take it off. Well, to make a long story short, even the paper spoke about it... And Mancini... he got pissed. He said, he was the general manager, and I had no right to release interviews to papers."

"I seem to remember you even received a warning not to talk about it to the press anymore without a written authorization, is that right?"

"Yeah, the press had spoken about the party of some common promoter, and completely neglected the one organised by the general manager."

"So, what are you doing? Getting all excited about it a year later? Please, the coat, hold my coat."

“Well... It’s not about getting all excited, it’s just that I’m thinking about something special for this year, too.”

“With easygoing ladies?”

“No, not at all. Well, I might need one of them... but she’ll have a very special mission, which I think could be of special interest to you, too. But the biggest firework display of the party, well, for that it’ll be someone else...”

“Are you up to one of your tricks?”

“Well, to tell you the truth, yes. And a rather ...how to put it, hot one. Wait, let me call the elevator. Got everything? Please close the door safely, you never know these days...”

“Do you mean Mancini, Salutti and Sturli have started breaking into people’s houses?” Céline asks you, while giving you a hug in the elevator. “Quite mysterious. Hot stuff. Firework display... Are you going to tell me about the hooker?”

“No, sorry, no time. You’ve gotta go.”

“No, no, please, There’s time. Three minutes. Come on, you wouldn’t want me to reproach you again, right?”

“Right, but nothing illegal this time. Mirko has approached a high-class hooker we’ll sneak into Nattan’s party using a press badge.”

“You’re already borderline insane, you know?”

“Yes, yes I know... The girl has to hook up with Sturli using the excuse of talking about soccer. Inter, Milan, you know all that stuff they love so much. Mirko dutifully trained her about the details of the troubles with the referees, the soccer market, Galliani as president of the League and so on. Then, she’s authorized to take him to bed with her. And then...”

“Oh boy, oh boy...”

“As they fuck, she’ll give a call to Sturli’s wife with her video-mobile and so ...”

“Oh, Gosh, you are really mental! How can you think of such ideas? I warn you...”

“Hah, I really got you going! Do you really think I could do something like that...?”

“Ok, let’s forget it. Don’t do anything stupid, please. I’ve really gotta go now. Give me a kiss, *Cochon*.”

Milan, *Petit Prince* Restaurant

8.00 p.m. December 21st

The first ones to arrive at *Petit Prince* are the bottom level employees. And bottom of the bottom are the men. Errand-boys, men from the sales offices but no promoters, obviously. Then the women make their entrance: secretaries, bookkeepers and a handful of higher rank office workers. They are all very carefully dressed. You can’t even recognize them: all made up, lots of jewels and eyes shining with a different light. Some of them put on too much make up on and look like clowns, some have just shaved their eyebrows a little too much. Some of them used too much gel, some went too far with their hairdos, some are wearing pants far too tight for them and their bellies just stick out, but all in all, it’s just a great blazing show. Looking at it,

you have the melancholic feeling that this dinner party thrown by Nattan seems to be, for many of the women and likewise for many of the men, the only social gathering they go to in a year and they are trying their level best to take advantage of it. Who knows, how many things could be born in a night like this? How many women and men will end up sleeping in a different bed from their own?

This year, especially, they are all dressed to the nines. Some of them have resurrected their grandmothers' laces and jewels, others have rented tuxedos, while still others have spent a month's pay to buy just the right suit. It was the top management, which had requested the highest level of elegance. The success of the share in the Stock Exchange Market, and the distributions of the stocks to the management and *stock option* to the promoters, must be celebrated. Several journalists, both from the business and society columns, have also been invited. It's fundamental to give the impression of great magnificence.

Alessandra Durante, from *Borse and Mercati*, is among the guests, too. She arrives at the restaurant wearing a pair of post-modern white gold earrings, one of which twirls around her ear with the tip almost inserting itself inside the ear itself. The other stretches all the way down to the corner of her lips. Inside those two earrings there is you, Jack. There is you, Jack, yes you, who hasn't been invited to the party, but wouldn't miss it for all the money in the world.

"So, Alessandra, how is it going?"

"I'm in, Jack. Everything's fine so far."

"Let me know when the dinner is about to start. I need seven minutes to prepare the package."

"Ok."

"Have you seen Annuska?"

"No, not yet."

"Did you apply the oil thoroughly?"

"Of course. Not a single inch of skin was missed. The smell is a bit strong, I hope nobody will start noticing it."

"I don't think so. They'll just think you got carried away with the female sex hormones."

Alessandra steps slowly into the dining room, but stops half way in, as journalists, beautiful single women, and gigolos do when making an entrance. To be half way in, means, for all three of them, being able to control the situation, scan around the crowd to spot who could be a potential victim – there's always one – and find for themselves the best place to ultimately end up.

Then, to this end, the great masters make their way in, dispensing smiles and generous blessings to all.

With the arrival of the great Nattan dignitaries, the atmosphere suddenly changes. From the chatty and noisy one, before, it quickly becomes more solemn and slow, with everybody looking for their assigned seats. Every year, the allocation of the seats, is curated by a committee of sadists, who make the shyest and most introverted girls sit with the worst bastards around; the high-ranking female hunters with the errand-boys; the atheists with the clerics; the intellectuals with the soccer fans. A

central table is reserved for the journalists, who can best enjoy the show that takes place every year after dinner. Every year, then, there are a few unfortunate ladies who get invited to the management table: an all male table, as if it was some sort of monarchy where succession is strictly reserved to males. The unfortunate ones are either secretaries who know how to give great blowjobs, or journalists particularly lovely and open minded, or maybe some extra-resume fiancée of one of the oh-so-extremely-exhausted Nattan managers.

The chosen ones are so full of themselves, as if they had just won the lottery, not knowing that most of them have just entered a slaughter-house, from which they'll leave shortly after, with a jewel or a cheque more, but with a lot less self-esteem.

Alessandra, too, has been invited to the management table and, as soon as she sits down she whispers: "Here we are, Jack. You can have the package delivered."

"What about Annuska?"

"Nothing, yet."

"Strange. Anyway the package is on its way."

"What, sorry?" Giorgio Salutti asks her, a real Salutti to the tee, resplendent in his expensive get-up, who has spotted her immediately and sat down next to her.

"Oh, nothing. I was just talking to myself: I think one of my heels got a bit loose."

"Well, since you're now sitting down, no need to worry. By the way, I talk to myself, too. Usually, I limit myself to philosophical subjects in front of the mirror in the morning when I shave. What an extraordinary fragrance you're wearing! Chanel 5?"

"Listen, Doctor...?"

"Salutti, but please, call me Giorgio."

"All right. You can call me Doctor Durante. As I was saying Giorgio, I think you're not so up to date about fragrances these days. Nowadays, only over sixty-ladies and hookers wear Chanel."

Salutti blushes violently. "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry. I didn't take it personally. I don't think you intended to offend my age or my morality."

"Absolutely... I just wanted..."

"Please I told you not to worry. Instead, why don't you tell me something about this mysterious investor who's betting on a Nattan drop?"

Salutti doesn't know which way to turn. Not only has he absolutely screwed his first approach, but he has also ran into one of those absolute workaholics. He must take time, somehow save the situation.

"Wow, news flies fast, doesn't it?"

"Well, you know, the fact that there is someone who's trying to corner as much stock as possible with options and then sell them at top price, it's rather intriguing."

"You think so? As far as I'm concerned, I think, that in this world, there are always a lot of people ready to flush their money down the toilet."

"Hum... unless there's something else. Something you're not telling me."

"Look, Aless... sorry... I meant Doctor Durante, There's really nothing else. I was shocked myself when I saw someone buying Nattan strike 12 when the share closed

today at 13,90. Then I investigated where the offer was coming from, and I understood it all.”

“What did you understand? Please tell me.”

“Well, well, I can’t tell you everything. I’m just gonna tell you that Friendly Bank is plotting something against Nattan. But I can swear it to you they miscalculated it all.”

“If you say so... Oh... but look what’s coming? What can that be?”

Salutti doesn’t answer, he’s just as surprised as she is as to what is going on.

As a matter of fact, two messenger boys are delivering a white box. The box is pretty big, but strangely, looks rather light. The two boys put it down on a table, that was quickly set in front of Mancini, Salutti, Sturli and all the other managers. Then they present a note which Mancini grabs before anybody else. After reading it, he passes it on to Salutti, and gets up. Even today is wearing his usual brown. He calls around for silence and asks for a microphone.

“Thank you, everyone. You shouldn’t have. However, if you have chosen a gift, let me tell you, we deserve it. In fact, I can tell you I was expecting something of this sort. After all, we have always given everything of ourselves to you, we have always tried to deserve your loyalty, and I’m sure we have succeeded in that.”

A true Mancinian speech: self-celebration and presumption. In the tables around him, people start muttering. Sturli, the lawyer, whispers something in Salutti’s ear. “Did you know anything about this?”

“You mean the surprise? No, nothing.”

“Strange. Didn’t we tell all the employees to inform us about any initiatives they felt like taking during this dinner? And with the press here, tonight...”

“Don’t worry. It’s probably a gift from the Neapolitan promoters. They are big ones for gifts, you know.”

“But, if you look around, you don’t see much enthusiasm about this surprise. They all look kind of shocked.”

“Wow, since when have you become a psychologist?”

“Wouldn’t it be better to check first as to who sent the package?”

“All right, if you want, try to look for the messenger boys. But, come on, everything is under control. It’s not San Valentine’s night, after all, is it?”

“The night of what?”

“Oh come on, you don’t know? It’s the night Al Capone whacked all his rivals.

During a dinner. Some of his killers came out of the cake and shot everybody dead. Look, I’m gonna send you to Jack Fly for some lessons, you know, he’s a real movie freak.”

“Jack Fly? Why did you think of him, just now? And what about if it was him sending this package?”

“To give us a Christmas gift? I don’t think so. But since you’re so worried about it, just go and check it out.”

“Yes, but you, in the meantime, try to stop Mancini.”

And then you ask Alessandra again: “No news of Annuska?”

Alessandra mumbles a “No” and puts her hand on Salutti’s arm. “You know, all of this got me very excited. I wasn’t expecting such a well planned evening by Nattan.”

Salutti, who was about to go talk to Mancini, stops right there. Alessandra's hand has just sent shivers up his spine. After all, what can happen if Mancini opens that box before Sturli comes back?

"Oh, help! Bees!"

"Run!"

"What's going on?"

Mancini, while making his way out of the restaurant, spins around as if he were a ceiling fan. All the other guests have jumped up, too. Some are covering their faces, some try to find shelter under the tables, some try to get out of the door, and some pour water on themselves. Around everyone a buzzing of angry bees, angry for having been kept for so long inside a box.

"How is it going, Alessandra?" you, Jack, ask via the hi-tech earring.

"A total mess. People are going nuts."

"You? Any problem?"

"No, everything's fine. The repellent I applied is working just fine."

"Please, make sure someone reads the note. I, meanwhile, have called the ambulance, the fire department and the bee-keeper."

"Ok. I'm going to take some shots now. I hope nobody else is in position to do so, I want the exclusive scoop on this."

You burst out with laughter. "I don't think you need to worry, with those bees, even the most ruthless photographers have something else to think about, Alessandra. You're going to have the scoop and finally your newspaper is going to be willing to give me some attention."

"Just wait and see, Jack, this is something my chief is not gonna let go by. Please, let me go now and get down to work before a bee not informed of the fact that I'm a friend, starts stinging me..."

BORSE E MERCATI DECEMBER 22ND Edition

FRONT PAGE

10000 BEES "QUOTE" NATTAN

by Alessandra Durante

Twenty-five people had to be taken to the Emergency Room because of a box full of angry bees delivered to the Nattan Stock Exchange debut celebration party

"This is exactly how Nattan Bank operates: troublesome, rude, and willing to do anything to bring honey to the bank.. No rules, no limitations and any irregularities allowed overlooked by its managing staff. Willing to crash anyone and anything: both men and law. What are they about to do with their banks in Lugano and Milan? Why do they take their clients' money abroad? Why do they fire very skilled collaborators? What's behind the ill-famed 'special managements'? What is the

relationship between Nattan and a certain 'bio-tech' company in need of cash? Why is there a newsletter on the Internet recommending that brokers not sell, and clients not buy the Niscagi bonds placed by Nattan? To what extent do they have adequate funds to guarantee the bond loan?

This note was attached to a box containing tens of thousands of bees sent by someone, who remains anonymous, to the *Petit Prince* restaurant, where Marco Mancini and Giorgio Salutti, the former, the managing director and the latter, the general director of Nattan Bank, had organised the end-of-the-year dinner party, and also to celebrate the Stock Exchange debut of the bank group located in Via Santalmassi. The bees attacked the guests, most of them, employees of Nattan, but also several dignitaries from Milan; (Mr. Cortellazzi, the vice-director of the Consob and Mr. Caputo, police commissioner of the city of Milan); some company and rating agency executives; journalists and jet set personalities (actually, a minor jet set, here's hoping Nattan won't be disappointed by me pointing it out: in fact, besides a few personages, omnipresent whenever there's free food, we mainly noticed b-list starlets on the look-out for generous mentors.

The bees' attack was so violent and unexpected, that it took nearly after half an hour for someone to finally call for help: the fire department arrived with three bee-keepers, who successfully attracted the bees into a couple of beehives, ending the evening's bee-filled depredations.

At least 35 people were admitted to the Emergency Room at Fatebenefratelli Hospital for the stings they suffered. For the time being, we have no information of legal actions or damage requests from the unfortunate victims. On the way out of the hospital, we attempted to interview Police Commissioner Caputo, visibly shaken, with at least ten bandages on his face, but he refused comments. It is clear, however, that an investigation is inevitable.

The big question remains as to who could have prepared such an unpleasant gift and what is meant by the accompanying message?.

From general rumours, it seems that Nattan is about to launch a bond issue of a company called Niscagi which produces a cancer-fighting drug. From what the prankster's note says, it is likely that such a loan might not be backed by adequate funds, explaining, at least partially, why the bond issue will be placed in Luxembourg, where, as everyone knows, it is not necessary to publish an informational prospectus. And yet, something further and obscure seems to remain regarding the relationship between Nattan and its brand new Lugano branch.

We are, naturally, investigating and hope that others, who have the institutional power to do so, will follow us. We can't exclude the possibility, that the personality behind this bee attack might simply be a lunatic, and it would certainly be in Nattan's interest to clarify the content of the note. If, instead, our suspicions regarding its content prove to be true, it would undoubtedly be in everyone's interest, that the competent authorities take immediate action, in order to avoid another catastrophe for Italian investors, both public and private.

Jack Fly's house

9.30 a.m. December 22nd

At your general headquarters enthusiasm is tangible.

“Alessandra was great!” Céline says as she bustles into your house. “Have you seen the article? Pure dynamite!”

“Hey, since when did you started talking like one of the Dalton brothers?” Giovanni, who sticks his head out from behind the computer, ironically asks her.

“Since I discovered I’m engaged to Lucky Luciano.” Céline laughs and comes to embrace you. You begin kissing each other passionately until Francesca’s little cough brings you back to your senses. “Hem... there are kids around here.”

“Hey” Giovanni protests, “you are a kid!”

“Exactly” Francesca replies. “I’m perfectly aware of how familiar you are with porno web-sites, and that nothing can shock you, but I’m a simple girl who’s not used to this.”

“Come on, come on, silent now, the local news is coming on TV. Maybe they’ll say something.”

First they talk about inflation, then about someone who died at his place of work, also of the usual road-hogs, nothing that can add much to your own existence. But, wait a minute, as if conjured by an evil spell, Marco Shiface Mancini appears on the screen, and as never before his nickname seems to have been coined just for him. Today, he’s just literally covered with brown, puffy eyes, cheeks and forehead swollen by the stings, his face looks exactly like one of those soft and mushy pieces of shit, that demonstrate a great stomach and a diet rich in fluids and fibres.

One of the sharpest news anchormen, Giorgio Biondo, is interviewing him, but the journalist doesn’t even have time to formulate his questions, Mancini overflows like a river in Spring: “I absolutely deny the article published in *Borse e Mercati*. The attack we were victims of, last night, is clearly the action of a lunatic as the note with its outrageous claims amply demonstrates. The terrorist attack of yesterday is an attack not only on us, but the entire national banking system, and therefore, indirectly the Italian economy, the working world and its citizens. Today the world is less safe.

“Look at him” says Céline astonished “he’s so full of himself. He talks as if he was a victim of September 11th!”

“Hush, hush... let’s hear what the journalist says!”

“...the note talks of Nattan’s responsibilities in the management of its clients’ assets, it doesn’t mention anything about the bank syst...”

Giorgio Biondo has no time to finish when Mancini again interrupts him: “Of the false accusations contained in the claim I have already spoken to the investigative commission. Let me only remark that they are absolutely false.”

“Well, could you explain to me then, how the Niscagi bond placed in Luxembourg, and addressed only to institutional investors, such as funds or insurance companies, end up in your clients’ special managements?”

“How do you know that?” Mancini says almost jumping out of the chair. Then, he chokes back his reaction and adds: “I categorically deny it.”

“What can you tell me, then, about managing and taking your clients’ assets abroad?”

“Total nonsense which anybody can verify.”

“So, you’re saying that Nattan is clean...”

“Sparkling clean. We are a strong and healthy bank and will not be easily intimidated.”

“But someone is betting several million euro on your crash.”

Now you can see the veins in Mancini’s neck pumping. “Who told you that? Oh God forbid, this is crazy, you’re slandering us on public television! It’s a shame!”

Giorgio Biondo moves slightly back from the over flooding river, but the flow doesn’t stop: “Well, anybody can read it on the Italian Stock Exchange web-site...”

“All right, I just want to say to this, whoever he is, that he’s going to be very disappointed, if he thinks he can succeed in damaging us. We’ll come out of this battle as the winners.”

“So, what you’re saying, is that you don’t fear any consequences affecting your share value?”

“Absolutely not.”

At this point the camera moves in to a close-up of Giorgio Biondo, ending the interview: “In reality, from what we know, some consequences are already visible, but for more about that, we have Carlotta Veschi live from the Stock Exchange:” Céline, Giovanni and Francesca all look to one another with great apprehension, while the location shifts to Carlotta Veschi.

“Yes, Giorgio, you’re right, it seems that we already have some consequences.” At this announcement, all of you explode in a huge roar of satisfaction and it is you, who calms things down so as to be able to follow the reportage.

“... it was down 0,73 at ten o’clock. But right now, at 1.25 p.m. the share is being traded at 13.50 euro, with a likely further drop. Here, at the Stock Exchange, there are rumours about a possible Consob intervention. It seems that their oversight committee has been keeping an eye on the Niscagi bond for a while, because the issue seems far too high for a company like Niscagi, which is traded in the New Market, a market with very few companies. In fact, some brokers have found it rather strange that, someone, just a few days before the new bond issue, is interested in buying as many Nattan shares as possible, and, after that, reselling them violently for several million euro. We also need to mention last night’s episode at *Petit Prince*. We’ve been told, by very well informed sources, that the management and some financial promoters at Nattan, will receive assigned shares only, and I mean only, if the value on December 31st is over 12 euro. But for more information about this, please let me introduce you to Doctor Gianfrancesco Holly, the Italian correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal*, who will help us understand more.”

Holly is exactly how you would imagine him. A tall, thin guy, with soft blond hair and a blue tie the size of a napkin, with a slight Anglo Saxon accent that makes him immediately believable.

“What seems more likely is that there might be someone inside the bank who has private information and is using it to finalise a speculation.”

“You’re talking about *insider trading*, and if this is the case, it would be illegal” Carlotta says.

Holly, then, slightly wrinkles his forehead. “This is the reason the oversight committee is keeping an eye on things, but I don’t think the Consob have enough solid evidence so as to take any action.”

“Don’t you think that this bee episode could have been planned by a speculator, that in the shadow, somewhere, is trying to take advantage of the shares’ crash?” Carlotta inquires.

Gianfrancesco lifts one of his eyebrows: “Well, in that case he’ll lose his money, because I have a hard time believing that such a serious and complex reality as the financial market, could be influenced by something as trivial as this.”

“Here’s one who knows it all, as usual,” it’s your comment, as you turn the TV off.

“Yeah, sure, in the Stock Exchange millions have always been bet following a rumour!”

“That’s right: the share is already going down,” Céline comments.

“The problem is that we’re only a spit away from the end of the year,” you answer, thoughtful “And I’m starting to think that it will never go under 12 euro in such a short time. I’m sure Nattan has already started its counterattack.”

“Yes, but if the Consob were to intervene...” Francesca shyly suggests.

“Well, that would be great” you reply. “But are they going to do it?”

Right at that moment the phone starts ringing. It’s Alessandra.

“So, are you happy?” she asks you.

“No need to ask! Of course. I’ll always be grateful to you.”

“Oh, come on! My chief is grateful. I think with this scoop, we’ve sold a few thousands more of today’s edition.”

“So, you should be giving me something, then.”

“Yeah, sure!”

“Do you think the other newspapers will write about it?”

“If they covered it on TV, even just on the local stations, I’m sure all the newspapers will be interested. The problem is, that I’d like to be a step ahead of everybody else. Have you got something for me?”

“Nothing more than you already have. But wait, let me ask Giovanni. I’ll put the speaker phone on. “Giovanni?”

“Yes: the mailbox is jammed. Lots of interest from investors and promoters, but nothing from the authorities.”

“What about the envelopes? Have you delivered them, Céline?”

Céline looks at you not knowing what to answer.

“No, Alessandra, it wasn’t Céline who delivered the envelopes, it was Mirko...”

“Oh, why’s that?”

“Because Céline was busy with a lawsuit against Sturli&Sturli studio and couldn’t... but Mirko told me he delivered everything just fine.”

“Hmm... all right. That’s not much.”

“We have the recordings.”

“Yes, right. They are fundamental. Is there any possibility of proving they are originals?” Alessandra asks.

You take a little time to think about it, and then an idea pops in your head: “Well, as far as Salutti goes, you heard his voice at the restaurant and can easily recognize it.”

“Ok, that’s not 100% sure as evidence, but it could suit the purpose. But I’d like to keep the recordings for later on.”

“Couldn’t you write a generic article on the need for the restoration of dignity to the financial market, on the importance of having high morals?” Céline steps in.

“Yeah, sure. I could have the Pope or the Dalai Lama write it...eh?” Alessandra answers.

“Are you teasing me?” Céline asks her a little annoyed.

“That’s not it. We need something hotter to keep the attention on. Jack, you must give me an interview.”

“I don’t want to act openly.”

“You have to. Otherwise they might confiscate the newspaper.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, a few years ago a journalist wrote something about a bank taking money abroad. The bank was reported, but they are all still there. Instead, she and her paper went bankrupt because the bank asked the court for a restraining order.”

“And so, you want me to get in the middle of it?”

“Well, everyone must take his own responsibility.”

“I don’t know, I’ve got to think about it.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, I’ve just got to think about it, that’s all.”

“By the way, have you read the news-agencies?”

“No.”

“Well, check the Ansa web-site and read them. There is a bulletin from the Consob.”

“Yeah? What does it say?”

“That they won’t do anything.”

Jack Fly’s house, in bed 11.30 p.m. December 22nd

You’ve always wondered how it felt to have a cigarette *after*. But since you’re not a smoker, you’ve replaced that pleasure with something else: with fondling, chocolate, pizza, a movie. Now, that you are with Céline, the pleasure is just in talking. Her head is lying on your chest and you caress her hair, actually you’re more than caressing it, you’re giving her head a massage and thinking about those bastards at Nattan.

“Sometimes I feel it’s just a nightmare what’s been happening to me” you whisper.

“I know, but it happens more often than you think. Every day, somewhere, there are more and more victims of their own employers. Corruption, sexual harassment, exploitation...”

“Suicides, homicides.”

“The point is that a worker is not considered human, but a resource to exploit, a piece of meat to slaughter. That’s how the world is.”

“So, what you’re saying is that we should give up?” you ask.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. But you need to get involved in public and in person, and if you do so, then, there must be many more who follow you.”

“Many, huh..., well, for sure the Consob is not one of them. I pay 114 euro a year dues, which means that counting all the financial promoters, which amounts to eighty thousand, we are talking about 10 million euro they cash in on.”

Céline leans forward on her elbows and looks at you. You can see her breasts, soft and alive, among the folds of the bedcovers and get pleasantly distracted. She notices immediately. “Hey, hey... forget it. I’m serious! Maybe the Consob won’t do anything, and maybe, even the internal control bureau will do nothing, but there must be someone in this country who cares. It’s impossible that dishonest bank executives always get away with it. The press spoke about what happened, it was in the news, and we sent warnings and reports to everyone...”

“It’s just there’s too little time left before the end of the year. By the way, let me check the after hour share performance.”

“The after what?”

“The after hour. After the official market closes, there are still some trades done in different markets, the prices are not official but they give you an idea of tomorrow’s trend.”

“I understood a flat zero of that, but it’s ok, Jack.”

“I’m sorry, I just can’t remain idle.”

“If you need to do something with yourself, then kiss me.”

Céline takes your head in her hands and pulls you towards her. You kiss each other, and you would like that kiss to make you forget everything. You’d like to get lost, to lose your memory and overcome the pain... but you can’t, you’re not capable of it. Slowly you move away from her embrace and get up.

“Let me go check. I just can’t...”

“Wait, I’ll come with you.”

Naked, completely naked, in front of the computer you look carefully at the Nattan share value. Not so much of a change. After the initial drop the share remains at about 13,75. Certainly, tomorrow the press will speak about this, but to what avail? People get excited very easily and just as easily forget. How long will it take them this time?

Milan, Friendly Bank head office

7.30 a.m. December 23rd

Archimedes has nothing in common with the famous Sicilian philosopher: not a natural and authoritarian beard, not a pure white tunic, and forget about a body like a marble statue. He has a long thin nose, little round eyeglasses and thinning yellowish

hair on a round head that sits on top of two stooping shoulders. But he is a genius. His intuitions were of the highest order at Nattan, before they kicked him out, and are just as good now that he's at Friendly Bank.

Before going to your office you go to see him. He's not where he is usually seated, but next to the coffee vending machine. There's nobody else in the bank. You, Jack, and Archimedes, do have something in common, even if you're twice as big as him: both of you always get to the office ahead of everybody else.

"How will Nattan perform today?" you ask him right away.

"I wish I knew!"

"I want your opinion, Archie. Tell me the truth..."

"Well, as soon as the news of the bees trick made the press, I thought things were just going to be fine, but now, I'm not so sure anymore."

"Why?"

"Because the news is dead."

"What, what do you mean? Aren't today's newspapers talking about it?"

"Today? Today there's nothing."

"What do you mean nothing Let me see." You throw yourself onto the pile of newspapers. Nothing in the *Sole*, nothing in *Milano Finanze*, nothing in the *Corriere della Sera*, nothing in the *Repubblica*. And even nothing in the *Borsa e Mercati*. "It's impossible! Alessandra promised me an article."

Archimedes looks at you with a look of surprise and bewilderment. As if he was asking you how come you did not think about it in advance: "They could have asked the press to be silent on the matter."

"I can't believe it. It's absurd. Can you imagine newspapers just doing what a bank tells them. Freedom of information in Italy is sacred."

Archimede's look then, turns from surprise to disenchantment. "Oh, Jack, you're just so naïve. I really wonder how you've survived."

"I wonder that, too, sometimes."

"Come on, let's see how the trades are going?"

The thirty metres separating the vending machine and Archimedes's office feel more like three kilometres. Why didn't Alessandra write anything on the Nattan case? Why are all the other newspapers silent about it? Could it be possible that Mancini, Salutti and Sturli were able to shut everybody up? Archimedes sits down in front of his computer, enters the password and on the screen the information become accessible.

"Dead clam, I'd say. Actually, wait a minute, the share value seems to be going up. Now it's 13,85. Hey, Jack, it looks like we're losing the game here. Think about it, we could back off now and limit the damages."

And you, Jack, can't control yourself anymore: "I can't believe it. Jerks like Mancini and Salutti can get away with anything and still make a profit! The Consob just takes forever to do anything."

"Listen, Jack, you're really crazier than I thought then, if you truly believed in winning the put thanks to the Consob."

"But, what the fuck! You know, just last year I almost forgot to pay my membership to the Consob. That fucking 144 euro yearly, and I had forgotten. Then, one day, I

have coffee with a colleague of mine and he says: ‘The coffee is on you today, I’ve just paid the membership dues to the Consob and I’m broke’. Shit, the Consob! I ran to my office and called them. You know they were just about to expel me? They wouldn’t have even sent me an overdue notice or anything. Nothing, just expelled. Overnight and goodbye. Because I forgot to pay 144 euro. Here, we have people stealing millions and them, all happy, like it’s none of their business.” Archimedes smiles at you: “Jack, you’re telling me? But it’s always been like that, I don’t understand why you are so shocked. If you want to steal and get away with it, you have to do it big-time. If you steal a chicken they put you in jail, but the big-time smartasses, where are they?”

Milan, Friendly Bank **3.15 p.m. December 23rd**

After trying to reach her all day, finally Alessandra picks up her phone.

“What happened?”

“You tell me. I had the article ready, when my chief editor told me that he was not going to publish it. Just for safety’s, he said.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that the press has responsibilities toward the markets and its investors. The chief editor made it clear that, for the time being, it’s not wise to publish something, which can’t be backed up with evidence, and that it could also be very dangerous.”

“But how... What are you saying? Do you think this is just a creation of my own imagination? Alessandra, listen, You’re deceiving me and I don’t understand why.”

“Oh, please, Stop seeing traitors all around! Lets’ say that the chief editor assured me that, if you let me publish your picture and you take full responsibility for what you are doing, he’ll publish everything because the newspaper would have covered itself. To make a long story short, he asked me something more, but after all, isn’t that what I asked you, too?”

And you, Jack, are fuming. Once more, as you were about to strike, you’re forced to withdraw. And, once more, you are hurt by someone you trusted. Alessandra, on the other hand, is trying to explain to you: “Come on, Jack, let’s try to straighten things out. Why don’t you come over here?”

“No, I really don’t think so. After all, I’ve seen that all the other newspapers also have no interest.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen it, too. But Nattan is in the Stock Exchange and nobody dares make any allegations without the evidence to back it up.”

“What can I do, then?”

“Let me interview you” Alessandra says.

“Wait, wait, I’ve got a call on my mobile.”

“All right. I’ll be talking to you.”

You answer your mobile and hear: “We’re gonna smash you, Fly, yeah, we’re gonna smash you. Stop with all this bullshit or we’ll smash you.”

“Hello, who are you?”

“Who am I? I’m your conscience, Fly. Don’t you have a quite nice fiancée who would be very sorry to see something happening to you? Don’t you want to spare her the sorrow?”

“How do you know this number?”

“Fly, we know everything about you, even how much toilet paper you use to wipe your ass. Watch it.”

“You watch it! You know I can track the number you’re calling me from?”

“Yeah, yeah, sure. You see, Fly, you know nothing, you understand nothing, you should have kept the money and shut up. Instead you have to be the avenger. You can’t stay away from trouble.”

“That’s it! Fuck you!” you hang up.

Not easy, you’re almost shitting in your pants. Who are these people from Nattan Bank? How do they know your private mobile number?

Yeah, Mirko could have helped you with something like this. And you wonder whether it’d be a good idea to call him or not, and also from which telephone to call him. He made it really clear when he asked you to leave him out of this, but he’s a friend, after all.

As you leave the building, you look around. Is there really someone watching you? You walk towards the subway station and go downstairs. Out of the corner of your eye you seem to notice someone who could be following you. You turn abruptly to the left and stop there, pretending to be interested in a poster, there, you can’t be seen from the stairs. The person you thought was following you, is a refined man, who keeps walking past you and disappears up the escalator.

You head toward a phone booth, put the card in and dial the number... then, you hang up. No, if he really doesn’t want anything to do with all of this, it’s not fair to try to get him involved. But you must do something...

Your mobile starts ringing again.

“Hi, Jack. It’s Archimedes.”

“Did we lose everything?”

“No, no. Actually I have good news.”

“Tell me.”

“Nattan is dropping. It’s back at 13,30 and the sell orders are coming from City Bank in New York.”

“Yeah, the allies are on the way!” you say, always prone to get over-enthusiastic.

“I investigated a little and found out that these sales are being done on behalf of an American fund called Scagini.”

“Excuse me, can you repeat that..?”

“Scagini. Why, do you know it?”

“No, no.”

“Anyway, they’re doing us a big favour. They keep selling Nattan. They’re doing what I’m doing. With the option, they guarantee themselves the shares, they’ll later sell. It’s the same thing, just much bigger.”

Milan, Palazzo Sormani, Public Library
4.15 p.m. December 23rd

It was back in 1988 when, for the first and last time, you set foot in a library. You didn't go because you wanted to... but they, sort of obliged you, maybe it was for your dissertation, who knows what you were looking for. Today, it just popped into your head that you could go back, not so much for the desire to look at some newspapers, that would confirm for you what you already know, but for the silence, yes, for the silence. A greater silence, a silence you have no memory of.

And now you're in. For a brief moment you even thought they wouldn't let you: who are you? A simple financial promoter, a disco partyer, someone who buys hookers, involved in God knows how many plots, someone who let a worm like Sturli screw you. Out of here! Out! Instead, nothing. Maybe they didn't recognize you. Maybe the FBI hasn't posted your picture, yet. 'Stop this Asshole. Immediately!' Instead, that little man with a beard even took you to the room where they keep the old newspapers and taught you how to look for the years you're interested in.

And now, here you are. In front of you the folders of the *Mattino* from Naples, of the *Gazzetta del Sud*, of the *Corriere della Sera*. The years are 1970, 1971, 1973 and on up to today. You've also asked for the microfilms, as if you were planning to spend the next six months in the library. Well, it could be an idea, after all, it's silent and warm. And there are plenty of beautiful girls. Maybe some of them a little too young for you, Jack, but some others are just fine. You are already half asleep when you open the folder for 1974, and, no need to look any further Your attention is caught by a white piece of paper on which is written:

Agis Inc
Niscagi
CingiSA
Scagini

And then, there was listed even the Gancisi, the tractor company which was supposed to give your father, your mother and you...a living.

All these companies are anagrams of the same name.

All of them. And the name, the only one you can think of, it's always the same. It's him. Uncle Scignia. How can it be possible?

Is Scigna Mr. Sapone?

And Nattan, then?

And if Scignia is Sapone, and if Sapone owns all these different companies, and has his foot in Nattan, too, why is his brokerage company selling Nattan, instead of supporting them?

While you are assaulted by all these thoughts, you flip through the newspapers. Here are the articles about uncle Scignia, and here the ones about Sapone... In the '80s, he was investigated regarding some credit companies in Switzerland... In the '90s, there

was a case of fraudulent bankruptcy... In the year 2000, it was the crash of a trust company called Nagisci, with a loss of 350 million euro...

But then, everything quieted down, everything appeased. After a couple of weeks, nobody was complaining any longer. The associations on behalf of the investors went into lethargy and the newspapers went to sleep. And here and there, a new hospital, "an incubator of new companies", a resort came to life. Everything so much praised. Everything so generously financed by Mr. Sapone. And not a single picture of him and no-one who'd ever seen him in person.

You take out your mobile. The librarian looks at you with contempt. You get up and leave. You send Alessandra a text message: "Do you want evidence, Alessandra? Run the anagram of the already investigated companies owned by Saponi and you'll have Niscagi. Will that be enough for your chief editor to prevent another financial crash?"

160 key entries exactly.

Jack Fly's house

6.30 p.m. December 23rd

"We have to succeed, Céline, I have to! At this point there's too much at stake. If I lose, I'll lose everything."

"What do you want to do?"

"I want to go to Alessandra's paper, give them the originals of the recordings and let her interview me. She said the chief editor will publish the article."

"I agree with practically everything, apart from you bringing in the recordings. In my opinion, they are keeping an eye on you and what happened yesterday confirms it."

"I have the same feeling, too... but so, what shall I do?"

"Listen, will you take your car?"

"Yes, of course."

Her eyes shine. There's something in all of this that gets her excited. Maybe the same thing that gets you excited, too. And in her, as much as in you, there is the feeling, the pride of being on the right side, to be fighting for the right cause. "I have a plan. Give me your car, I'll wear a hat and a jacket, and set them on the wrong track. And you, after a while, take the subway and go to the newspaper.

"It sounds too dangerous" you say.

"Dangerous? Why? I'll just drive around the city center, back and forth for a couple of hours. Just to give you enough time to deliver the stuff to Alessandra and speak to the chief editor."

You'd like to dissuade her, find a reason to stop her from doing something like that, but Céline, with the help of Francesca is already changing her clothes. And shortly after, she turns into a good looking man with a hat. You look at her as she turns around to face you, and you notice something is off: "Well, if you really want to look, at least a little bit like me, you should be wearing high-heel shoes..."

"Oh, Gosh, you're right, what can I do now?"

“What a coincidence” you answer, “I just happened to have a pair of high-heel shoes right here in my house and... I think they are your size... a 38, right?”

Céline regards you rather dubiously: “Wow, how come you have a pair of high-heel shoes in your house? Do you like dressing up as a woman when I’m not around, or one of your bitches just forgot them?”

“The second one.” You reply, laughing.

“Ah, and who’s the little bitch?”

“You. You left them here months ago. Remember? The evening before we had a dinner party, and then the next morning we went skiing.”

Céline relaxes, smiles, comes closer to you and hisses in your ear: “So, you called me a bitch...”, she pinches you hard enough to almost make you cry. “You have no idea how much fun I’m having” she says, while putting your coat on. “First I dress up to go and talk to those big guys over at Nattan. Now I dress up like a man to make them lose your track. I thought the priority for financial promoters was to have a horribly boring life. I had no idea your job could be so exciting.”

And your answer comes in the form of a wink. The door closes behind her. You go to the bedroom to check on the stuff: the CD and the MP3..., yeah, after all, Céline was right. If they are spying on you, and they definitely are, they also know of your contact with the newspaper *Borse e Mercati*, and could try anything to prevent you from getting there. Céline will take them on the wrong track and you can move around easily. And then, it will be over for them. The newspaper will have to publish the story and, the other papers will get interested as well. And after that, the Consob, the Bench, the police... well, somebody will be able to stop them.

Right then your mobile starts ringing.

“Hello?”

“Hi, it’s Alessandra... Are you com...?”

An explosion.

An explosion so loud as to make all the windows shake and your blood freeze in your veins. You throw away your mobile without turning it off. “Jack, Jack, what happened?” Alessandra screams on the other end of the line. But you’ve run over and are leaning out of the window, you know your car was parked just below on the street.

You scan the street looking for it but it’s nowhere to be seen.

You run downstairs, almost fly down the stairs as if you are in a dream. In your head you see everything passing by, like in a film: what you’ve gone through, what you’re living in and what your future is holding for you. Whose car is that one covered in smoke? But you know, you know all too well, even if you can’t help asking yourself. How are you going to live from now on?

In the street people are crowding around the smoking up car, keeping at a safe distance. You make your way through and run to the car, but at two-metre distance you have to stop. The car in flames is completely hidden by the smoke. There’s too much heat. You can’t get any closer. You look around desperately searching for Céline’s familiar face. You hope to spot her in the crowd. Why shouldn’t she be there, after all? Why does she have to be in the car, after all? But Céline is not in the

crowd. She could have just walked away. In the meantime curious people start getting closer to you. You feel them pressing on you. Why can't it be that Céline is one of them?

Someone pats you on the back.

You turn around. Is it her?!

"Who was in the car?"

No, it's not her. It's Mirko. Your heart gives way. You hug him as you feel your heart going to pieces, and tears start rolling down your cheeks. "Who was in the car?"

Mirko asks you again.

"Céline" you reply, with hardly any voice left.

"Goddamn it!" he hisses.

"Oh my God!" and you burst into tears. "What happened? "They killed her!"

"Oh, come on," Mirko says. "Maybe a short circuit."

"They wanted to kill me..."

"That's bullshit" Mirko whispers to you, while his hug gets tighter. He just wants to comfort you, protect you. But suddenly, something hard pushes painfully against your ribs. "Don't do anything stupid. Let's go upstairs."

Jack, please, don't feel like an idiot now, if you don't immediately realise that what's pushing against your rib cage is a gun. Someone, who's never felt it before, can even imagine the feeling. But now, don't waste too much time thinking about it. Go upstairs, hurry.

"Come on Jack, hurry! The police will be here any minute now and it will take them no time to find out who the car belongs to and where the owner lives."

And you, Jack, fly upstairs, thinking of Giovanni and Francesca. You'd like to warn them, but how? Céline was right about him, too, when she told you not to trust him.

Mirko kicks the door open. Francesca and Giovanni, still shocked by the sight of the car, are looking out of the window, and Mirko takes them by complete surprise.

"Don't move guys and nothing will happen."

"But, Mirko..." Francesca dares saying.

"No 'buts', Francesca. And you, Giovanni, come here. Don't get me angry, the gun is loaded."

While Mirko keeps the gun aimed at all three of you, moving it from one of you to the other, Giovanni walks over to him. His eyes are empty, he moves like a robot and reminds you of the night you first met him, the night his father killed himself. He looks at you, begging for comfort, for help. You gesture him to stay calm. Once Giovanni is within Mirko's reach, Mirko takes out a pair of handcuffs. He locks one to Giovanni's left wrist and then, approaching Francesca he handcuffs her, too. He can grab both of them with just one hand, while with the other, still holding the gun, he's aiming at you. He gets close to the heater and locks the other end of the handcuffs.

"You're set for now. Sorry guys, but I have some very important business to take care of with our friend Jack, and you'd better stay out of it, all right?"

Francesca and Giovanni are speechless.

“Ok, Jack, it’s up to you, now. Where are the recordings? You said the last copy was here in your house.”

“Which recordings?”

Mirko pushes the gun harder into your rib cage, and this time it really hurts. “All right, all right... in the bedroom,” you can hardly answer him.

It takes eight seconds to go from the hallway to your bedroom. What are you going to do, Jack? Forget about trying to take the gun away. So, on your way to the bedroom, you take on a very melodramatic tone. “Why did you deceive me, Mirko? How long has it been going on?”

“Jack, you’re a real dummy. I’ve never deceived you,” Mirko hisses, while he ties one of your hands to the leg of the bed. “I was simply recruited by Nattan Bank to follow you. And that’s what I did. Since when? Since the very beginning. I’m not sure that they knew we used to know each other, but I think they gave me the job because of that, because I knew you. I came to the hospital and it was a lie that I had to receive some kind of treatment. It’s routine, Jack, nothing personal. But now I have to stop you no matter what. I’d rather wanted things to be different, but you, you see, you wouldn’t stop and listen to me.”

“I’m listening now, Mirko..., why are you doing this? Your bosses are finished any way, and even if the paper won’t publish anything, there are still the recordings you sent.”

“Are you really sure, Jack?” Mirko smiles. “What makes you think I sent them?”

“What do you mean?” you ask, suddenly frightened.

“Nothing, nothing, Jack, just forget it. Give me the recordings and I’ll try to save your ass. Maybe I’ll help you run away.”

Yes, it’s clear. “You didn’t send them, did you? You never sent the envelopes!”

“Well, obviously I didn’t. I didn’t even record any conversations with Esposito, I didn’t get in touch with Annuska, I did not go to the internal control bureau. Do you think I’m stupid? I had to win your trust, that’s all, I had to make you believe I was working for you.”

“And what did you do? What did you do with the recordings?”

“Enough, I’ve had it. I’m the only one here who can ask things. Where are they? Come on, I have no time.”

You look around. “They are not here!” you cry.

“What do you mean? Look more carefully!”

“There’s nothing here. They were here a minute ago.”

“Look again!”

“But there’s nothing to look for. They were here, on my bed. I left them here before going downstairs and now they’re gone.”

Suddenly the thought of the gun that you bought over at that store on Borseri Street comes to you. It’s very close, no further than a couple of metres, but too far to be able to get to.

By now you can hear the police sirens approaching.

Mirko, raising his voice loud enough for Francesca and Giovanni to hear, says: “All right Jack, and you infantry, too: you wanna play? Ok, let’s play. I’m gonna count up to five. Either you give me the recordings or I’ll shoot you all dead.”

He goes back and forth between the two rooms always pointing the gun. This time, you really don’t know which way to turn. There’s neither the CD nor the MP3. You have no clue to what happened. You’re running out of time... In that very moment, your brains is at work, frantically, and God knows why, but you suddenly recall something you had long forgotten, your father’s gun. Yeah, that’s where you put it. Under the right foot of the box spring. Is it possible? When did you move here? Fifteen years ago? And you never changed the box spring since then? No, never. Unconsciously, you turn abruptly toward the bed, but Mirko sees you. Damn it. “What is it, what are you looking at?”

“Nothing” you reply.

“What do you mean nothing?” Mirko says as he comes closer.

Think, think, use your brain. “No, I just thought that maybe the CD could be under the covers, or the pillows...”

“That’s easy.” And Mirko lifts the cover and throws it on you. It lands right on top of your head. You can’t see a damn thing. You can only hear Mirko giggling: “Hey, feel comfortable under the tent?” And then, “Nothing, there is nothing here. There is fuck all. So, where were we at? Yeah, one... two...”

“Fuck, guys, tell him where they are!” you yell from under the cover, while with the other hand, you anxiously try to find the gun.

“...three...”

There it is. In a plastic bag, stuck to the box spring with scotch tape. You’re able to just release it with one hand. “Why don’t you talk? Hey guys, he’s gonna kill us, tell him where the briefcase is!” you scream with all the strength you’ve left. “We don’t know, fuck, we don’t know!” both Giovanni and Francesca reply simultaneously. Taking advantages of the cover on top of you, you hurriedly tear the plastic away from the gun.

“...four...” Mirko resumes his countdown.

Driiin... The phone starts ringing. Everything comes to a halt, even you. Mirko moves to the living room where the answering machine is. The machine goes off: *This is Jack Fly’s answering machine. I’m not home, but if you are a nice girl or a client, please feel free to leave a message after the beep. Otherwise forget it. I’m not gonna call you back.*

You had stopped just for a moment and now, resume working frantically at tearing the plastic.

Beep, the sound of the answering machine.

The gun won’t work. It’s impossible. After all, more than thirty years have gone by... *‘Hello, it’s me Alessandra Durante. Thanks for the recordings. I got everything. Tomorrow you’ll read it all in the paper.’*

You don’t know, but you can guess that in the other room, Mirko is looking around, petrified. You throw the cover away and you, too, are petrified. Hidden by the

bedspread that had fallen to the ground across you, you're holding the gun in your hand.

And then, after a moment of uncertainty, Mirko smiles: "Good, Guys. I don't know how you did it, but congratulations. You fried me. Too bad you won't be able to tell anyone. Sorry. Goodbye."

He looks around again, as if trying to find a reason for what is happening. Or better, for what *hasn't* happened, when you start screaming "Stop! I Can't take it anymore. Stop the killing, you killed Celine, you bastard!"

"What the fuck are you screaming for, Jack? Shut up!" Mirko yells, as he comes into the bedroom to kill you. It's a scream that breaks your ears, a scream that contains Mirko, Francesca, Giovanni, Alessandra, Céline...all the world and all the shit you got yourself involved in because of Nattan.

It's only a split second. Just enough time to face one another for the last time. Neither of you can believe it.

A shot is fired and hits Mirko, who falls to his knees, puzzled.

Your father's gun, thirty years after having taken his life away, just saved yours. And, as if in a dream, the phone starts ringing again and the answering machine goes off.

You can hear Alessandra's voice: *'Hey, guys... is everything ok? What was that gunshot? Shall I worry? Guys... hello... guys!'*

"Everything's fine Ale, ok, tell me how you did it?" Giovanni answers, raising his voice so she can hear him.

Alessandra's voice picks up that sound typical of answering machines: *"I've overheard everything through Jack's mobile. We were talking when, after that terrible burst he must have thrown it away but the line was still on. Please bring me the recordings now otherwise we have to say goodbye to the article!"*

You look for your mobile, it was under the bed. Alessandra has hung up. Mirko is on the floor. The blood has stopped streaming from the hole in his chest.. He's extremely pale, but not any paler than you, Jack. In ten minutes you've seen your girlfriend murdered and you killed a man. You throw up on the bed, and now, all these people crowding into your house, policemen, medics, a doctor, and you ask if you can go pee.

"Where are you going?" a policeman, dressed in camouflage like a marine, asks you. And you think, let's hope at least he won't use a leash with me.

"To the bathroom, if you don't mind."

"Ok, but leave the door open."

As you move toward the bathroom, you brush past Giovanni and Francesca. Giovanni gestures you to come closer: "In the dirty laundry bag".

"What?"

But Giovanni is already looking away.

You go into the bathroom. The dirty laundry bag is there, but you pee first. You do it, shake it and close the door. Then you flush the toilet and move to where the bag is.

You're almost afraid to open it.

The CD, the MP3... everything's in there.

You're startled. You pick them up and go to the living room. "Did you put them in there?"

Giovanni and Francesca look at one another in a mix of innocence, complicity and idiocy. "Yes, we did."

And then you explode: "What kind of jerks are you! He was gonna kill us! Do you realize that? You're crazy! You should have told me, you fucking jerks!"

Two policeman hurry to hold you back. They would need four of them to keep you still with how much rage you feel, a rage that comes from exhaustion; and you could just throw yourself out the window, or kiss them, or kill them, you could just bite a ear off one of the policemen who's holding you. You're in a total haze.

Then, suddenly the phone starts ringing and you freeze.

You think maybe you should answer before the machine picks up, but you don't have the energy.

The homicide lieutenant picks up the receiver. He remains silent for a few seconds and then hands it over to you. "It's for you."

"Fly. Hello. I'm here downstairs. I'd like to see you. Is that possible?"

That voice.

"Who's speaking?"

"I'm sure you know."

"But..."

"Don't worry. I've spoken to lieutenant Scarpia. He's one of my men. Come down."

That accent.

"Ah... take the recordings with you, please."

You lift your eyes and meet those of the lieutenant, who nods at you and hands you the briefcase with the recordings in.

Two minutes later, on the street

A huge black limo silently pulls over in front of your house. A long car-door opens making a faint sound. "Come inside, Jack, it's cold out."

That voice cuts through you like a sharp sword. It's a warm, soft voice and the accent unmistakable. It's the accent of your hometown.

"Come, come Jack, get in."

So you do it, and the door closes behind you smoothly as if it were a blade on a piece of velvet. On the other seat, someone you met, thousands of kilometres from here and more than 30 years ago, in what was your house then. He was the one doing most of the talking with your father, while your mother was busy taking care of you, who was already an obnoxious boy.

Yes, it's me, unbelievable, no?

"Come on Jack, now give me the recordings. All right? What happened to Mirko?"

The first man you've killed. Don't worry, he was just a jerk. But don't sit so far away, come closer, let me get a look at you."

You know who I am, you just want to take some time... You look at me from where you sit but don't move any closer...

"Come on Jack, you know who I am."

"It's impossible."

"Why Jack? Everything's possible."

You try to get out of the limo, but you can't.

"The doors are locked and I'm the only one who can open them."

I feel sorry for you, Jack, when I see you bury your head in your hands and ask me:

"Why?"

"Why what, Jack?"

"Why are you here?"

"Because, I've always followed you, Jack, and now I'm old and tired."

"Why have you been following me?"

"Please, calm down, my son. I've been doing it because I've known you since you were a kid."

"Since I was a kid..." you repeat mechanically.

I know the way you feel, it's like being in a dream. "So..."

"Talk to me Jack, please talk to me."

But you don't want to concentrate, you don't want to think.

"I knew it... Sapone and all his companies: Niscagi, CingiSa, Agis Inc, Gancisi..."

They were all the same word..."

"Yeah."

"What about Nattan?"

"I don't own much of Nattan, but I own the right people. The people I need to do what I want done."

"Why did you do it?"

"What?"

"You said you've followed me all this time..."

"Yeah."

"Since you killed my father?"

"I didn't kill your father, Jack, believe me. I trusted him. The system killed him."

And then, again, you're astonished. Doesn't it ring a bell? They are the exact same words you said to Giovanni.

"How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"You know everything, even the words I use."

"I told you, Jack, I've been following you for all this time."

You feel like you're going to explode, Jack, or maybe just give up. So, is this the feeling of someone who's just discovered that he's been used? Let's see what you'll do, but if I think, knowing you, you'll...

"Go fuck yourself" you scream and throw yourself at the car door, ramming it with your shoulder and kicking at it. "Open the door, you damn bastard! Open the door, asshole!"

And I let you scream, Jack: you're right to be pissed off. And then you turn around and face me. I know you won't hurt me, but I'd better be careful. Between you and me a face takes shape. A face you should remember, Jack.

"Please, Jack. This is Santo. I think you remember him."

"Yes" Santo says, smiling. "We met in Paullo. Sorry if we gave you a rough working over..."

You move as if you want to punch him, but he blocks you. He's both delicate and firm in his movements. "Ok, now, calm down, all right?"

You wriggle, grind your teeth and flail for a bit, and then you quiet down.

"Let him go, Santo, thanks. I know how he's feeling, I would be just as pissed."

"It was you then... why did you have to burn my films?"

"That wasn't me. It was just a stupid idea one of them had. You know how bad guys are. They like fucking around. Anyway, the guy who did it, doesn't work for me any longer... well, he doesn't work, period."

"So, it's really you."

"Yes, it's me, your uncle. Uncle Scignia, the asshole who killed your father."

"... the asshole who killed my father..." you murmur.

"Let me try to explain to you. I did not want the Gancisi to go bankrupt. I was caught in the middle myself. The money you'd given me, I truly invested it. I wanted to do something good for our town, but then..."

"But then what?"

"Jack, listen, I don't like beating around the bush. What do you want me to say? That it was the failure of my principle intention to do something honest, that took me in a different direction? Or, maybe, you want to hear that, I also created wealth, that I also have rules, that I did something good and continue to do it, and would like to do something good for you, too?"

Ok, Jack., I look at you from my seat in the back of the limo and you already understand me. I know. Even now, overwhelmed by the situation, your brain is already at work, you're already thinking about something and so I go on: "We are two of a kind, Jack. This is why I wanted to sound you out."

You suddenly become alert: "Sound me out? Why?"

"I wanted to make sure that my opinion of you was correct. That you knew how to defend yourself and counterattack. That you had the balls to resist, to go on."

"And do you think I have them?"

"Yes, you do. You're exactly like I'd expected you to be. You are like I wanted you to be. This is why..."

"This is why, what?"

No, wait, maybe it's still too early.

"You know I deal with a lot of things."

"I know *Sapone* does."

"Well, not much of a difference there. Your uncle Scignia and Mr. Sapone have the same style, only Scignia was a bit more naïve and had to disappear. Sapone, instead, did much better. He bought companies in the States and Europe. Sometimes they did well, other times not. And I've always tried to help people out."

“Buy them out, you mean. You really think you can buy whoever you want, isn’t that it?”

“Don’t judge me if you don’t know. The Gancisi bankrupt, the one that made your father do what he did, wasn’t my fault. It was the banks’, and when I said no to their request to become shareholders in the company, they asked me to pay back all the loans. Up until then the company was doing great.”

“Sure, sure. What about Switzerland?”

“A bit of bad luck there, too. Yeah, what I did with the clients’ money was not to invest in stocks, but instead I bought real estate in Bulgaria, India, the Czech Republic... Everything would have been just fine if it wasn’t for that fiscal law, instituted back in 2001, where the Italian government allowed people to bring back to the country money they had abroad, avoiding having to pay taxes. And at that point, far too many clients asked for their money back and a statement wasn’t enough.”

“A false one, anyway.”

“If that fiscal law had passed only a year later, nobody would have ever noticed a thing, and everyone would have made profits. However, from the sale of the real estate I’d bought, I earned 900 million euro from the 150 I had originally invested. When I got the money, after 15 months, I sent 230 million euro to the liquidator of the Suisse company and each one of my clients was reimbursed.”

“What a gentleman. So, not only did you get away safe even that time, but I bet anything, that you also feel yourself to be a sort of benefactor.”

“Of course, I do. Why not? In the end everybody made money, thanks to me.”

“You got your share, too, didn’t you?”

“That’s only fair.”

“Let’s get back to us, now. What about the Niscagi? What do you have to say?” you ask me.

“When you own a private equity fund worth 500 million euro available to invest in companies in need of cash, many come to pay you a visit, I can swear to you.”

“What are you talking about? The Scagini American fund?”

“Right. I became the shareholder in a bio-tech company going through a hard time, but researching a treatment for people with cancer. Then I bought myself a slice of Nattan, especially the upper management. Which is, believe me, a cheaper and safer way to become the person who controls the company.”

“Were you aware I was working at Nattan, or was it just by chance, that you found out that one of its promoters, was the son of the man who killed himself because of you?”

“You want the truth, Jack?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then you should be aware that I’ve always followed you and, somehow, always guided you, without you being aware.”

“What are you saying?”

“How come, just a few months after your graduation, they offered you a Master in Finance scholarship, in Milan? And how come, after two weeks, you ran into the

general manager of Banca Modestini who offered you a job? And, by the way, do you remember how you started working at Nattan?"

"Enough, enough. I'm disgusted and humiliated."

"But, Jack, that's the way it is. I've always followed you, in the shadow, and always praised you. And do you know why? Because I knew that regardless of the many things we have in common, I knew you would have fought me. Bottom line, I appreciate people who fight me, more than those who always say yes, who always agree with me only because they are afraid of me. Your fellow Cabrini, for example, I've always liked him because I feel close to him. I am someone who wants law and justice, too."

"You?"

I made you smile, but if you smile, it's only because you don't understand.

"You see, Jack, you know me only from what you've read in the papers. But, just think for a minute. Who are the real criminals, here? I keep my executives on a short leash."

"What's this got to do with anything? What good do you do?"

"Let me tell you one thing I do, at least I redistribute wealth among those who are less fortunate. Yes, make fun of me. I did more for our hometown, and the people who live there, than all the politicians and banks put together. And then, with me, if an executive acts improperly, well, he's out. In other banks he gets a promotion. In what you probably call, a legal system, someone who steals remains in his position forever, with justice actually incapable of doing something. Have you ever heard of a bank executive, who gets fired by his own bank, on the ground of stealing? Or maybe putting a sign up: Don't trust this man. Don't give him your money. He is a thief. Never. Instead, with me, they hardly have time to make me suspicious before they're out, on the ground, with nothing left."

"Or *under* the ground" you say.

"Sure, even under. Why not? Don't you think it's justified? Were you selling the junk bonds, Jack?"

"You tell me, uncle."

"I know you didn't. What do you use to say all the time? First the client's interest, then the bank's and, finally yours. Yeah, but how many of you were just selling them anyway, perfectly aware of how risky they were? Well, don't you think that someone who sells that kind of shit, knows exactly what he's doing? So, what can we do about that? Shall we go to the Attorney General? Or, maybe, please, allow me to laugh, we'll try to get the Consob involved, so that then everybody will make fun of us? Or, maybe, we could just get rid of him, so he gets what he deserves and we prevent further damages?"

And you, Jack, you can't help but be startled again. You are wondering how it is possible that he knows everything, even your own words.

"Yeah, but how do you know all of this? How do you know my thoughts and words? You even knew I was going to Paullo that day, and I never said a word to anyone. It's as if you followed me with a hidden videocamera all these years, but we are not in a TV reality show."

“How do you know? Who can say we haven’t been following you all these years with videocameras and tape recorders? Who can say, instead, that it is just because when two people are bound together, a bond which is beyond comprehension, nothing can be done, you can’t run away.”

You are speechless, aren’t you?

“You and me are the same. I know and you know. I’ve had you followed all these years and you just confirmed that, day by day. Yeah, maybe you think we’re on opposite sides, but it’s no true. We are on the same side, the side of people who take things seriously, who don’t bullshit around and waste time blubbering. And I’m sure, Jack, you understand what I’m saying.”

You can’t reply, Jack, you can only listen. So, I resume: “You shouldn’t worry about anything. Mirko is gone, too bad for him. Although he was from our hometown, he wasn’t that great a guy anyway. After all, he was willing to turn you in for money... a former schoolmate, how disgusting! Don’t worry, there will be no fuss about it. It was self-defence. You won’t even have to go to the police station, my lawyers will take care of that, they are the best around. All right, then, there is Céline. I know you’re thinking she got killed, but sorry, I’ve got nothing to do with that. If there was a bomb, it wasn’t me. But I’ll be honest with you, I don’t think there was. They don’t do something like that if they want to get rid of you, they do it more subtly. What kind of fucked up people are they? I think it was an accident. Mirko had to take care of the recordings getting on fire before anyone at the paper could put a hand on. I know, it hurts. But, you’ll see, maybe it’s all for the better. She was the kind of woman who wouldn’t shut up... she wanted to get involved, she was a lawyer... Well, a female lawyer, not just a lawyer. No, Jack, you need someone else, you need a woman who takes care of the house, who breeds your children, because you’re meant to have children and many of them. You need someone who minds her own business. We’ll find you one, and a beautiful one, too, of course, because I know you like nice things.”

You feel uncomfortable and I realize that. “What are you doing? Running my life for me?”

All right then, I’m just gonna tell you.

“No, Jack, I don’t want to run your life, I wanna be part of it. I’d like you to come and live with me. All of this was meant to make sure you’re my rightful heir.”

“What?”

“Yes, I have no children and you’d be the perfect son...”

And now, Jack, no more will to escape and you just sit there, your jaw slacks, and sorry, but you look almost idiotic. Poor kid, how many more years you have to live, how many more things you have to see.

“Listen, I want to give you all that’s mine because you are like a son to me.”

And now you finally wake up: “A son whose father you killed.”

“A son I’d like to give a father back to.”

“So, you want me to become your accomplice, is that it?”

“You are, Jack, you already are. You are my accomplice, you’ve always been during all these years, whether you wanted it or not, you’ve always done what I thought was

best for you. And now, it's only a matter of accepting it, along with all the advantages, the responsibilities, and something else..."

"What?"

I take your hand, Jack. Let me take your hand, Jack.

"My love as a father."

You leave your hand in mine for a long time, and at some point you squeeze it. Then you let go.

"Well, as always, your offer is of the kind that doesn't take no for an answer."

"Jack, please. Think about it. I told you everything and for a reason: so you know who I am and where I stand."

"Well, thank you."

"This means that I told you all there was to know about me. Things beyond what my closest collaborators know. No other human being knows this much."

"No other human being, you mean *living*?"

"Yeah."

"I see. I don't have much of a choice, then."

Good, Jack. You're always so good at getting to the point. But this time, it's me, who doesn't want to get to the point. I again step back, away from you, I don't want to impose myself. I look out of the car window but all I want to do, is hold your hand in mine. "Jack, my son... I know you well and I want you with me. I know you could give a lot to my organisation, and could get a lot in return. I'm getting old and wouldn't want to see all of this gone to waste. My assets are worth more than one billion euro. But I don't wish to force you. Just think about it and let me know. Nothing will happen to you. I could never do anything bad to my son, regardless of what he does. But remember, you have a huge responsibility towards the people you love. Today you lost one, Céline. Maybe, you were just not careful enough in making sure nothing would happen to her. So, if you say no, I'll give you a hug and we'll never see each other again. But promise me that you'll always take care of the people you love, Francesca, Giovanni, Alessandra, and that you'll never do anything to jeopardize them and their lives. Will you promise me?"

I know what you're thinking, Jack...

"I know one can't go beyond certain limits without being killed. And you, you are my limit. But if I tell you no, what's gonna happen to Mancini, Salutti, Esposito and Sturli?"

"They'll get what they deserve."

"You'll kick them out? Have them arrested?"

"Esposito and Salutti will pay dearly for having deceived me. Thanks to the recordings I got from Mirko, I've come to know what they did. Instead of taking my clients to Nattan Bank, they were taking them to CBT SA."

"What about Mancini and Sturli?"

"I'll give them a better position. They did a good job. They sounded you out for me to discover what you were capable of."

"They didn't know about us?"

“No, they knew nothing, and if you want them to pay, come with me, join my family, be my family, and you will. If you want to be the General Director of Nattan Bank, it’s done, I don’t care about them, I care about you.”

“It’s strange, but I feel perfectly comfortable in this car-living-room. It’s warm and welcoming, did you know that? It’s the first comfortable place in a long time where I can finally sit for a few minutes. It’s true, uncle Scignia. I feel disgusted and would like to fight back, but I’m tired, terribly tired and I need a break. I know I can’t fight you anymore, it’s useless. People, like you, will never be completely defeated. You know, you have a reason to exist, that is to show the good that otherwise would be forgotten. You’re so full of shit, uncle Scignia, that you are offering my own victory to me, the head of Mancini, Salutti and Sturli, but at what price? To admit I failed and come with you. And what if I were to come with you and, become your son? Maybe you would make me do what you do: some charity, too, a little good here and there, but just a little, for the promoters, for the banks, in exchange for money and power. Then, what else do you have to offer me, uncle Scignia?”

“I’m not gonna answer you, Jack, but let me remind you of something you might have forgotten.”

“Tell me .”

“Your financial bet on Nattan. You’re about to win, only few days are left and you know, I’m helping you out...”

“I realise that.”

“A call would be sufficient, to place the order to buy as much Nattan as possible, and make the shares sky-rocket...”

“I know, uncle Scignia. You see, you can do everything, you can read people’s minds, you can shift the markets at your will... you are like God. So... why don’t you just do it?”

“Call it a welcome gift, Jack.”

“Or a goodbye token?”

“Yes, or a goodbye token.”

The first snow flakes started falling on the city of Milan. People hurry to do the last Christmas shopping. From the big black limo a man gets out , and slowly walks toward the burning skeleton of a Maserati, that even the snow can’t hide, melting as it touches the scorched metal. There is a strong smell of burned flesh. The man brushes past the car, slightly slowing down. The police is leaving the scene and the man keeps walking home. The limo, silently rolling on the wet asphalt, drives away in the opposite direction.

Hey, Jack, you will always have to watch your back and that of the people you care for, and just keep fighting your daily battle to survive. But, after all, isn’t that what we all do?

Epilogue

January 5th 2005

Somewhere in the Caribbeans

7.10 a.m. local time, 1.00 p.m. Italian time

“What are you doing Jack?”

“I want to watch the news.”

“What do you care? Nattan has closed the year at 11,9. You won, Jack.”

“Yes, but I love to hear it discussed, and maybe, they’ll say something additional.”

“Ok, but please, keep it low.”

‘And now please let’s hear from Giorgio Biondo, our correspondent from the Milan Stock Exchange.’

‘Good morning and Happy New Year to everyone! As we have been telling you over these last few days, the drop in value of the Nattan share, seemed to be only the latest in the troubles the bank and its management were going through. The management had no right to cash the Nattan share since, on December 31st, it was worth only 11.9. Last night, Nattan has been discovered to be responsible for one of the worst scams in Italian financial history, which luckily has been prevented just a few days from its complete success. In fact, a huge bond issue of Bio Niscagi has been blocked, saving the investments of thousands of people. It seems that the money they would have invested in the Niscagi bond issue, was not meant to finance the research toward a drug for cancer, but more likely, to save the balances of several European companies and two American companies, somehow connected to Bio Niscagi. The bond placement was done with an ‘illegal’ management arrangement, called ‘special management’, which allowed the bank to allocate the bonds to their clients’ accounts, without them knowing of it, and with a clear conflict of interest by the bank. Furthermore, the executives at Nattan had created a parallel network with a Suisse partner, Nattan Suisse, which they used to move money to and from Italy. Even there, the clients would discover the Niscagi bonds in their investment portfolios’.

“Oh, shit. Uncle Scignia is gonna think it was me. I’m dead.”

‘Meanwhile two of the people responsible for the illicit transactions, Marco Mancini, the General Manager of Nattan Bank, and Oliviero Sturli, the bank lawyer, have been arrested. Their legal advisers have immediately asked for house arrest. The bank’s General Director Giorgio Salutti is the third suspect, but for the time being is nowhere to be found. In other developments, no charges, instead, were filed for the death of another Nattan executive, Doctor Esposito, who was found dead in his home on the night of January 1st. The police ruled that the cause of death was a gas leak in his house...’

“Yeah, sure, it’s called Scignia gas, intended for those who deceive him.”

'The Consob has been determined and taken fast action. In just six hours the officials at Consob called, with a phone tape, all the financial promoters of Nattan Bank asking them the same questions, and recorded the conversations. Afterward, by crosschecking, they were able to understand what had happened and come to the truth. They have evidence of the illicit transactions and have been able to identify those promoters involved in the scam. They have been immediately expelled and reported to the State's Attorney. This confirms that the problem is not that a few rotten individuals can operate freely in our system. Dishonest people exist, we know, and always will. What's important is that a financial system, or a community, or a State is based on the honesty of its own people. Even in this scam, it was honest people who stood up and brought the dishonest ones to justice'.

“What the fuck happened? Uncle Scignia had the recordings. At least let's hope Mancini and Sturli will stay in jail...”

'The preliminary investigating attorney has granted house arrest to the suspects until they are convicted'.

“Yeah, great! I guessed it right, as usual. What the fuck I am going to do now? The world is just too small to think of running away from Uncle Scignia. He'll have me killed. Alessandra!”

“What, what... What's going on? Why are you yelling?”

“Alessandra, we have to speak to Giovanni and Francesca immediately. It's a matter of life and death.”

“What happened?”

“A fucking mess! Take a look at the news.”

'The scam has been discovered thanks to an accusation coming from the Notary Mr. Silvestri, who is Céline Daccò's executor. The lawyer Daccò died a few days ago in what seems to have been a terrible accident. Mrs. Daccò had, in fact, left to the notary several recordings and documents proving Nattan and Niscagi's management irregularities, with instructions and that the Notary turn them over to the authorities if something were to happen to her'.

“Jack, do you understand? It was Céline... she thought it all out!” Alessandra cries out.

“Yeah, and me, I'm here with all of you not even a month from her death...”

'Luckily the scam did not succeed. But there's more. With the crash in Nattan shares, there's been someone, a financial promoter, still anonymous, who bet exactly right on the outcome and, now, finds himself with a great fortune'.

“Hey, hey, I can't see anything!”

“Jack, the light went off.”

“Hey guys, what’s going on?”

“Nothing, Giovanni...”

“What’s the matter? Can’t I even have a nice and quiet swim in the morning? Why were you screaming, Jack?”

“Was I?”

“Look, mom is already up, she’s still a little jetlagged. But if you don’t stop screaming, she’s not gonna like you anymore, even if you were the one who paid for this vacation and the mortgage.”

“Well, at least Francesca is still asleep.”

“No, I’m up. It’s so dark in here! So... what were you screaming about, Jack?”

“They all were arrested.”

“Who?”

“Wait, let me show you on TV... It’s just that on this fucking island the light comes and goes all the time. Had I bought the Niscagi, I would have found myself left with nothing but a match, but I sure could use it now... Ouch! Who left this damn deck-chair in the middle of the room? Oh, it was me...”

The end