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I know love better than you

(The two first chapters)

1

My dick wasn't just for pissing anymore, and I rarely thought of anything beyond its stiff end. I would masturbate at least three times a day, feel up whichever cousin came within reach, bask in bliss with my pants hanging around my knees or lower. My orgasms came clean, without sperm. They wriggled out from between my legs like cats, darted through my groin and along my spine, climaxed on the surface of my scalp. I had no pubic hair, a high-pitched voice and a head of dark, thick, coarse hair. I was just a child.

Agnese was alive and beautiful. In those last few months of her life she smelled divine, as if death could never spoil her. Even then I already loved her, in a way.

“When I grow up I'm going to marry you”, I threatened every day. She would smile, closing her eyelids as if the muscles that made her laugh also made her sleep. I would take advantage of this and launch myself onto her chest, because her breasts were growing and I wanted to feel them. They were still small breasts, pointy and insolent. They stood out under her tops like my dick pushed up

against my pants. But Agnese knew what I was after. She would intercept my wrists before I reached her, deflecting my passion.

“Brothers can’t marry their sisters”. She would end the conversation with a slap on the back of my head and go back to what she had been doing. I’d set off in high dudgeon to find a cousin who would let me touch her.

We lived in a garret, just two rooms and a kitchenette. I remember our home as spacious but actually it was tiny. Agnese and I didn’t even have a room of our own, we slept in the living room. I had to make do with a diminutive bed set against the sloping ceiling, since I was the only one who could get to it without kneeling down or bumping my head against the ceiling, crying out for a house with straight walls. The sloping space between my bed and the floor was my kingdom, my hiding place. That was where I piled up toys, comics, the photos I had taken in Piazza Armerina: crooked mosaics, the dark interior of the Cathedral, my classmates’ thighs in the springtime. Two regiments of plastic soldiers guarded the Commodore 64 cassette which - after a couple of harmless games - played an exuberant strip poker. When I was at home by myself I would unearth the cassette and undress pictures of women, one card at a time. Someone usually came back just as I was winning,

the screen luminous with huge pixellated breasts. I would have to turn it all off, muffle my breathing, hide my erection.

Agnese's bed disappeared into an massive chest made of varnished wood. It had belonged to a great-grandfather of ours who sniffed tobacco and died at the age of eighty, with perfect teeth and without ever having seen toothpaste, toothbrushes or dentists. I'd rather have inherited those tendencies, but instead I got sebaceous cysts. I have two on the crown of my head, they keep on growing, ruining the contour of my rapidly advancing bald spot. They are two balls of fat, sooner or later they can be cut out, when I'm brave enough. For now they are a nuisance, but I still try to hide them under my remaining hair which is wavy and weak under my fingers: I can feel that its days are numbered. Soon I'll be bald and the cysts will be visible, up there above the line where my hair made its last stand. From a distance my tonsure will look like a moon with a couple of inverted craters. The first one is as big as a blackberry, the second one as small as a lentil. Like the lentils my great-grandfather grew in the field where he worked as a sharecropper, by the road to Villarosa, in the narrow valley where the southern side of Calascibetta meets the northern slope of Enna and a solitary train line snakes alongside the motorway. Diesel trains puff alongside a stream of cars, buses and motorbikes full of

tourists hurrying from Catania to Palermo to see the Valley of the Temples. Hardly anyone stops; very few people lift their eyes from their guidebooks or, waking from a nap, glance distractedly at the cliff where the Rocca of Cerere stands. Nobody knows that was the field where the *carabinieri* came to arrest my grandfather as he hoed broad beans. He was neither a mafioso or a communist. He knew nothing of the dead body thrown among the blackberry bushes where at the edge of his field. They didn't ask him many questions or listen to his protests. They left him handcuffed in the sun as they struggled to retrieve the corpse: the brambles were like tentacles with talons that tore the *carabinieri*'s skin as they worked, cursing, their uniforms rolled up to their elbows. Then they pushed my great-grandfather into a van, unloaded him at their barracks and gave him a black eye. They tried in vain to extract a confession. When they saw that he was not going to budge, they put him on a boat to Sardinia. His wife was pregnant; they didn't even let him say goodbye. They made him waste ten years in a prison that drew salt air and boredom from the sea; he was shamed by the seagull's cries as if they were mocking him. He wrote short letters, thick with spelling mistakes and longing. He tortured himself over leaving my great-grandmother penniless. She had to find work and washed the floors in a rich family's mansion.

Eight years later, some scoundrel on his deathbed confessed to the murder. But they left my great-grandfather in prison all the same, until the last of the sentence he had served for no reason. When they finally let him out, his daughter was growing breasts and he had lost the habit of talking. Sure enough, I found out this story by chance, when the photo on his tomb was already ragged with damp. Instead, one time when he'd had a bigger glass of wine than usual, he told me that he had been a soldier in Crete during the fascist war. He missed the sunsets when he would take off his cardboard boots, issued by the imperial army, and immerse himself in the warm sea where fish swam.

Our garret had a separate bathroom, a tiny space high up at the top of the last flight of stairs. The bath was short, with a ledge to sit in it. It was uncomfortable for Dad, his knees poked out of the water. He would often call me to wash his back where he couldn't reach it. I didn't like touching the scum that rimmed the enamel sides, but I would manage a peek at his hairy dick among the bath foam: it was much bigger than mine. I wanted one like that too.

We had a terrace where we sculpted snowmen in the winter. In August the sun roasted the roof tiles and the air in our house became soup. Nobody could sleep, so Mum would move two mattresses outside, under a thick cotton awning patterned with

fleshy flowers. Opposite us loomed a church, crumbling but still in use. The steeple cast a shadow on our terrace even in the summer. At Christmas the shadow reached into our house, lapping against the presents under the tree.

An abandoned building, two stories high, was connected to the church. It had been built as a monastery. Cavour had made it into a barracks, with a dovecote attached. Nowadays its sole occupants were the obscene descendants of carrier pigeons of yore. They spent their days cooing and dancing in puffed-up circles around females that pretended not to notice. They fought over the daily crumbs that an old blackened widow fished out in fistfuls from a plastic bag. They mated constantly, balancing on the electricity wires or hanging off the church's chipped cornices. They shat on the cars parked along the narrow road where I played football, on my bicycle when I leaned it against a lamp post, on people as they passed dragging their shopping bags. They even had the cheek to swoop between our sheets hung out on the terrace. I would wait for them with a loaded air gun. I would push needles into each rubber bullet, melt candle wax into the middle to hold the needle in place and blow on the wax until it set. If Agnese caught me doing this she got angry and said I was evil. But I never managed to hit the pigeons, not even scare them away. So then Mum would come out

waving her arms: she didn't want to wash everything all over again. Her shrill voice routed the advancing pigeons and woke the ones who had fallen asleep in random places. They flew up in one mass of snapping wings and wheeled over our heads towards the shelter of the dovecote, with its windows shattered by stones thrown when Dad was a boy. Most of its shutters were rotten, a few still hung from their hinges. Only one section of the building had intact windows that were often shuttered: the part nearest to the church. Behind those windows, on his own, lived Father Calogero.

Dad spent more time away than at home with us. He worked across the Strait of Messina, somewhere on Italy's boot, in various places that to me were just fascinating and cruel names. He built embankments, bridges, bypasses. He came back to Enna by train every two or three weekends. His hands were covered in calluses: his caresses were like sandpaper, his slaps were harder than Mum's and stung for longer. Sometimes he had a plaster on his finger, or a scab covering some recent cut. He often arrived in a daze after spending the night in crowded train carriage. This was before mobile phones and their deafening ringtones, but people have always been stupid and disrespectful. He was had to doze amidst the fumes of broken worn-down shoes and undigested sandwiches, surrounded by insomniac chattering and explosive laughter from the train corridors, the thundering snores of old men in his ears. We would meet him at the station in our Fiat 500. The train was almost always late and we had to wait, along with a few others; we hardly ever saw a railway employee. The ticket office was shut, the waiting room covered in dust and the café sign switched off. Cars zoomed along the motorway behind us. Their wheels bumped over the joints in the flyover with rapid double thuds. Mum would sit on

a bench while Agnese and I ran over the train tracks, explored the hut with the stinking toilets and chased floating dandelion seeds or sparrows. We were impatient and fought over nothing. Mum would uncross her legs and tell us to stop it: “Dad won’t arrive if you carry on like this”.

We would sit on each side of her giving each other resentful looks behind her back. By the time the train arrived, dripping diesel, we were all excited again, springing to our feet at the first touch of the bell announcing the train’s approach. Mum only got up after the train driver whistled at the last level crossing. She would put her hands on our shoulders but couldn’t calm us down. We vied to see the carriage that Dad would come off, we raced to be the first to touch his luggage and see if he had brought us presents. Our knees left several layers of skin on those platforms.

Dad drove on the way home and asked us what we were learning at school. Agnese would show off some French and I would blab something about Portugal before quickly changing the subject to my latest football match. Mum patiently waited her turn. When we got home she started cooking. Dad went for a wash, Agnese set the table, I revised the Ten Commandments and the *Salve Regina* that I never could remember. After lunch Mum and Dad would go for a rest and shut themselves in their room.

Whatever we did, we had to do it quietly. The dirty dishes stayed on the table, wine stained the bottom of Dad's glass, the smell of coffee lingered in the air. Occasionally a car drove by. If the window was open the neighbours' plates clinked. I would pack my bag for catechism lessons at three o'clock: jotter for taking notes, pocket New Testament, white booklet of prayers and sacraments. Agnese had already finished catechism; I didn't have long to go before my Confirmation. Dad would visit my grandparents, after he had rested. He always walked me to the church building on his way there. At catechism a grim nun indoctrinated us in a room on the ground floor of the church building, under Father Calogero's rooms.

I would sit on my bed and wait, shoes and rucksack on, ears straining to hear the sounds that heralded my parents' awaking. My eyes would glance to the clock on the wall. The nun was merciless with latecomers. She made us say interminable prayers kneeling on the freezing floor in front of the altar. She forced us to serve as altar boys until we could no more. She revoked our right to climb the bell tower and ring the bells. She claimed that God does not tolerate lateness.

Dad gave no sign of waking up. All was silent behind the door, even with my ear pressed up against it. I went to check the

clock again: just a few minutes until three o'clock. I had waited a long time and now it was my turn to ring the bells, to hang from the rope and let it pull me up as the bell swung back, up closer to the Lord for a moment. I went back to the door, grasped the handle, hesitated. Once more I looked out of the window: the church door was open, the other children were disappearing into it. I grasped the handle again and silently opened the door. The room was dark but they were awake, sitting on the side of the bed. Mum's breasts were uncovered: they were small and limp, their nipples pointing down. She immediately covered herself with her arm, looking down between her naked knees.

“Dad, it's three o'clock”. “Yes, Vincenzo, let's go”.

He got up and came towards me tucking his shirt into his trousers and closed the door behind him. I managed to run through the church door just ahead of the nun. I would ring the bells even harder than usual, my parents needed to be purified too.

I went to Mass on my own: Agnese had been dispensed from going after her Confirmation; Mum and dad only went for important ceremonies. I had to be in church at half past ten but I woke early, as if it was a normal school day. I would rouse my sister because on Sundays we were allowed to go into the big bed, sliding between our parent's warm bodies. In the middle of covers

I would reach out towards Agnese, sometimes I would manage to feel up some part of her. She often expected it though, and blocked my advances. I wasn't too offended: after Mass we would go for lunch at my grandparents' house and a cousin would always turn up. I had an abundance of female cousins, some younger than me, some older, all of them more or less willing to touch me and let me touch them. Precocious sexual contact is one of the privileges that come with being born into a large family; like getting lots of birthday presents, mostly having enough people to play hide and seek or *barattolo*, and paying frequent visits to one of the restaurants scattered around the Lake of Pergusa to celebrate baptisms, First Communions, Confirmations, weddings.

At that time, these were the members of my family who were alive and more or less close by: three great-grandparents; all four grandparents; a total of eight uncles and aunts, seven married with children, a couple married more than once; a total of twelve first cousins, of which nine were girls; an indefinite number of second and third cousins that occasionally livened up family reunions, especially in the summer. In August the relatives who had emigrated came back on holiday and showed off their success. They had new cars, with strange number plates, and so big that it was unwise for them to drive through most of Enna's narrow,

winding streets. The latest wife would then step out of the car. The wives were incredibly blonde and beautiful, with white skin that would redden, burn and peel after an hour of imprudent exposure to the Sicilian sun. I liked them, the foreign aunties, because they smelled of shampoo and good health, they had long hair and didn't contaminate the ozone layer with clouds of hair spray like the Sicilian aunties did. They wore short, thin dresses. Their shoulders held up thin straps, not the belts of the armoured bras that local women bought in the market. Their naked legs, their effortless cleavages, their hairless armpits kept my Sicilian uncles awake at night and infuriated their jealous Sicilian wives, sweating in their vulgar aprons. The Sicilian aunties would gang up against the intruders and sometimes a grandmother would join in: what does she do half of the day locked up in the bathroom? She can't even cook half a plate of spaghetti with baby fennel and breadcrumbs. Look at our poor brother, son-in-law, godfather to our child, see how he wastes away working like a mule while she lives the good life.

To tell the truth, I never thought that the emigrant relative in question seemed to be wasting away, on the contrary he seemed to enjoy the sighs and jealousy unleashed by his wife. One of prettiest and youngest of these wives came close to driving a fair few

members of our family mad – men, women, me especially. Her name was Chantal. She was from Alsace. She didn't speak a word of Sicilian, never mind Italian, and didn't even make an effort to learn anything. She was the first wife of an uncle who later got married another couple of times. She was twenty years old and would eat up to three plates of pasta with great gusto, conclude her meal with the most genteel of burps, then smile at the astonished family, take my uncle's hand and lead him into the bedroom. A deathly silence would fall at the table, slaps would fly if a man allowed himself a jealous. We kids were sent out to play in the street even if we hadn't finished our fruit. Until then we had never been allowed outside after lunch, when the sun is like a hammer on the earth and folk rest. I would run around the building trying to catch something of what was happening behind the curtains. Mum would appear on the bathroom balcony and send me away to play somewhere else, so I would go back to where my cousins and Agnese were discussing the incomprehensible things that grownups did. I would rub up against all of them, try to persuade a couple to follow me, I'd lower my trousers and swivel my pelvis to show them all my happy dick. When Agnese was there, even the most willing cousins became hard to get .

“Aunty, Mum, Gran! Vincenzo has his pants down!”

That sort of shouting ruined the repose of full stomachs and called my grandmother, my mother and whatever aunties were present out onto the kitchen balcony.

“Vincenzo, I'm about to come down there and make you see stars!”

Then they would mutter other things amongst themselves about the dissolute foreigner who corrupted the children, even. I had to cover up and I envied my uncle who didn't have to go begging because he had found a wife whose appetites were larger than his.

At a certain point a trip to Cefalu' was decided. The emigrant uncle suggested it, but actually it was Chantal's idea. What sort of Sicily was this she'd come to see if there wasn't even a scrap of seaside? There followed a long and chaotic discussion. I would have left instantly, my cousins agreed, the men feigned indifference but actually they couldn't wait to admire Chantal in a swimsuit and show off their broad chests: the emigrant uncle was as skinny as a deportee. I hung onto Dad and begged him:

“Take us to the seaside, buy me a life jacket, teach me how to swim”.

Not that he could swim that well,

“Take us to the seaside, there are rocks at Cefalu’ and we can dive off them, we can collect seashells, we can fish for swordfish, build sandcastles twelve stories high, hunt for treasures in sunken galleons”.

“We need to talk to Mum”.

So then I would latch on to her wrists:

“Dad agrees, he’d like to take us to the seaside and teach me to swim, to fish, to build sandcastles, dig a huge hole, find an enormous treasure, if you agree of course”.

Convincing her was easy once Agnese got caught up in my enthusiasm. However, the aunties’ hearts were hardened by years of watching sentimental television programmes and they suspected adultery behind every glance. They were rightly suspicious, because I wanted as many cousins as possible to come so that I could get my hands under some swimsuits.

In the end, among complaints and anxieties, the matter was resolved: we would go. The Sicilian aunties spent the day before the trip cooking pasta dishes and sterilizing the two picnic sets that had spent years in the cellar. Their husbands, in the meantime, checked the deckchairs still worked and opened up the sun umbrellas, examining their hinges and commenting on the rusty spots exacerbated by the salt air. They checked tyre pressure and

oil levels, and polished up the cars that would make up the convoy. We left at seven o'clock. As soon as we got onto the motorway, the uncle from Alsace took the lead with his convertible. The other three cars – a Fiat Ritmo, a Fiat Uno Sting and an old Peugeot – couldn't keep up with the vanishing race car. I begged:

“Faster, Dad!”

But there was no way we could catch up. Chantal's hair fluttered in the sunlight, two bends ahead.

It was a clear, dry day. The *scirocco* wind from the South dried our palates and our sweat. The corn stubble was yellow and thick around the motorway flyovers that loop through the valley. The fields climbed up to the sides of the hills and mingled with jutting sandstone, chalky soil, residual sulphur, ravines. Two plumes of smoke signaled fires, towards the Madonie: self-combustion, careless farmers, probably arson. Dad followed their dark wavering with one eye and kept the other eye on the road.

Parking near the beach was full so we had to go further away and then trudge back, laden with suncream, sun umbrellas, buckets, pasta dishes. We gained the beach and struggled along, looking for a space that would fit us all. Agnese and I wanted to dive into the sea immediately, and so did the five cousins of which four were girls. But we had to wait for everything to be in its place:

sun umbrellas up, cream on, water warm enough. We waited for the sun umbrellas and the cream; the sea was warm as soup, the uncle from Alsace confirmed our suspicions and put an end to our begging. We threw ourselves into the water, scattering the fish and some mortified bathers. We wore armbands around our thin biceps and coloured lifebelts around our waists. My cousin had a snorkeling mask and had loaned me the mouthpiece. Agnese was the eldest of the female cousins. She was the only one for whom wearing a bikini made sense. The other girls only had nipples under the top half of their costumes, just like the nipples my male cousin and I showed off in the sunlight.

And so we began splashing, spraying, diving to contemplate thighs. We were distracted by other girls who were more beautiful, plumper, but unreachable. Agnese persuaded the other cousins to leave us alone, she said we were disgusting idiots. My cousin and I then went towards the rocks, pulling faces at our cousins and shouting vague warnings at them over our shoulders. We tried to prise limpets off the rocks but failed, despite my cousin saying that he had ripped tons of them off the rocks with his bare hands and then sucked them raw, the taste of the sea exploding in his mouth. We gave up after our nails got chipped. We then stopped to look at an old fisherman in swimming trunks, his open shirt showing the

white hairs on his chest: his eyes were fixed on his float that moved with the waves but showed no sign of a catch. After a while my cousin got bored and went back to the girls. I went on exploring by myself. I loafed about on the rocks, jumped onto one that was almost below sea level and my feet hurt, an internal, intense, insistent pain. I squeezed the parts of my feet that had hit the rock; there were no cuts or marks, just the spasms of pain that took my breath away and seemed endless. But then, suddenly, the pain disappeared. I started moving again, more carefully. Splashing waves intermittently drowned out the mix of holiday noises: worried calls, mothers scolding, the salty sobs of children treacherously dunked underwater, the thuds of dive-bombing, the slaps of stomachs hitting the water. A ball bounced off bare feet, or maybe they were hands. A motorboat sputtered not far off, parallel to the coast.

I noticed that one of the uncles had immersed himself, up to his bellybutton, in an isolated rock pool. Dad and the Sicilian uncles stood like guards on the rocks surrounding him. I called Dad, he told me to stay away. The uncle in the water was staring at the beach with a ravenous expression. He was swaying faster than the rocking of the sea. I looked towards the sun umbrellas too. The uncle from Alsace was lying on the beach. Next to him, Chantal was

whiter than milk. The other aunties were parked in a circle, in the shade. They were muttering among themselves, contained in their chaste one-piece swimsuits. Mum was one of them.

“What is Uncle doing?”, I asked Dad. He didn’t answer. One of the others said to me:

“He’s making baby fish”.

And he started to laugh, along with the other uncle. Dad kept a straight face and told me to go back and play, repeating his order with more strength when he realized I had understood what was happening. They wouldn’t have allowed me such freedom. True, this was not the cleverest of my uncles. They said that when he was a child he was more boisterous than all of us put together. His mother made him poppy tea to make him sleep. One time she gave him too much. Uncle slept for two days straight and never completely woke up again. Indeed, when we played cards after Christmas dinner he always lost more than anyone. While the women cleared the table and washed the dishes, Grandfather laid out the green cloth for playing cards instead of the table cloth covered with wine stains and crumbs. Four generations mingled around the table, like the cards mixing in their hands. We played *bestia, piatto, sette e mezzo*. We children were also allowed to bet, risk, win or sulk because someone had been cleverer than us. This

uncle would empty his pockets of every single coin. Sometimes he had to pull a banknote out of his wallet and leave it on the cloth as his wife protested. He played without a plan, he would even lose against me when I challenged him to *scopa* or *cinquecento*. But was it possible that he had reached the point of masturbating in public, in the middle of the sea, surrounded by people? Dad said again:

“Vincenzo, go back to play”.

I moved away then and went to look for Agnese and my cousins to tell them what I had seen. I saw them leaving the water and going towards our mothers. I called my cousin, yelling out his name and finally he seemed to hear me. He turned towards me, started calling my name and gestured for me to run. When I reached him on the water's edge I was out of breath.

“What do you want, what's the hurry?”

He seemed as excited as the uncle in the water, and he whispered:

“Look at Aunty”.

I looked beyond his shoulder and then I understood. Chantal lay on her back, squashed by the sun's ferocious light. She shone with tanning lotion. Her hair fanned out, its ends spilled over her beach towel and mixed with the grains of sand on the beach. It

traced a mane, a halo around her head. A tiny white triangle covered her pubic mound. It didn't mask the curls of her thick pubic hair and a hint of the fleshy cleft that was sadly hairless in all my cousins. Her stomach was as smooth as the Lake of Pergusa in postcards from the Sixties, when it was still full of water. Her bellybutton was the whirlpool that in those years was emptying the lake, it was the eye of the storm that lifts the roofs off bedrooms shaken by moans, collapses satisfied erections, overturns cars with seats soaked by ejaculations. Her ribs were revealed, sinuous on her sides, with every breath. Then her skin curved, stretched and rounded. Her nipples emerged, wide and diaphanous, letting us see minuscule blood vessels, letting me imagine milk increasing, hungry gums suckling, the uncle from Alsace's teeth biting. Chantal's nipples were squint: one pointed towards the moon in the day sky, the other towards a lost cloud that drifted towards the sun, blown by the wind. A breath of air reached down to the beach and lifted a curl of sand, scattering the sun's warm rays as the shadow swallowed us. The nipples reacted immediately. They hardened, becoming opaque, thicker, wrinkly. The skin on her chest and under her armpits tensed, the many pores contracted and showed up clearly and attractively. I could not resist. I leapt forward without even hearing Agnese ask:

“What are you doing?”

“Aunty, I’m coming!”

I howled and my dick was already hard, I could feel its point pressing against the polyester of my wet swimming costume. The bells I pulled on to announce Mass started ringing in my head, I heard them sound out my name, encouraging me to avoid my mother’s arms, escape an aunty’s tackle, run across the boiling sand like Jesus walked on water. I leapt over the uncle from Alsace who seemed to be asleep. Chantal was sitting up. Her nipples were still tense, still standing in absolute disregard of earthly shame and attractions. So much for my mother’s breasts, my aunties’ breasts, my grandmothers’ or Agnese’s breasts. Chantal’s breasts were soft, they were compact, they were heaven without the waiting room of sacraments and indulgences.

“Aunty!”, I repeated.

I jumped into her outstretched arms, with such fervour that she ended up lying on her beach towel again. I found myself lying on top of her, my mouth on her chest and my hands on her breasts. My palms were small though, my short fingers couldn’t hold all that swollen flesh, it spilled over in all directions, it was too much. I kissed the parts I could not hold, the parts I risked losing, pressing my mouth against that white, tense, overheated skin. The

salt water around my mouth mingled with sweetish suncream. I left traces of saliva like a snail. My pelvis had started up automatically, pumping like when I lay on top of my cousins; but I was too short for Chantal and poked her belly button. I was tickling her, she was laughing. Was she laughing at me? Had her husband not yet told her that Sicilians are quick to take offence? But the jerking of her laughter were in time with my thrusts, for a second I thought that she wanted it too. It didn't last long. Mum's hands grabbed me under my armpits, removing me with a jerk from Chantal's voluptuous body and pushing me towards the Sicilian aunties who stared at me in disgust. Crossing their arms, they held up breasts that were floppy, covered in stretch marks, devoid of enchantment. Looking at me, they condemned me to burn in the most torrid hole of their private hell. Half a word was enough to quell the giggles from my cousins and Agnese. Dad and the uncles came closer, drawn in by the chaos. The uncle who had fertilized a million mackerels was out of the water and kept a distance, his bum held back, waiting for his erection to fully disappear. We exchanged glances and I thought he looked jealous. I had achieved what he had only imagined. I took a long scolding from Mum without protest. Dad stayed on the edges of the row because he had a guilty conscience. He landed a couple of slaps on my cheeks that

made my ears hum. I sobbed with dignity and shed enough tears to keep up appearances. Not even Chantal's *ca fait rien* could rein in my mother's fury, backed up by my bigoted aunties. The uncle from Alsace said that there was no need to slap me, speaking with his Italian coloured by French accent and turns of phrase. He spoke sincerely and didn't seem offended, rather he seemed glad that someone in the family had inherited his vices and his talent. It was hard to find any Sicilian possessiveness in him, living in France had ruined that too. I had to spend the rest of the day in the naughty spot, under a sun umbrella on my own. For lunch I got the smallest serving of pasta with no béchamel sauce. I drank water, not orange juice. No pudding was offered. But the punishment and the isolation were worth it just for the looks I got from my uncles and Dad, while their wives recounted with horror my attempt at raping Chantal. My male cousin was a ball of envy too, and under my female cousins' patina of disgusted outrage lurked a layer of jealousy. Agnese, after the first moments had passed, was sad that I had to stay away from the water the one time we came to the seaside. Mum and the aunties had their victory: Chantal was forced to cover her breasts. Her protestations, translated by her husband, were fruitless. Our morality was at stake, and especially mine. Reluctantly, she tied her costume behind her back. Two weeks

later, when she and my uncle got back in the car to return to Selestat, she said goodbye to everyone coldly. She only kissed me, on my forehead, and embraced me as if she wanted to leave an imprint of her breasts on my chest. I had another instant erection. I hid it, this time, and satisfied it alone, later, in the bathroom. None of my female cousins wanted to take her place. Chantal did not appear in Sicily again, she and my uncle got divorced not long afterwards. To this day she fills appears in my lonely solitary fantasies.