

NONNA CARLA

PART ONE

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April 13, 2000, from Rome to Turin

I am on my way to Turin. For ten days now, my mother has been a patient at the San Giovanni-Molinette hospital. She has been in the intensive care unit for three days. She is suspended between life and death, her mind far away from us. I try to distract myself in different ways, but I can think of nothing else. Will she live? Will she die? And if she lives, will she be the same again? It is terrible, very sad, to see her suffer in her hospital bed. First, for a year, I saw my father ill, now I see my mother. So much suffering. To look at someone who is feeling physical pain reminds us how life is body. She is trapped in a body that fails and breaks.

My mother is in an intensive care ward, together with others who are ill, entrusted to the care of doctors and nurses. Her life is truly hanging by a thread. Before they operated on her, one night at four o'clock, I thought that she would die, that she would not make it. But she underwent an emergency operation and survived. A few days earlier, the doctors had told us: "Prepare yourselves: she could die, she is too weak."

That night I called the rabbi. Giorgio, my brother, went to pick him up. He arrived, in his dark coat and a light-grey hat. He held her hand, told her about the Bat Mitzvah of one of his daughters and then, before leaving, he recited a prayer in Hebrew and blessed her.

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Mother was absent. She was listening, but was sick and thinking of something else. She was elsewhere. She was afraid to die, she had said it so many times.

Alain Elkann

April 14, 2000, Turin

Yesterday, in her hospital bed, my mother had an empty, lost gaze. The tubes made it impossible for her to speak. Looking from the window, I saw the sparrows move on the roof. "See? There are birds outside," I told her. She was immobile, unable to turn her head towards the window. But she understood what I was telling her, I could tell from her expression.

I don't know what she is thinking, how she is experiencing these days in intensive care. I don't know if she will ever want to speak about it, if she will remember it. For now, she is making slow progress. Perhaps between today and tomorrow they will take the tubes out and she will be able to speak again.

While she is here, in Turin, stuck in her bed, entirely in the hands of the doctors, the world goes on. Stock markets collapse, and in Ethiopia people die of hunger.

I will return to see her today, with my brother and my son Lapo. Ida, Giorgio's wife, is pregnant. This will be wonderful news for my mother, who was hoping for it. Nina, my niece, will no longer be an only child. A very ill grandmother, a new life about to arrive.

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April 16, 2000, Turin

This morning, together with Guido, Mother's husband, and Giorgio, Lapo and Professor Volterrani, I went to visit her. The test results are, generally speaking, improving, but she continues to feel pain of unknown origin in her abdomen. An ischemia? Post-operative pains?

Doctors are wondering whether to remove the tubes, which help her breathe, but make it impossible for her to speak. If things should not go well, a small incision will need to be made in her throat in order to insert a probe.

When we entered the intensive care unit, she was sleeping, covered with a green sheet made of the same fabric used for surgeons' scrubs. First I, then Lapo, tried to talk to her, understand how she was feeling, but she would neither open her eyes, nor listen to us.

Yesterday afternoon, when we went to visit her, she was awake, and when Guido told her that Ida was pregnant, and that she would become a grandmother again, she made a grimace full of emotion. It has been thirteen days that she is in the hospital and there is no way to make predictions.

Our life has been suspended, our nerves made fragile by a long and helpless wait. Yesterday, Montanelli told me: "I don't know what to wish for you." I don't know either, although I am still harboring hope for a recovery.

I have to say that these days I greatly miss Jaki, even though I am happy about his American experience. I think that he will have many problems to face when he returns to Turin, and that it is good he can benefit from

his stay, which is not entirely serene, because I know how fond he is of my mother.

Right now, Lapo is very close to me. He will complete his military service on Tuesday and leave for Modena to work for Maserati.

Giorgio continues to be a bit worried about the house in Moncalieri and about other things. He is a very dear and also a very anxious man.

6 p.m.

I call the hospital to ask for news.

“Good evening, doctor.”

“Good evening.”

“How is my mother doing?”

“Well, she seems to be doing better. The abdomen looks less bad than a few days ago. She still has, of course, some repercussions of peritonitis, but if she continues this way, we’ll remove the tubes tomorrow. The intestine is beginning to function normally again, even though it is still a bit unsteady. We’ll see if she has any problems tonight.”

“What happens when you remove the tubes?”

“She’ll cough a bit, her voice will be weak, but she’ll be able to communicate again. We’ll keep the oxygen mask close by, of course.”

“Supposing that she recovers and everything goes well, how much time will it all take?”

“About a month. Given her age and the number of days she has spent in bed, she’ll have to go into rehabilitation. Mobility and respiratory rehabilitation...”

“And the head?”

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“Sometimes she is conscious, sometimes not. She dozes off, gets distracted.”

“Will you be on duty tomorrow morning?”

“No.”

“Many thanks, then. Have a good evening.”