

# Chapter Four

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22 Agosto 2015

A liberating impulse for the Dane, to wave her arms at counterparts up there on Ponte Vecchio.

Raising the white flag. Either a mute, elegant gesture, an actress swathed in tulle flounces in the credits. Or else pure theater: her stage is the world she visits, or plans to.

Instinctively, a cluster of boy scouts answers from the bridge. Lifting their hands, bottles, blue-green kerchiefs in the air.

They click, commune. And this armistice sets off the old familiar itch from my neck down to my buttocks, played in reverse. We're under the shadow of the bridge, we tunnel through it, officially home-free: a grin in the darkness, which seems to have worked like some ruse of mine. Aimed at eluding terror.



*Francesco Natali, Nararno*

I glimpse among the eddies that adolescence is a gulp of reality deeper than it seems: you take a first swig, vaguely sweet. Many years later, if willing, you take another one, more bitter. I swigged my first when I would play at unravelling time in high school: hours of breathing on shop windows, friends nibbling inexperienced lips, Sundays warm and rancid as roast chestnuts. In a Florence of rusty tail pipes, skyless alleyways... And oh! the high-strung parents, the cashmere sweater in winter, the white espadrilles in summer, the war against the espadrilles, the war against the cashmere, without quarter!

This was a parched city, no juice in it, a dry gulp. But I drank it down with the asymptotic smile of a fifteen-year-old: I was there, with all the other kids, and at the same time I was glorious and confirmed in an endlessly looped afternoon.



*Francesco Natali, Narrano*

As for the second swig, some gulp it down, others savor or ignore it—maybe the better to enjoy it fully senile. Graduating from university, more a rite of erosion than initiation. The benders that unfailingly end with the bells of Florence stuck in your eardrum. On withered lips, the question of whether you’ve joined the spinster club. A limbo between ambitions and calls for help, the sour aftertaste of cynicism and cowardice, that odd, awkward 27. Lean against the embankment wall and that was it, you saw that river: if only it would carry you away, a highway with an exit at some border.

You even felt like you could burn the whole city down to a blighted wasteland, but soon realized the scorched smell came from you. The people you wanted to immolate, in the best cases, had come to see a statue’s toes, pinch David’s butt. In the worst cases, they had barreled into you on the street, smack against your chest, drained from a brief journey studded with timetables.

The feeling I have now is that I’m pouring water—this water around me that never looks appealing, chameleon skin of yellow, green, slate-gray—water on the still-smoldering ashes of myself. The ashes summon up a hiss, then smoke, and one last crackle. And then I’ll be like earth, ready for a soft footprint.

Already Ponte alle Grazie is stretched out before me like a diadem, we're nearing that realm of Andrea's and mine, almost lake-like, where the buildings thin out, there's the green gush of Viale dei Colli, the river goes back to the dogs, fishermen, oddballs, rowing teams with tribal training drums.



*Francesco Natali, Narrarno*

I'll be as pliant as that damp earth, when Andrea tells me she's leaving. When she asks me to pull up the tent stakes, drag out the provisions, the sleeping bags. She'll tell me to make a pile, prepare.

Get ready, because in Austria it'll be total bedlam, she'll tell me maybe.

And I'll answer that, without her, my life—the life lying on the damp grass, cradled by the graceless croaking of frogs, woken by the first mosquito bite, the life that someone may have rolled up in a tent brought to me in secret—I'll answer that my life without her maybe won't be everything, but it'll be enough. Because if I'd spent my adolescence here, diving in. If I'd spent my second adolescence here, the one that made me flee, here, diving in, if I hadn't taken that dive only today, I would probably be ready to head off again for that Austrian

bedlam.

Instead I'm standing like some tacky figurehead on a *renaiolo's* boat. Ready to trespass on the daytime space of an indecisive yet very astute lover.

On the right, Piazza Demidoff. We're getting closer to the old haunts. I squint my eyes, almost sniffing the air.

Too bad Massimo the boatman decides to say:

Ride's over. That'll be a hundred, *wahn under-hed*, special price, girls.

And the Dane, grasping the ripoff, counters with a shove.

So I dive in any old how.

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