

The Dark Century of Elsa Morante and Elena Ferrante

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This is an in-depth essay about the works of Elsa Morante and Elena Ferrante, specifically *La Storia* and *The Neapolitan Quartet*. Between these five novels, the entire twentieth century is stripped bare, revealing a horrible darkness we are still barely emerging from. While reading any further might lead to some spoilers, these books are too rich to taint with my basic overview, which will dwell on the anarchism, history, celebrity, and anonymity of these Italian authors, one who is far better known than the other. Just like Elsa Morante, I write these words for those who can't read, the illiterate.

Introduction

I was living in a small city on the north-western coast of the United States when I first found a copy of *La Storia* by Elsa Morante. Of all people, it was loaned to me by my landlord, who claimed her favorite character was the anarchist hero whose speech at the novel's climax was the best in all of literature. I was truly surprised she liked anything related to anarchism, given she'd just evicted her friend by raising the rent too high.

I had the privilege of paying her \$500 a month in this former logging town, but only until the end of spring when my room would turn back into a furnished, \$800 a month boutique AirBNB unit, filled with sea-shells and the artwork of the landlord's dead mother whose ghost, I believe, would routinely move the paintbrushes.

I read *La Storia* during the especially dark winter of 2017, when fascists were running rampant in the streets of the US thanks to Donald Trump, and I couldn't believe this book had fallen into my hands, especially from a landlord who was draining me of all my money. In this bleak time, with the US polarized between disgusting liberals and deranged fascists, I fell deeply into *La Storia* by Elsa Morante, never imagining I would discover a forgotten anarchist novel.

Novecento Anarchico

The novel begins with a series of historical entries corresponding to dates, the first being 1900-1905, which simply reads: *the latest scientific discoveries concerning the structure of matter mark the beginning of the atomic century*. After this, the bleak twentieth century unfolds year by year, spanning the entire globe but also focusing on Italy, where the book is set.

In 1922, a *mediocre opportunist* named Benito Mussolini, *having tried to launch his career under the banner of socialism*, now switches to the opposite side *with a platform consisting only of a guaranteed anti-Communism, truculent and vulgar*. This terrible fool has already created *his fasci, a collection of vassals and assassins of the bourgeois revolution*. *And in such company, he defends his employers' interests with the terrorist violence of poor action squads or bewildered mercenaries*. Together, these monsters seize the Italian state.

Italy is eventually joined by Germany in 1933 with the Nazi's rise to power, and soon Mussolini begins his imperial expansion into Africa, seizing the territory of Abyssinia and proclaiming a new Roman Empire. In 1936, the Italian fascists join the Nazis in a military pact aligned against the USSR, a country which Morante portrays as a false hope for global liberation. As her entries inform the reader, *the earth's oppressed multitudes—for that matter, ill-informed and deliberately deceived—still look to the USSR as the only homeland of their hope (hope difficult to give up, when there are no others)*.

In 1938, *following the dictates of its ally Germany, Italy proclaims her own racial laws.* The next year, Mussolini invades Albania, while to north, the Nazis and the USSR divide up Poland between themselves after a joint-invasion, formally initiating World War II. With the Nazis giving him a free hand, Stalin proceeds *to subdue the Baltic States by force, responding to Finland's incredible resistance, which will finally be quelled by Soviet arms.*

In 1940, the idiot Mussolini *makes his declaration of war against Great Britain and France, four days before the Germans enter Paris.* At the end of that same year, the Italian fascists suffer a series of setbacks, first during their invasion of Greece, then in North Africa, where the British begin their counter-attack.

This breathless series of entries comes to an end *one January afternoon in the year 1941 [when] a German soldier was out walking, enjoying an afternoon's liberty [and] found himself wandering alone, through the San Lorenzo district of Rome,* where almost half of the novel takes place. On this terrible winter day, the Nazi soldier forces himself into the apartment of a woman named Ida Mancuso, a thirty seven year-old school teacher.

The scene pauses here, and before delving back in time through Ida's back-story, the author explains in Ida's *great dark almond eyes there was the passive sweetness of a very profound and incurable barbarism, which resembled foreknowledge.* Those same eyes recalled *the mysterious simplicity of animals, who, not with their mind, but with a sense in their vulnerable bodies, "know" the past and the future of every destiny. I would call that sense—which is common in them, a part of the other bodily senses—the sense of the sacred: meaning by sacred, in their case, the universal power that can devour them and annihilate them, for their guilt in being born.* Not only does this bleak passage reveal the mysterious first-person narrator of *La Storia*, it introduces themes that will re-occur through the book: psychic communication and telepathic empathy.

Ida is born in 1903 into the glorious *novecento*, a time of great promise and change. Her mother Nora is a Jew from Padua, a northern city near Venice, while her father Giuseppe is *from a peasant family, in the deep Calabrian south.* Both her parents meet and teach in the elementary school of Cosenza, a city in central Calabria of about 20,000 people.

Nora's family is from the walled Jewish ghetto of Padua and she switched her maiden name *from Almagià to Almagià, convinced that by changing the accent she was fabricating an immunity for herself!* Meanwhile, her Italian husband Giuseppe *had dug up texts by Proudhon, Bakunin, Malatesta, and other anarchists. And on these he had based a personal creed, ignorant but stubborn, and destined to remain a kind of private heresy. In fact, he was forbidden to profess it even within the walls of his own house.*

In the first twenty pages of *La Storia*, anarchism comes rearing its head as Giuseppe drinks wine at home instead of in a tavern *out of respect for his position as teacher.* As he drinks, he quotes Carlo Cafiero, Mikhail Bakunin, and Pyotr Kropotkin, and then *he would start to shake his head, saying: betrayal! Betrayal!, meaning that he himself, since he had become an employee of the State, was behaving like a traitor towards his comrades and brothers. A teacher, if they were honest, facing those poor little creatures in the school, should preach anarchy, total rejection of the established order, of the society that raised them to be exploited or used as cannon-fodder.* All of these words throw his wife Ida into a panic, believing as she does that someone will hear them and alert the authorities. She has panic attacks when Giuseppe starts preaching anarchy at the kitchen table, and every time he apologizes, only to do it again.

In 1908, Nora and Giuseppe learn that their daughter is now falling *subject to attacks of an unnamed disease* where she would *suddenly fall silent, turn pale, with the impression that the world*

was spinning and dissolving around her. Nora insists her daughter keep these attacks a secret and cancels their annual trip south to Reggio Calabria, afraid that Giuseppe's family will witness her condition. They never visit their Calabrian relatives again, given that Reggio is destroyed by the earthquake of 1908, and Ida grows into her teen years with this mysterious condition kept secret, along with her Jewish ancestry.

Her father escapes service in World War I thanks to a bad leg, although ever since the Italian invasion of Libya in 1911, *there had been arrests and prison sentences in the very city of Cosenza for defeatists like him!* Nevertheless, Giuseppe continues to spout Tolstoy and Proudhon quotes at the dinner table, stressing his wife Nora's nerves even further, and he eventually ceases his drunken propagandizing in favor of helping his daughter Ida, who he calls Iduzza, study for school. As she prepares to take her teaching degree, World War I comes to an end, ushering in the so-called Red Years, a time when a revolution seemed imminent.

As Elsa Morante describes it, *this was the period of the "occupation of the land" by the peasants and farm laborers. Illusory occupation: because when they had fertilized and cultivated the lands, the occupiers, in the name of the law, were driven off. Many were killed.* In this time, one of Giuseppe's sisters dies from the Spanish Flu where *the deaths outnumbered those of the war. And the corpses remained unburied for days, since there wasn't enough wood for the coffins.* Giuseppe sends all of his teacher's salary to his peasant farmer family in Reggio Calabria, leaving his immediate family to live off Nora's salary. This burden is slightly alleviated in 1920 when Ida earns her teacher's certificate and finds a fiance.

His name is Alfio, and his entire family was killed in the 1908 earthquake that destroyed Messina, a city in Sicily across the water from Reggio Calabria. He became a salesman after the war and meets Ida in Cosenza while he's peddling his product. Soon enough they are off to Rome, headquarters of his company, *where Alfio had already prepared their cheap two-room apartment in the San Lorenzo quarter.* A few months into this new life, Iduzza is *startled, up on the top floor, by a loud racket of singing, shouts, and gunfire in the neighborhood streets below. In fact, these were the days of the Fascist "revolution," and on that particular day (30 October 1922) the famous "march on Rome" was taking place. One of the black columns on the march, entering the city by the San Lorenzo gate, had encountered open hostility in that Red, working-class district. And the Fascists had immediately set about taking revenge, beating up the inhabitants and killing some of the rebels on the spot. There were thirteen dead in San Lorenzo.*

As the author sadly explains, Ida simply can't comprehend what's happening and *she supposed this was the outbreak of the famous universal revolution constantly announced by her father.* Only when Alfio arrives home safely that same evening does he explain that *the things Don Giuseppe, her father, always said were surely right, sacrosanct; but, in practice, now, what with strikes, incidents, and delays, getting on with the job properly had become a problem for businessmen and merchants like himself! From now on, Italy would have a strong government at last, to restore order and peace among the people.*

By 1925, this March on Rome has morphed into a full-scale fascist dictatorship, and in 1926 poor Ida gives birth to her son, Antonio, who will hereafter be referred to by his common name, Nino. When she takes her baby to Calabria to see her parents, Giuseppe suddenly regains *his puppylike gaiety.* Prior to their first visit, the man had been crushed, because seeing *that grim parody triumph in the place of the other REVOLUTION he had dreamed of (and at the end had seemed immanent) for him was like chewing every day a disgusting gruel, which turned his stomach. The*

occupied lands, which still resisted in 1922, had been taken away from the peasants with definitive violence, and given back to the contented landowners.

To cope with his sadness, Giuseppe takes to *spending much of his time in a secluded little place where he could give some vent to his ideas. It was a tavern of the lowest order, with three or four tables and a barrel of new wine. The owner, an old acquaintance of Giuseppe's, was an anarchist. And he and Giuseppe shared youthful memories.* The few customers in this place are *farm laborers, migrant shepherds, and an occasional fisherman from the coast.* This tavern is a place where Giuseppe could *vaunt his youthful ideals, all the more exciting now, however, since they really were dangerous secrets.* At the top of their lungs, he and his friend sing, *Our Revolution's on its way, our black flag will win the day, for an-ar-chy!*

In her detached, cynical tone, the author explains that these men were, *to tell the truth, poor Sunday anarchists, and this was the beginning and end of their subversive activities.* When the authorities learn of their heresy, the tavern-keeper is *sent off to enforced residence elsewhere; the tavern had to close down, and Giuseppe, without any specific explanation, indeed with some pretense of respect, was pensioned off at the age of fifty-four.* This sad episode mirrors the fate of Errico Malatesta, the anarchist kept under house-arrest by Mussolini until his death in 1932. For the peasant anarchist Giuseppe, *his worst regret was not the harm he had suffered or even his forced inactivity.* What tormented him *was the thought that among the friends of his little table, whom he called brothers, a spy, a traitor had been concealed.* He dies in 1936, *killed by cirrhosis of the liver, having drunk away his pain for decades.*

Soon after his death, Iduzza's husband sets out *for Ethiopia—recently subjugated by Italy—with some business plans so grandiose that he expected to distribute his merchandise through the whole Empire.* Instead, he comes back from Africa with what he thinks is an exotic jungle disease that turns out to be cancer, *which had perhaps been developing in him for a long time without his knowledge.* After he dies, poor Ida is submerged in fear, and *the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, which promoted Italy from Kingdom to Empire, had remained, for our little schoolteacher in mourning, an event as remote as the Punic wars.*

Ida, daughter of an anarchist and a Jew, blindly proceeds onward with her job, having her students copy fascist propaganda into their notebooks and salute the Duce's image. To her, authority is simply an *occult and awe-inspiring abstraction which makes laws,* and she follows it blindly, an unremarkable anti-hero meant to represent the millions of Italians who went along with the fascist agenda.

In 1938, under pressure from Germany and the fascist mystic Jules Evola, the Italian state replaces its conception of *Romanity* with that of *race*, and soon they bombard the population with anti-Semitic propaganda. Nora, having just lost her husband Giuseppe, grows terrified at this racist onslaught and refuses to turn her radio on, fearing that any moment the government will take her away. She slowly goes mad in her Calabrian isolation and convinces herself she will walk to Palestine, *although she knew absolutely nothing about Zionism, if she even knew the word. And of Palestine she knew only that it was the Biblical homeland of the Hebrews and that its capital was Jerusalem. But still, she came to the conclusion that the only place where she could be received, as a fugitive Jew among a people of Jews, was Palestine.* In her delirium, Nora wanders the shoreline until she collapses in the sand and drowns, *escaping by a few months the Italian racial decrees.*

According to Article 8, sub-section D of these decrees, *anyone born of parents of Italian nationality, of whom only one is Jewish, shall not be considered of the Jewish race if, on the date of*

1 October 1938–XVI, he was of a religion other than Jewish. This decree exempted both Ida and her son Nino from being considered Jewish, so she dutifully reports this to the fascist authority who, *in its secret coffers, from that day on retained the knowledge that Ida Mancuso, née Ramundo, schoolteacher, was a halfbreed, though for everyone else, still, she was an ordinary Aryan...In Italy, an Aryan!* She eventually learns these laws are much more strict up north in Germany, and she fears one day the authorities will come for her and her son, Nino.

For his part, Nino becomes *a fanatical admirer of the Blackshirts* and grows excited when his beloved Duce declares war on England and France in 1939. He knows nothing of his Jewish or anarchist heritage, nor does he have any idea how his mother is suffering inside, racked with the same type of fear that killed her mother Nora. When she goes to visit the Jewish ghetto, *a small, ancient quarter segregated—until the last century—by high walls and gates that were locked in the evening*, Ida meets a neighborhood witch named Vilma who tells her and the other Jews stories of the death-camps being set up with the Nazis, only no one believes her, except for Ida, who intuitively feels that it's true, like an animal. This primal fear consumes her until *one January afternoon in the year 1941* when a Nazi soldier barges into her apartment.

Ida thinks he has come to take her to the death-camp Vilma spoke of, when in reality he is simply drunk and arrogant. In her paralysis, the Nazi soldier rapes Ida in her San Lorenzo apartment while fourteen-year-old Nino is out being a young fascist thug. She has the chance to kill the Nazi when he passes out on top of her, *following the example of Judith in the Bible; but Ida, by nature, couldn't conceive such an idea, even as a fantasy*. The author nihilistically remarks that young Nino, *however, with his political ideas, might even be proud of this visit, and would hail the German, his mother's rapist, as a companion*.

This Nazi soldier soon leaves, bound for the continent of Africa, and *less than three days later, the air convoy in which he had just been embarked (from Sicily towards some southern or southeastern direction) was attacked over the Mediterranean. And he was among the dead*. This is how Elsa Morante ends the first, giant chapter of *La Storia*, bringing the reader into the very center of hell on earth.

The World Saved By Children

The first chapter of *La Storia* is titled 19—. The second chapter is titled 1941, and encompasses that entire year as it was experienced in Rome. Like the chapter before, it begins with a series of historical entries that describe the global events that transpired in this war-torn year. For example, the reader learns that *the Germans intervene in Greece, to prevent the complete rout of the Italian expedition*, just as they learn the Nazis have betrayed Stalin and invaded the USSR. At the end of this list of world events, the author drops the reader back into Rome where we find poor Ida still sitting in her apartment, waiting for Nino to get home.

When he finally arrives, Ida tells Nino nothing, nor does she mention her violation to anyone. She continues to work at her school instructing children to copy down ridiculous phrases like *to fight for the great-ness of the Fa-ther-land*. Back at her San Lorenzo apartment, Nino rarely came home, but when he did *he would ask for money for the movies. And she would doggedly deny it to him, until he would stalk around the room angrily, like a true exploiter of women, and finally would take it from her, by force or with threats of running away from home forever*. Like the fascist futurists before him, Nino is obsessed with cars, screaming at Ida to *shift into high. Give it some*

gas! However, amid the food shortages and gas rationing, young Nino begins to waver in his commitment to the Duce, subverting the fascist war hymn from, *I want bullets for my gun!* to *I want real coffee with my steak!*

Meanwhile, Rome is in a state of uneasy calm. The urban witch Vilma continues to tell residents of the Jewish ghetto of the horrors being committed in Poland, of the gas-chambers and cattle-cars filled with Jews. Still, no one believes her, for they hadn't learned *the true meaning of certain official terms, such as evacuation, internment, extraordinary pacification action, final solution, and so on.* Likewise, none of the Italians in Rome believe their city will ever be bombed by the approaching Allies *thanks to the protection of the Pope.* Amid this sea of denial, Ida's pregnancy, hidden until now, finally comes to term, forcing her into the hands of a *Neapolitan Jewess* who was the local midwife. It is here that she gives birth to her second son, who she names after her anarchist father, Giuseppe. He's born on August 28, 1941, while his elder brother Nino is *off at a young Fascists' summer camp.*

When he gets back, Ida reveals his new brother, only she claims to have found him in the street. After a few questions, Nino grows ecstatic at this new brother and immediately extorts his mother for some money to go out on the street. When he returns, Nino has brought along a dog who he names Blitz, and together with little Giuseppe, they will form an unbreakable trio, a symbol of Romulus and Remus raised by a wolf, the founding myth of Rome itself.

In addition to following Nino on his fascist outings, Blitz finds *himself madly in love with Giuseppe, as well as Nino. But Nino was always out, and Giuseppe always at home: thus it was impossible for him to live constantly in the company of both his loves.* From this moment on, Blitz becomes a fully embodied character with thoughts and feelings, possessing a language that Giuseppe is able to learn, *a knowledge that, with his understanding of other animals' language, was to remain a valid attachment of his for as long as he lived.*

After another series of historical entries for the 1942 chapter, the reader is dropped back into the San Lorenzo apartment where little Giuseppe, unable to speak, pronounces his own name Useppe, eliciting howls of laughter from Nino, who dubs him Useppe, a name that will last until the end of the book. Newly christened, Useppe begins going on outings with Nino and Blitz.

On their second journey, they walk into the freight yard of Tiburtina Station. In one of the train cars, they see a calf *tied to an iron bar, barely sticking out its helpless head (its two little horns, still tender, had been torn out); and from its neck, on a string, hung a tiny medal, like a tag, on which the last stage of his journey was perhaps written.* As he stares at this poor creature, Useppe's gaze *underwent a curious change, never seen before, which, however, nobody noticed. A kind of sadness or suspicion crossed his eyes, as if a little dark curtain had been drawn down.*

Nino notices nothing out of the ordinary in the train depot, and in the days to come, he continues terrorizing the streets with the Young Fascist musketeers, a volunteer army used to enforce new wartime regulations, and with this power his gang screams below the apartment of his *Greek professor, suspected of anti-Fascism.* Still, Nino grows bored and takes to evading his own Fascist patrols after curfew, for sport. As the author describes it, *he now felt a kind of inner rage, and he began to grow impatient,* and this feeling grows until he puts on a *black shirt, black trousers, black cap,* grabs a can of black paint, and writes VIVA STALIN on a wall near the Palazzo Venezia. He doesn't do this *because he liked Stalin, who, on the contrary, seemed the chief enemy. But just for the hell of it, for a laugh. He would have amused himself by writing VIVA HITLER on the walls of the Kremlin.* So begins Nino's journey away from fascism.

In the next chapter, 1943, Nino becomes a prolific thief, bringing contraband food back to the apartment, and when Ida worries he might be caught, he tells her *he would display the black scarf with a skull printed on it, which he wore around his neck, declaring himself a musketeer of the Duce, authorized to requisition supplies*. Later that year, as the war continues to ravage Italy, the bombs eventually get close Rome, and during air-raid alarms, everyone in their apartment building runs to the cellar, including Ida, Nino, Useppe, and Blitz. Huddled down there, few believe the bombs will hit their city, still convinced there *was a secret agreement between Ciurcíl and the Pope, declaring Rome an untouchable city*.

In that air-raid shelter, they meet some Neapolitans who explain that their own city, *after the hundred air raids it had undergone, was reduced to a cemetery and charnel house. Everybody who could run off had gone; and the poor beggars who had remained, seeking refuge, went every evening to sleep in caves, where they had carried mattresses and blankets*. While these stories horrify Ida, they make Nino feel the *seduction of that adventurous existence in caves and sea-grottoes, which promised to be full of surprises and amorous fortune, risk and anarchy*. With this urge boiling his blood, Nino manages to get accepted into *a battalion of Blackshirts, leaving for the North*. He leaves at the end of June, 1943.

In his absence, Ida and Blitz watch over Useppe, quickly becoming a tight, cohesive family. As little Blitz tells Useppe, *you're all I have left in the world now!* This all comes to a quick end when the first bombs fall on Rome itself, levelling their San Lorenzo apartment. Ida and Useppe are out of the house when it happens, but poor Blitz is crushed to death, and with nowhere else to go, the mother and son retreat to the air raid shelter with dozens of other homeless Romans. Knowing she can't stay there forever, she joins a procession of refugees out of the city center to the undeveloped outskirts of Pietralata where, *so it was said, a dormitory had been set up for the homeless*. On the way, Ida meets Cucchiarelli Giuseppe, an elderly red Communist, and he carries little Useppe in his cart all the way into the countryside.

Their arrival in the homeless shelter coincides with the fall of the Duce, who is voted down in the Fascist Grand Council and arrested by the King of Italy, the Duce's former ally, who installs a new leader, Badoglio. This puppet *simultaneously proclaims the end of Fascism and the continuation of the war at the side of the Nazis*, while on the side he and the King begin making secret deals with the Allies, hoping to end the war. After signing an armistice, this provisional government flees south to where the Allies have already invaded, *leaving the Fascists and the Germans the rest of Italy, where the war continued*. Meanwhile, under orders from Hitler himself, Mussolini is broken out of jail and taken north to the newly formed Republic of Saló, of which he is appointed as leader.

Down in Rome, still under Nazi occupation, Ida and Ussepe take shelter with dozens of others in *a single ground-floor room, rather vast, with low grilled windows, and one exit*. Aside from old Cucchiarelli Giuseppe, who carried little Ussepe to this shelter in his wagon, their other friends are *The Thousand*, a family of displaced Neapolitans who had come to stay with their Roman relatives after Naples was destroyed by bombing, only to discover their relatives had also become homeless during the air raids. The only other friends of Ida and Ussepe is the cat Rosella, who will now become a central character.

One day, a delirious stranger walks into the shelter and is immediately given refuge. The first person to grow attached to this vulnerable young man is the cat Rosella, who begins to watch over him with *sincere concern and responsibility*. As the shelter's inhabitants learn from his papers, this is Carlo Vivaldi, born in 1922, and everyone takes him for a simple army deserter. When two

brothers of *The Thousand* show up in a truck, engaged in running black-market goods between Rome and Naples, they offer to smuggle Carlo to Naples amid the crates, given that's where he claims he's going. However, the brothers believe the Allies will soon take Naples from the Nazis, followed by Rome, and because of this belief, Carlo remains in Rome, with Ida and Ussepe.

Shortly after Naples falls to the Allies, young Nino returns from the north and visits his mother and brother in the shelter. He arrives with his comrade *Quattropunte* and announces they are both Communist guerrillas fighting the Nazis. This evokes the approval of Cucchiarelli Giuseppe, hereafter referred to as Giuseppe Secondo, a dyed-in-the-wool Stalinist. In a strange mutation of his previous beliefs, Nino champions a vision of communism where *we'll have a regular airline Hollywood-Paris-Moscow! And we'll get drunk on whisky and vodka and caviar and foreign cigarettes. And we'll ride around in an Alfa Romeo and a personal biplane.* As these three cheer communism and the red flag, brooding Carlo Vivaldi suddenly reveals his secret allegiance: anarchism.

After listening to Carlo's beliefs, Nino declares, *I like anarchy.* Later on, he asks Carlo if he was always an anti-Fascist, only to be told, *I've always been an anarchist.* Carlo goes on to explain that he had been *distributing political propaganda* when someone reported him to the German Headquarters, leading to his arrest and imprisonment. Carlo was kept in what was called an *antechamber of death* where someone is executed every night, at random. He was in there for three days with *bandits* and *partisans*, as they were called, and then eventually put on a train bound for a concentration camp. He escaped from this train and eventually ended up here, in the Pietralata shelter.

When asked to join the Communist guerrillas, Carlo refuses, claiming to be an anarcho-pacifist of the Tolstoyan variety. He tells Nino that *true anarchism cannot admit violence. The anarchist ideal is the negation of power. And power and violence are the same thing.* Nino and the other Stalinist are confused by this, unable to comprehend Carlo's position, and Nino defensively states, *I don't believe in anarchy without violence! And you know what I say? YOU KNOW? That the Communists, and not the anarchists, will bring the real anarchy!* Observing all of this silently, Ida is on the verge of whispering to her son, Carlo's *an anarchist, just like your grandfather,* but shyness restrains her, and so she realizes, *recalling her father's sorrows, that the anarchists evidently encountered little sympathy in this world.*

Having refused their offer, Carlo remains in the shelter while Nino, *Quattropunte*, and Giuseppe Secondo, now given the guerrilla name *Moscow*, march off to battle the Nazis. Should she need to get hold of him, Nino tells Ida to leave a message with Remo, a comrade who kept a tavern on the Via degli Equi. Shortly after these Communists depart, the Germans round up all of the Jews in the Roman ghetto and bring them to the train station. The date is October 16, 1943.

As usual, no one believes this event has actually occurred, not even Ida, not until she sees with her own eyes, hundreds and hundreds of people locked in train cars, awaiting deportation to the death camps few people believed in. She's only in the station by accident, holding Ussepe in her arms, and one of the prisoners throws her a scrap of paper, a message to be delivered. As she bends to pick it up, Ida realizes *that there, scattered on the ground along the cars (from which a foul smell was already emanating), there were other similar crumpled notes among the rubbish and garbage; but she didn't have the strength to stay and collect any.* As she wanders out, it becomes clear the station is unguarded, only no guerrillas are there to liberate the prisoners.

In the weeks that follow this deportation, the guerrillas do take some action: a Nazi is slain in the streets, a riot breaks out that leads to the looting of an armory, and an entire group of SS is ambushed on October 22, 1943. Three days later, Carlo suddenly departs, saddening the cat Rosella, who's been pregnant this whole time. After giving birth, *she didn't show up again that evening or the next day, while the kitten lay dying in the straw*, leading one of the Neapolitans to curse this *unnatural mother*. A week later, Rosella departs and is never seen again.

Later that fall, Nino returns and whisks little Usepe off into the mountains to see his guerrilla hideout. Inside a little peasant hut are *Moscow, Decimo, Tarzan, Quattropunte*, and Carlo, now going under the guerrilla name *Pyotr*, after Kropotkin. When he *Pyotr* returns that night, he has just ambushed three SS and killed one with his bare hands, having learned that *his parents, his grandparents, and his little sister, hiding under false names in the North, had been discovered (certainly through some anonymous denunciation) and deported by the Germans*. Carlo is never the same after this bloody night.

After returning his brother to Rome, Nino and the guerrillas depart the region, not to be seen again for some time. In the meantime, the shelter begins to empty out as *The Thousand* depart for better shelters, tired of waiting for an Allied liberation that never comes. That November, Ida and Usepe are the only occupants of the shelter, and they receive updates about Nino and his band of fighters. Ida learns that they had recently *dynamited a whole train of German troops; it had exploded immediately, in an inferno of flames and twisted iron*. Unfortunately, *Pyotr* had fallen into drunkenness, *unuseable as a guerrilla*, and some of the comrades wanted to *liquidate him, with a shot in the head*. The only reason this doesn't happen is because of Nino, or *Ace*, who protects his anarchist friend with a heart the reader should not expect existed.

This chapter ends with everyone in Rome starving and the final anti-Jewish laws being enacted, ordering all Jews to be deported on November 30, 1943, with those of mixed blood to be put under surveillance. When the 1944 chapter begins, we learn the liberation is still far off, but that Nino and Carlo are still alive, unlike *Moscow* and *Quattropunte*, who died fighting the Germans. By a stroke of good-luck, Ida and Usepe find a furnished room to live in, rented by a family from Ciociaria, something Ida can afford with her meager teacher's savings.

This apartment is relatively close to the Jewish ghetto, now depopulated, and the narrator informs us that all of Rome's Jews were taken by train to Auschwitz-Birkenau and that, *of the one thousand fifty-six who had left, in a body, from Tiburtina station, a total of fifteen came back alive*. Ida doesn't know this, nor does she like to think about the ghetto. The city has become a terrifying micro-dictatorship ruled over by the self-dubbed *King of Rome*, a Nazi monster who establishes torture chambers where *inside, all the wretches infected with the vice of death found employment, like their Führer, masters at last of living, helpless bodies for their perverse practices*. This depraved *King of Rome* eventually holds a food-distribution and *in the square, around the trucks, photographers and movie-cameras were at work*. Unable to help herself, Ida takes the kilogram of flour handed out by Rome's German king.

Ida begins to steal after this, just like her son, first eggs, then cocoa, until, *in those last ten days of May, she carried out, on an average, one theft per day*. When she's walking near the Tiburtina train station one day, Ida sees that some women, *with the supreme audacity of hunger, had actually clambered up on [a] truck, which was loaded with sacks of flour*. In this moment, Ida doesn't hesitate, she loots her share of flour from the fascists, and in this extended scene, the reader can see just how much the good, rule-abiding fascist schoolteacher has transformed into a skillful thief and navigator of the black-market.

During one of her outings, Ida realizes she's instinctively heading for the Jewish ghetto. Since the deportation, the few Jews who had escaped the Gestapo had returned only to be deported during a second raid, leaving the neighborhood truly empty. Ida tries to find the recipients of the note she was given at the train station, but when she does their apartment is empty and all she can hear are the literal voices of ghosts, making her cry out loud: *they're all dead!* On her way out of this haunted ghetto, Ida sees *an almost-closed door from which a trickle of blood was flowing*, and when she looks inside it's a butcher *chopping into pieces the already-skinned and halved body of a baby deer, or kid*. Without hesitation, Ida trades a packet of her looted flour for *a leg and part of the shoulder*.

The very next day, June 4, 1944, the Allies liberate Rome to cheers of *Hurray for peace! Long live America!* In the days to come, Ida learns that both Nino and Carlo are alive, although she's told this by Remo the tavern keeper, who saw her son *on an army jeep in the company of two American sergeants, and in a great hurry*. Rome may have been liberated, but war continued to the north in the Republic of Saló, where *the Nazi-Fascists multiply their acts of repression and genocide, with murders and incalculable destruction*, a final gasp of this fascist darkness.

As the war comes to an end, Nino gets involved in the black-market with some Neapolitans, Carlo returns to Rome, and a new dog named Bella enters the lives of Ida and Useppe, heralding great times ahead. Despite the promise of this regal dog, the final half of *La Storia* is the darkest, which is half of the tragedy. After the dictatorship, occupation, and war, everything was supposed to get better, only this is not to be, and I'll leave you here, halfway through this dense, 550 page novel. If you chose to read *La Storia*, if you come to the end, you will read one of the greatest anarchist speeches in all of literature, one that is fragmented and garbled from the use of heroin and other narcotics, a dire warning Elsa Morante delivered to the *autonomia* wave of 1974, the year this book sold nearly a million copies inside Italy.

Those Who Leave And Those Who Stay

Elsa Morante was born in Rome on August 18, 1912. Her mother was Jewish, her father Sicilian. She wrote children's stories and poems all through her childhood, publishing her first piece ("Story of Children and of Stars") at the age of eighteen, in 1930, eight years after Mussolini seized power. Shortly after this first success, she moved out of her parents house into an apartment near the Piazza Venezia where she'd come to know famous writers like Italo Calvino and her future husband, Alberto Moravia.

According to her US biographer, Lily Tuck, Elsa *was very poor and often went hungry* in this time period when she earned a meager salary giving private lessons in Latin and Italian. When she had no money, Elsa didn't hesitate to sell her body in the back-streets of Rome. From 1930 to 1938, she wrote over 100 stories for various Roman papers, many of them fables or prose meditations. It was in this context, as a respected writer, that she met Alberto Moravia in 1937. At the time, she was living with an older man and had several lovers, but Moravia soon grew obsessed with this free spirit.

While he was visiting Elsa's apartment one day in June, 1938, a parade was taking place on the street below. Hitler and Mussolini, in the flesh, were about to pass by in a limousine, so Elsa prepared a giant pot of boiling oil and was on the verge of throwing it at the fascists when Moravia intervened, having convinced her of *the utter foolishness of it all*. As you will see, this

should have been a warning, but Elsa quickly fell in love with this famous novelist, marrying him on Easter Monday, 1941.

The next year, she published her first book, a collection of her children's stories called *The Marvelous Adventures of Cathy with the Long Tresses and Other Stories*, bringing her a much needed 2,000 lire. She and Moravia lived together in an apartment on via Sgambati, and it was here in 1943 that they learned Moravia would soon be arrested by the fascists, and given that both he and Elsa were half-Jewish, they quickly fled Rome, although not before Elsa stored the manuscript of her first novel, *House of Liars*, in a safe location.

Even though she wasn't wanted by the fascist police, Elsa moved with Moravia from village to village, avoiding armed patrols, until settling in a one-room hut in the Campanian village of Sant'Agata, just across the water from Naples. Here they did nothing but survive. The only books they brought were *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Bible*, the former of which they used as toilet paper, the latter they read cover to cover, being the longest book on hand when they departed. When it got cold, Elsa returned to Rome and gathered warm clothing, but also to check that the manuscript of *House of Liars* was intact, which it was. As she would later describe this journey, *the trip filled me with bitterness because Rome, the city where I was born and where I have always lived, was for me, at that time, an enemy city.*

During their exile in Campania, Elsa and Moravia were attacked by an English plane and an American plane, who strafed them with gunfire as they walked in the woods, although both were uninjured. On May 23, 1944, a US Army lieutenant heard a rumor from some partisans that two writers were hiding in the mountains, so he drove up to their hut and informed them that Campania had been liberated and granted them a military pass allowing them free travel into Naples, a city which would remain close to this woman of Rome.

On May Day, 1945, three days after Mussolini was killed and strung up like a side of beef, Elsa wrote in her diary that *all of Mussolini's faults were either tolerated or encouraged even, and applauded. Thus a people who tolerate the faults of their head of state are complicit with these faults. But if they encourage and applaud them as well, it is worse than being an accomplice.* This was as much a critique of herself as others, for like most of her generation, they were always waiting for fascism *to get worse* before acting definitively, which none of them did, although at least Elsa had tried with her pot of boiling oil.

In the years to come, Elsa finished her first novel, *House of Liars*, published in 1948. As her biographer Lily Tuck describes it, *House of Liars* is a *sprawling and confusing novel of over eight hundred pages. Any attempt to summarize the plot is likely to lead to more confusion. Suffice it to say that it is the story of three generations of an eccentric Sicilian family.* It was generally given negative reviews by Italian critics (even by Lily Tuck in 2008), but the Hungarian writer and communist György Lukács called it *the greatest modern Italian novel*, a solid boost from the Stalinist patriarchy. Her greatest champion, however, was Natalia Ginzburg, the anti-fascist novelist whose first book had been published under an Italian pseudonym in 1942 and whose husband had been literally crucified by the Nazis in 1944 for their clandestine paper.

As Ginzburg would later write, *I read House of Liars straight through and liked it immensely: although I can't say that then I clearly understood its importance and greatness. I knew only that I loved it and it had been a long time since I had read anything that gave me such life and joy. It was an extraordinary adventure for me to discover, among the chapter titles I perceived still like those of the nineteenth century, the time and cities that were our own, and that had the painful and shattered intensity of our daily life; for me, it was a great emotion to discover the possibility even in*

our own time, when books were miserly and tangled, of giving our fellow human beings a work of art so luminous and generous. Perhaps, in a way, I understood the greatness.

Along with this praise, *House of Liars* received the Viareggio Prize in 1948, and as the first edition sold out, Elsa Morante was now rich for the first time in her life, so rich, in fact, that she quickly spent it all. In 1951, the US edition of her book was released, although when it hit the shelves, over 200 pages had been cut without Elsa's permission. The bastards in New York City also placed an insulting comment in the front jacket flap, stating that this was *the first work of Elsa Morante, who in private life is Mrs. Alberto Moravia*. That was simply not her name, nor would it ever be, even with their Catholic marriage. In sum, the US edition of *House of Liars* sold horribly, sunk by the goons in Manhattan. Elsa would never become well-known in this insufferable country.

That same year, Elsa started a radio program on RAI public broadcasting called *Chronicles of the Cinema*. As you might have guessed, she reviewed films, but was fired when she didn't shower a certain film by a male director with overwhelming praise. During the 1950s, she mingled with all the new Italian writers, artists, and directors, and when she could gather enough people in her apartment, she'd play the game *Assassino* (or, *Murder in the Dark*), a favorite still enjoyed by anarchists today. People like Italo Calvino, Natalia Ginzburg, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Luchino Visconti all played *Assassino* with Elsa, and as the acclaimed director Michelangelo Antonioni would later recall, all of them *were naughty. We played murder in the dark, the light went off and the 'detective' stayed away for a long time: in the darkness everything would happen.*

With her marriage to Moravia an open one, Elsa began an affair with Luchino Visconti and would often stay at his house on the island of Ischia or his villa in Rome. According to Visconti's other lover Franco Zeffirelli, the man often complained that *the problem is when you please [women] once, they don't ever leave you in peace, as the dear Elsa Morante knew very well.* According to her biographer, Elsa was *always very attracted to handsome, young, homosexual (or perhaps bisexual) men...I venture that her attraction to young gay men had more to do with her maternal instincts and her desire to have a son.*

Elsa was going to leave Moravia in 1953 to be with Visconti, but at the last moment her lover backed out, dropping her into months of grief and sadness. She stayed with Alberto Moravia but their relationship became increasingly toxic, leading him to say that while they were hiding in *Sant'Agata she had found herself in her element: danger, devotion, sacrifice, contempt for life. In Rome, on the other hand, daily life made her lose patience and become difficult, intolerant and even cruel.* This same man would later call Elsa *totalitarian*.

Amid all this amorous chaos, Elsa began work on *Arturo's Island*, one of the great works of gay literature. Begun in 1952, the novel is set on the island of Procida, just off the coast of Naples, a place where Elsa often retreated to write. When it was published in 1957, the book not only won the prestigious *Strega (Witch)* award, Elsa was the first woman to win this prize. In truth, this prize is named for the popular green liqueur *Strega* made by the company that sponsored the literary prize, their logo being a witch. The second woman to win this award would be Natalia Ginzburg for her novel *Family Lexicon*, published in 1963.

By then, Elsa had left Alberto Moravia, although now she was rich again from the sudden fame. As her relationship with Moravia was disintegrating, Elsa met an artist named Bill Morrow in New York City and travelled the world with him, just as they took LSD together, introduced to the psychedelic through US circles. He was deeply in love with Elsa and on the verge of coming to live with her in Rome when, with a massive dose of LSD in his body, he fell from the roof of a

Manhattan skyscraper. In all likelihood, he was targeted by the CIA in their MKULTRA program, as was Elsa and their circle, all of them open radicals in the middle of a Cold War. This death (and potential murder) plunged Elsa into darkness and she didn't leave her house for two months. When she did, it was to publish her short story collection *The Andalusian Shawl*.

Recovering her strength amid the darkness, Elsa wrote a long love-letter to Bill entitled *The World Saved By Children*, of which my favorite part is the character who plays "Cielito Lindo" on the ocarina, the revolutionary anthem of this highly-visual book of prose-poetry where letters make shapes and the text literally warps itself. This was her great contribution to the emerging hippie culture, although her presence was everywhere back then. The Zeffirelli film of *Romeo & Juliet* features one of her songs, "Ai Giochi Addio," just as she was involved in every film that Pier Paolo Pasolini made in the 1960s, acting as co-director, producer, soundtrack composer, actress, and general uncredited assistant.

To be blunt, Elsa was the secret mother figure, the *grandmother-child*, the *nonna bambina* of Italian arts and letters in the 1960s. As her close friend Allen Midgette recalled, *she introduced me to everyone—Luchino Visconti, Federico Fellini, Vittorio De Sica, Luigi Comencini, Damiano Damiani, the whole scene*. One day, Elsa called Allen and told him she was on LSD, and so, worried over her physical safety, Allen wandered the streets of Rome with her, a trip where she realized just how dirty automobiles were and that the obelisk in Piazza del Popolo is *all made of dust*. With her trip over, Allen walked her home, to which she replied, *you are an angel*.

Elsa was now into her fifties and the situation in Italy was growing volatile. She and her friends were despised by the fascists, who were bombing civilians with the help of their NATO backers and throwing anarchists out of windows. After the horrible murder of Giuseppe Pinnelli, a classical Italian anarchist, Elsa seems to have remembered the lost world of peasant insurgents and poetic propaganda, just as she became obsessed with rekindling its flame. The dark old days had returned, worse than before, with the slaughter now taking place far away from Europe. As the Hot Autumn turned into the Years of Lead, Elsa spent days walking through the old Jewish ghetto of Rome, located in the Testaccio and San Lorenzo districts, and at night she would write her new novel, the contents of which she kept secret. When her friend Luca Fontana asked what it was about, she replied, *I'm writing a book for the illiterate*.

Obviously, the book she was writing was *La Storia*. Before publication, she negotiated the lowest possible price for her book, which would immediately be issued in softcover. To secure this arrangement, Morante forsook much of her royalties back when royalties meant something. For the price of 2,000 lire, around two day's wages, a common worker could buy a 600 page novel that was not only simply written, it could be read for weeks and weeks, a good investment for those who had only a few spare moments to relax in this extremely pre-digital age. When *La Storia* was published in 1974, it sold 800,000 copies within the first year, saturating the Italian population with an anarchist voice amid the communist and fascist bulldogs.

Starting in 1969, several Italian communist organizations went underground and began a guerrilla war against the fascist terrorists and their state backers. This campaign was largely successful in pushing back against the fascists, and as the left temporarily gained the upper hand, a movement called *autonomia* began to emerge in the cracks of the communist dinosaurs, something animated by anarchism more than Marxism. In this crack of light, Elsa released *La Storia*, a book whose title doesn't really translate into English. In Italian, the word for *story* and *history* is the same: *storia*. It all depends on when it's used, making the title of Elsa's novel even more

compelling. An exact translation would be *The Story* or *The History*, and it was this version of the title that the Italian public received, while those in the US got *History: A Novel*.

The sales spoke for itself, and even the illiterate were reading it, asking their sons and daughters to explain what all the fuss was about. Elsa succeeded beyond her wildest dreams, spreading the great idea of anarchism further than all of the Italian anarchist newspapers of the 1960s combined, and I mean that literally. Radio Alice, *Armed Joy*, the *autoriduzionista* who didn't pay for anything, the anarchist squatters, all of it came after *La Storia* and valued exactly what Elsa valued in her novel: life, in all its forms, against the regime of death.

Before her great work was released, Italian youth were turning to the false hope of the USSR, but afterward, thousands of them turned to anarchism, making it an even more potent threat. As you can imagine, the communists weren't happy that *La Storia* was so popular, and they all came howling, along with fascists, each of them condemning what she'd written (aside from Natalia Ginzburg, who loved it). Even the anarchists who wrote for the *Volontà* newspaper were critical, claiming she'd presented anarchism as the domain of drunks and drug addicts, just as she'd failed to depict any *true* anarchist heroes in this time of darkness.

The most hurtful of these attacks came from her close friend Pier Paolo Passolini, a lifelong communist, and his critique began a plunge into darkness that Elsa never recovered from. He called the book's ideology a mish-mash of spiritualist animism and anarchy, and that *when such an ideology is transformed into the 'theme' of a popular novel—voluminous by definition, full of facts and information, predictable, coming full circle to closure—it loses all credibility: it becomes a feeble pretext that ends by undermining the disproportionate narrative structure which it intended to put in motion*. While this might just seem snarky and elitist, Elsa never spoke to Pier Paolo again.

As he wrote this review, Passolini was casting the *most beautiful* actors and actresses for his new film *Saló, or The 120 Days of Sodom*, a re-telling of the Marquis de Sade's fucked-up fiction set in the late fascist Republic of Saló during the 1940s. Having just finished his *Trilogy of Life*, something had possessed Passolini to make a *Trilogy of Death*, and this *Saló* would be the first installment. While his former friend Elsa was hiding from all the negative publicity, Pier Paolo went on to film what can only be called fascist death-porn.

Sure, perhaps a few viewers might not have realized what kind of sick maniacs the fascists in Saló were, but the film is a non-stop barrage of torture, rape, and death, adding nothing to the new revolution outside the movie-theater besides more darkness, of which it already had plenty. I personally hate *Saló* and strongly dislike Pier Paolo for his pointless critique of *La Storia*, given Elsa had always defended him in public, against everyone. Elsa was equally mad with this dumb hipster-communist, but had they remained friends, she might have been able to pull him back from the edge of darkness, only that was not to be.

On November 2, 1975, the body of Pier Paolo Passolini was found in Ostia, where the Tiber that flows through Rome meets the sea. His testicles had been crushed, his body run over multiple times and then set on fire. This assassination was more than likely committed by fascists angry at his upcoming film, or who simply hated him for being a famous, openly gay man. Either way, the darkness had come for Pier Paolo, and Elsa would live with the pain of his loss for the rest of her days. At the funeral, people said Elsa *howled like an animal*.

She dropped out of sight after that, retreating to write her next novel, but she was interrupted in 1977 by a violent development. Since the death of Passolini, darkness had cracked wide open as the fascists went on the offense again, just as the Prima Linea and Red Brigades escalated their attacks against the police, capitalism, and the state. On March 16, 1978, the Red Brigades

kidnapped Aldo Moro, head of the Christian Democratic Party, and in response to the crisis, Elsa was moved to write the Red Brigades a letter, one she never sent. Inside this small text, she tells them that what they are pursuing *is founded on the total contempt for human beings. A society based on the total contempt for a human being, no matter what name it gives itself, can only be an obscene Fascist society.* Not wanting anymore public savaging, she kept the letter to herself and continued writing her latest work, *Aracoeli*, or *alter of heaven* in Latin.

This final novel, a meditation on the end of Spanish fascism and the dark legacy of Italian fascism, was published in 1982. While she was writing it, Elsa had fallen down some steps and broken her femur, and just before publication, her legs stopped working, keeping her stuck in bed. Despite the positive reviews of *Aracoeli* (whose main character is her version of Pier Paolo looking for his mother) Elsa was wracked with overwhelming sadness. On April 6, 1983, she tried to kill herself by taking three different kinds of pills and flooding her apartment with natural gas. She survived, but remained mostly-paralyzed in a clinic for the next two years, paid for by selling the TV-rights to *La Storia*. The only book she read was Dante's *Inferno*, over and over again, and she passed away on the afternoon of November 25, 1985. The next day, the daily newspaper *Il Messaggero* ran the headline GOOD-BYE ELSA OF A THOUSAND SPELLS.

She was cremated on November 28 with her ashes kept in the Prima Porta Cemetery in Rome. Six months later, an anonymous group of friends broke into the cemetery, stole the ashes, and transported them all the way to the port of Naples. After boarding a small fishing boat and motoring towards Procida, the setting of *Arturo's Island*, these friends scattered Elsa's ashes across the sea, spreading them far and wide, just like *La Storia* across the Roman peninsula

The Lost Daughter

At some point in the late 1980s, shortly after Elsa Morante's death, a woman called Elena Ferrante begins to write a short novel set in Naples titled *Troubling Love*. It's unclear how long she worked on this book, but by 1991, it was ready for publication. In a letter written to her publishers at *Edizioni E/O*, the author delivers something akin to a manifesto on anonymity.

In this letter, the author writing under the name Elena Ferrante boldly declares, *I do not intend to do anything for Troubling Love, anything that might involve the public engagement of me personally. I've already done enough for this long story: I wrote it. If the book is worth anything, that should be sufficient. I won't participate in discussions and conferences, if I'm invited. I won't go and accept prizes, if any are awarded to me. I will never promote the book, especially on television, not in Italy or, as the case may be, abroad. I will be interviewed only in writing, but I would prefer to limit even that to the indispensable minimum. I am absolutely committed in this sense to myself and my family.* At the end of this definitive letter, she writes, *besides, isn't it true that promotion is expensive? I will be the publishing house's least expensive author. I'll spare you even my presence.*

This all might seem alien to you, especially now, when a writer can't get paid for shit, but when Elena Ferrante made this decision, she was informed by what publicity had done to Elsa Morante, her every relationship gawked at, her gay friends constantly mentioned, her past dredged up at will, her ex-husband always preceding her in lists. And so, without hardly any publicity, *Troubling Love* is published in 1992 to immediate acclaim and wins that year's Procida Prize for first novel, a category created in honor of Elsa Morante. In 1995, the book is turned into an Italian film co-written by Elena Ferrante and directed by a man, also a success. At this point, the

identity of Elena Ferrante remains a mystery, her only words transmitted through a handful of anonymous interviews. Between 1992 and 2002, no other books are published.

In her journalistic interview, Elena Ferrante reveals her connection to the late Elsa Morante, especially after winning the Procida Prize, named for the location of *Arturo's Island*. As she tells the president and jurors in a letter, *I deeply love the works of Elsa Morante, and I have many of her words in mind*. She then dwells on a passage from *The Andalusian Shawl* regarding the enforced shapelessness of mother's bodies where Elsa claims that *no one, starting with the mother's dress-maker, must think that the mother has a woman's body*. Ferrante believes that Elsa was speaking of *the need to find the mother's true clothes and tear up the habits that weigh on the word "mother"* and in the process *fight the error of Shapelessness*.

In an unsent letter from 1995, she writes about Morante, *I never met her; I've never been able to get to know people who provoked intense emotions in me. If I had met her, I would have been paralyzed, I would have become so stupid that I would have been incapable of establishing any meaningful contact with her*. In 2002, her second novel, *The Days of Abandonment*, is released to immediate acclaim, and she reluctantly engages in several anonymous interviews with the press. In one of them, she says that *House of Liars* and *Arturo's Island* by Elsa Morante are what she calls her *books of encouragement*. In regards to her second novel, one journalist calls her *the greatest female Italian writer since Morante*, although Ferrante labels this *exaggeration*.

In 2003, some of these letters and interviews are published in a book called *Frantumaglia*, and two years later, *The Days of Abandonment* is made into a successful Italian film directed by a man. Shortly after, this second novel is translated into English, bringing her name to a US and UK audience. In this second novel, Elena Ferrante makes clear she is aware of contemporary anarchists and their repression by the Italian state. The main character, Olga, reads *in yellow, on the roof tile of a low structure: "Silvano free."* The Silvano referenced in this graffiti is none other than Silvano Pelissero, the single survivor from a group of imprisoned anarchists, the others being Edoardo Massari and Maria Soledad Rosas, murdered by the Italian state for their opposition to the proposed TAV train-line. As the main character Olga notes, Silvano is now free.

In 2006, her third novel, *The Lost Daughter*, is also released to immediate acclaim, although unlike the previous novels, no film is quickly made of the story. In *The Lost Daughter*, Ferrante uses the term *unnatural mother* from *La Storia*, although instead of applying it to a milk-less cat-mother who lets her kitten die, the main character Leda declares, *I'm an unnatural mother*, given she once abandoned her daughters.

That same year, fans of Elena Ferrante write questions to their favorite author, with both the question and answer read aloud on Radio 3, and one of the fans asks, *is the name you chose to sign your books an homage to Elsa Morante? I confess that even if you reject this hypothesis, I'd like to go on believing it*. In response, Ferrante tells them, *my great-grandmother, whose name I bear and who has been dead so long that she is now a fictional character, will not be offended*.

However, just like Elsa Morante, the anonymous Elena Ferrante writes a children's book, *The Beach At Night*, published in 2007. After this, she presumably gets busy writing the first volume of *The Neapolitan Quartet*, a book called *My Brilliant Friend*. It begins exactly where *La Storia* leaves off, at the end of World War II, and the book is released in 2011 to a chorus of praise. In one of the promotional interviews for this first volume, Ferrante writes, *let's say instead that we have available House of Liars and Aracoeli, but not a writer named Elsa Morante. We are so unused to starting from the works, to seeking in them coherence or difference, that we're immediately confused*.

This is just another example of how Elsa Morante's experience in the realm of publicity informed the choices made by the author Elena Ferrante.

As far as I can tell, the earliest influence Elsa Morante might have had on Elena Ferrante was through her first novel, *House of Liars*. At some point, most likely in the 1960s, this book came into the hands of the young Ferrante, and in her own words, this was *the book through which I discovered that an entirely female story—entirely women's desires and ideas and feelings—could be compelling and, at the same time, have great literary value.*

The Story of a New Name

In no uncertain terms, *The Neapolitan Quartet* by Elena Ferrante completed the project begun by Elsa Morante. Aside from the first volume, all of the other novels begin with the word *Storia*, at least in Italian. Ferrante finished *La Storia* in her own way, bringing the reader from the 1940s all the way up to the 2010s and allowing them to comprehend the immensity of the disaster we're all stuck in. *La Storia* technically ends in 1956, exactly the time when *My Brilliant Friend* begins.

The first novel starts in Turin in 2010. The narrator, a woman named Elena Greco, gets a call from the son of her *brilliant friend*, informing her that the infamous Rafaella 'Lila' Cerullo has gone missing. Her clothes are gone, so are her suitcases, and she's physically cut herself out of every family picture. No one knows where she is, and this sudden disappearance is enough to make Elena Greco finally sit down and write the story of her best friend and how they grew up together in post-war Naples.

Elena, known as Lenú in the neighborhood, meets her best friend, known as Lila, while the two are in first grade. Both of them were born in 1944. Lila is the smartest, being able to write and read before everyone else, just as she is the bravest.

After throwing her and Lenú's dolls into a basement, Lila boldly declares that not only were the dolls stolen, they were stolen by the dreaded Don Achille, whom she immediately asks for money with trembling Lenú standing at her side. Earlier, Don Achille's eldest son Stefano attacked Lila simply for being publicly smarter than his little brother Alfonso, a possible motivation for Lila's sudden inspiration. Surprisingly, the evil Don Achille, also known for ruining and then beating up a neighborhood father, gives the little girls *some money, I don't know how much*. With this sudden treasure, they go to *Iolanda the stationer, who had displayed in her window forever a copy of Little Women, yellowed by the sun*. After purchasing it, the girls read this book over and over until they can recite entire pages from memory.

As the girls age, Lenú earns the favor of their teacher, while Lila is rejected. Both of them remain in poverty, but Lenú is allowed to advance, guided forward by her secular school teacher, Maestra Olivero, who gives her private lessons. Lila, on the other hand, is consigned to a lifetime of toil, like every other woman in the *Rione Luzzatti*, a post-war neighborhood of cheaply built cement apartment buildings thrown up on what was then the undeveloped outskirts of Naples, the rest of the city having been destroyed by Allied bombing. All of the parents in the *rienne* are brutalized from the war, tired, and largely unable to imagine anything other than perpetual survival, much like poor Ida in *La Storia*.

As the story progresses, both of the girls are subjected to physical abuse from their parents, who at the same time protect them with a psychotic Catholic benevolence. For example, Lenú is beaten by her mother and father before being allowed to continue her public education instead

of work, while Lila is thrown out of a window for daring to insist she be allowed to learn. The first part of this book culminates in a supreme act of violence when Don Achille is stabbed to death in his own home. The police immediately arrest the poor worker Don Achille had recently beaten up, the father of their close friend Carmela, but Lila is convinced he wasn't the killer, even though, *if it really was her father, he had done well to kill Don Achille.*

While the favored Lenú progresses through school, gaining weight, getting her period, breaking out with acne, her friend Lila works in her father and brother's shoe shop. However, while Lenú struggles academically, Lila uses the local library to grow proficient in all subjects, becoming vastly smarter than Lenú, a cause of much resentment as the story progresses. Not only are the girls subject to the changes of puberty, the local boys have now grown into young men with cars, and they begin acting like predators to many of the characters. Since the death of Don Achille, the Solara family, owners of the local bar and pastry shop, have grown more powerful, and their sons are now patriarchal tyrants of the neighborhood. They kidnap the daughter of the local mad-woman and sexually assault her in a public manner, leading to a brutal fight where her brother is beaten by the Solaras.

Shortly after this traumatic scene, a second layer of context descends onto the *rione*. Up until this point, the neighborhood is a character unto itself, a wild ocean pushing Lenú and Lila back and forth with its violent tides, seemingly at random. One day, after attending an award ceremony at the public library (which Lila wins, Lenú gets second), her teacher Maestra Olivero points to her friend Pasquale and says, *don't waste time with him...he's a construction worker, he'll never go further than that. And then he comes from a bad family, his father is a Communist, and murdered Don Achille. I absolutely don't want to see you with him—he's surely a Communist like his father.* Having romantic feelings for Pasquale, Lenú proceeds to hide this friendship from her benefactor, even when Pasquale develops romantic feelings for someone else.

This moment with Maestra Olivero causes an epiphany in the mind of young Lenú, our narrator. As she explains, *I turned the word over in my head, Communist, a word that was meaningless to me, but which the teacher had immediately branded with negativity. Communist, Communist, Communist. It captivated me. Communist and son of a murderer.* Her teacher has similar words for Lila, who she snubs for her families *plebian* status, but none of this affects loyal Lenú, who keeps her personal life and academic life separate.

One day, with Lila now having gone through puberty, the Solara brothers corner her and Lenú on the street, only neither of them are prepared when Lila brings a thick box-cutter to Marcello's throat. In this moment, the bastard falls in love with her, according to himself, and the Solaras leave them both alone, at least until a neighborhood dance. When they see Lila and Pasquale dancing together, Michele Solara asks the party host, Don Achille's son Stefano, *are you some kind of sissy? That's the son of the man who killed your father, he's a lousy Communist, and you stand there watching him dance with the girl you wanted to dance with?* In the distraction caused by this, Marcello Solara cuts in and starts dancing with Lila, which she does without thinking, setting off a confrontation which leaves the loyal friends out on the street, ejected from the party by Stefano and the Solaras.

Pasquale is furious that Lila danced with Marcello, and in her effort to understand just why, Lila asks Pasquale to explain. He tells both Lila and Lenú *things that we weren't capable of understanding. He said that the Bar Solara had always been a place for loan sharks from the Camorra, that it was the base for smuggling and for collecting votes for monarchists. He said that Don Achille had been a spy for the Nazi Fascists, he said that money Stefano was using to expand the grocery*

store his father had made on the black market. Crying at having betrayed her friend Pasquale, Lila cries, *Who are the Nazi Fascists, Pascà? Who are the monarchists? What's the black market?*

Starting here, these young women begin to learn *La Storia*, the one that was hidden from them until now. The year is roughly 1962 or so, almost two decades since the end of war, but only now, at the age of fourteen, do they understand the *rione* where they live. Over the coming days, Pasquale fills in all the blanks for Lila, who then explains to Lenú, *that man fought in the war and killed, that one bludgeoned and administered castor oil, that one turned in a lot of people, that one starved his own mother, in that house they tortured and killed, on these stones they marched and gave the Fascist salute, on that corner they inflicted beatings, these people's money comes from the hunger of others, this car was bought by selling bread adulterated with marble dust and rotten meat on the black market, that butcher shop had its origins in stolen copper and vandalized freight trains, behind that bar is the Camorra, smuggling, loan-sharking.*

As the narrator Lenú explains, *Fascism, Nazism, the war, the Allies, the monarchy, the republic—[Lila] turned them into streets, houses, faces, Don Achille and the black market, Alfredo Peluso the Communist, the Camorrist grandfather of the Solaras, the father, Silvio, a worse Fascist than Marcello and Michele, and her father, Fernando the shoemaker, and my father, all—all—all—in her eyes stained to the marrow by shadowy crimes, all hardened criminals or acquiescent accomplices, all bought for practically nothing.* In this manner, the dark context from *La Storia* comes flooding in like a tsunami of ghosts, irrevocably changing the *rione* in their young eyes.

This information turns to icy bitterness inside Lila, who states to Lenú that *everything in the neighborhood, every stone or piece of wood, everything, anything you could name, was already there before us, but we had grown up without realizing it, without ever thinking about it. Not just us. [Lila's] father pretended that there had been nothing before. Her mother did the same, my mother, my father, even Rino. And yet Stefano's grocery store before had been the carpenter shop of Alfredo Peluso, Pasquale's father. And yet Don Achille's money had been made before. And the Solaras' money as well. She had tested this out on her father and mother. They didn't know anything, they wouldn't talk about anything. Not Fascism, not the king. No injustice, no oppression, no exploitation. They hated Don Achille and were afraid of the Solaras. But they overlooked it and went to spend their money both at Don Achille's son's and at the Solaras', and sent us, too. And they voted for the Fascists, for the monarchists, as the Solaras wanted them to. And they thought that what had happened before was past and, in order to live quietly, they placed a stone on top of it, and so, without knowing it, they continued it, they were immersed in the things of before, and we kept them inside us, too.*

The Lying Life of Adults

As the story progresses, all the lines become clearer, even as Lila and Lenú begin to become subsumed between them. Lila begins designing shoes with her brother, hoping to break away from their father's tyranny, while Lenú advances through high-school with much difficulty. All of the young women slowly become attached to various neighborhood men, while the worst fascists in the *rione* all want to possess Lila, the woman who put a blade to the throat of Marcello Solara. While Lila is dealing with suitors manipulating her poor family, Lenú is being groomed and then sexually assaulted on the island of Ischia, where Maestra Olivera got her a job as a

cleaning woman for tourists. When she finally returns to Naples, Lila is now engaged to be married to a neighborhood man, although I won't tell you who it is.

Both women, Lenú and Lila, shunned by Maestra Olivera or not, are forced into the hands of two neighborhood men, one more educated and liberal than the other. Lila's marriage, the finale of *My Brilliant Friend*, is a purely economic arrangement, as becomes immediately clear, while Lenú's sexual hazing is a more perverse version of the same practice, this one wedding her to the new leftist literary world of Italy, only much more slowly than Lila's marriage, and its impossible to quantify who suffers more, nor is it truly necessary. Both of them emerged from the exact same poverty and their disparate journey's are part of *The Neapolitan Quartet's* lasting appeal, given both women are actually just as brilliant as the other, their power truly collective.

As they age, the new Naples of the Marshall Plan rises in the dusty fields around the *riione*, with the characters slowly obtaining shiny new commodities like TVs and Fiat cars. Some characters like Stefano open new storefronts in the ground floor of new apartment blocks, while other characters like Pasquale build those apartment blocks, a powerful symbol of the alleged *economic miracle* taking place in Italy after the war, an initiative presided over by NATO and the CIA, two severely anti-Communist organizations, neither of which have a file on people like Pasquale, at least not yet.

When the young men of the neighborhood begin receiving their summons for mandatory military service, Pasquale is exempted for having had tuberculosis in the past, although he *regretted it, one ought to be a soldier, though not to serve the country. People like us, he muttered, have a duty to learn to use weapons, because soon the time will come when those who should pay will pay.* According to Pasquale, or Pascà, as they call him, *the Fascists wanted to return to power with the help of the Christian Democrats. He said that the police and the Army were on their side. He said that we had to be prepared.*

As the early 1960s roll onward in the second novel, *The Story of a New Name*, modern culture comes crashing in, with the famous director Vittorio De Sica asking how to contact Lila, the Camorristas selling her shoes in the old city center, and the young questioning everything, including marriage. A large portion of the second novel takes place on Ischia, site of Lenú's sexual assault, only this time Lenú is no longer a maid but a guest of her now wealthy best friend Lila. While they're lounging on the beach of this breathtaking island, they spend a lot of time with a young liberal who used to live in the *riione*, one who escaped into higher education just like Lenú, and feeling excluded, Lila begins to ask questions, as she does.

After the liberal says that shopkeepers were part of the great army of *destroyers, bloodsuckers, people who steal suitcases of money and don't pay taxes*, Lila asks things like, *who are shopkeepers?* When she finally understands, Lila explains that her husband is a shopkeeper, but when he asks her if she pays taxes, she claims she's never heard of them. The liberal goes on to explain that *taxes are important for planning the economic life of a community*, but all Lila says to that is, *if you say so*, already intuiting it's bullshit, being essentially a mob-wife.

She then asks him about the neighborhood boys he's forgotten, like Pascà, and claims without all the new construction people like him would lose his job. She then blows the liberals mind by explaining that Pascà is now a Communist, and that *his father, also a Communist, in the court's opinion murdered my father-in-law, who had made money on the black market and was a loan shark. And Pasquale is like his father, he has never agreed on the question of peace, not even with the Communists, his comrades. But even though my husband's money comes directly from my father-in-*

law's money, Pasquale and I are close friends. All the liberal says in response is, *I don't understand what you're getting at.*

Lenú eventually escapes Naples when she gets accepted into university in Pisa, a city north of Rome far away from her violent *rione*. Aside from the island of Ischia, this is her first extended journey away from home, and she comes to *develop an anti-Stalinist sensibility and the conviction that in the the USSR there was neither socialism or even Communism: the revolution had been truncated and needed to be started up again.* Her new Trotskyist boyfriend takes her to Paris where, as far as I know, the first black people are depicted in the novels, with Lenú unable to contain her *amazement at the widespread presence of blacks on the streets and in the meeting rooms.*

While Lenú's away from Naples, her best friend Lila is likewise becoming enmeshed in the emerging youth politics as she breaks free from a horribly abusive marriage. One night she and her new liberal lover go *to hear a new writer named Pasolini, who also made films. Everything that had to do with him caused an uproar and [her liberal lover] didn't like him, he twisted his mouth, said, "He's a fairy, all he does is make a lot of noise."* While this terrible liberal holds this opinion inside the lecture hall, *on the sidewalk across the street there were youths shouting insults and beating those who left Passolini's lecture, a group of fascists hired by some of the other fascist characters, themselves hired by elements of the state, as Ferrante implies.* While this level of harassment and violence might seem intense, the year is still only 1963, and it will only get worse.

By 1965, Lila has left her husband and Pascà has *become secretary of the neighborhood section of the Party*, although now he was being influenced by the new youth wave of anti-Stalinism and *he made an effort to consider us women not inferior, generally speaking, to men, with our feelings, our ideas, our freedoms.* As you might imagine, almost none of the male characters refrain from indulging in the patriarchal status quo of the day, falling back on it like a slimy throne, and the few who resist this temptation tend to shine in this bleak reality. Lila is subjected to much more overt chauvinist abuse than Lenú, and she eventually goes on strike, locking herself in her room and abandoning all responsibility, showing just how much weight has been thrust on her shoulders. Bravely, Lila takes her newborn son and walks away from it all, disappearing from the neighborhood.

At the end of the second novel, Lila suddenly declares to Lenú that it was a mistake to take that money from Don Achille all those years ago, as if the dirty fascist money had been cursed, polluting their dreams of writing the next *Little Women*. She says this in despair, having lost all her childhood literary ambitions, and Lenú does her best to ignore these ominous words, given her first novel is about to be published in 1966. As she tells the reader, *I looked for [our copy of] Little Women, I found it. Was it possible that it was really about to happen? Possible that what Lila and I had planned to do together was happening to me? In a few months there would be printed paper sewn, pasted, all covered with my words, and on the cover the name Elena Greco, me, breaking the long chain of illiterates, semi-literates, an obscure surname that would be charged with light for eternity.*

The Story of a New Name ends at the release party for Lenú's first novel, a story that includes a fictionalized account of her sexual assault on Ischia. Her frank sexuality in the text makes the book a minor hit in the Italian literary scene, propelling her forward into the third book, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*. She ends up married, just like Lila was, and develops a friendship with her future sister-in-law Mariarosa Airola, a thinly-veiled depiction of Mariarosa dalla Costa, co-author of *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, both of them

young professors. Mariarosa is the one who invites Lenú to go to Paris in May, 1968 and stand at *the barricades in the Latin Quarter*. As Lenú explains, *I admired her, there were no women who stood out in that chaos. The young heroes who faced the violence of the reaction at their own peril were called Rudi Dutschke, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, and, as in war films where there were only men, it was hard to feel a part of it.*

This new feminism challenges Lenú, raised in the conservative Catholic poverty of the *rione*, and one day she sees a young mother breast-feeding her son in a smoke-filled political meeting, *an incongruous icon of maternity*. As she honestly tells the reader, *that girl disturbed me...she was younger than me, she had a refined appearance, responsibility for an infant. Yet she seemed determined to reject the persona of the young woman placidly absorbed in caring for her child. She yelled, she gesticulated, she asked to speak, she laughed angrily, she pointed to someone with contempt. And yet the child was part of her, he sought her breast, lost it.* The themes of motherhood introduced in this scene will persist for the rest of the *The Neapolitan Quartet*, involving both Lenú and Lila.

When she's back in the old *Rione Luzzatti* of Naples, Lenú runs into a childhood friend who's now married to Michele Solara. She praises Lenú's book, saying she wrote about the terrible sexuality of males *just the way it happens, with the same filthiness*. She then asks her to tell Lila *that she was right, I admit it to her. She was right not to give a shit about her husband, her mamma, her father, her brother, Marcello, Michele, all that shit. I should have escaped from here, too, following the example of you two, who are intelligent. But I was born stupid and I can't do anything about it.*

While Lenú might have escaped to the north of Italy, Lila now lives in an even more bleak Neapolitan neighborhood near her new job butchering meat at a sausage factory. This former mob-wife now lives in a shitty apartment with her platonic male partner and her son Gennaro. Lila and her partner are both learning the emerging field of computer programming, and Lila grows *frantic to reduce the entire wretched world they lived in to the truth of 0s and 1s. She seemed to aspire to an abstract linearity—the abstraction that bred all abstractions—hoping that it would assure her a restful tidiness*. When he comes to visit her in this crummy worker's apartment where she studies binary programming, Pascà tells Lila, *there is no woman like you, you throw yourself into life with such force that, if we all had it, the world would have changed a long time ago.*

This force Pascà sees inside his brilliant friend soon leads him to encourage her to join his communist union, which she does simply because she hates her boss at the sausage factory, who turns a blind eye to constant sexual assault in the workplace. Pascà brings Lila *pamphlets of various kinds, very clear, concise, on subjects like the pay package, collective bargaining, wage differentials, knowing that even if he hadn't opened them Lila would sooner or later read them*. He goes with Lila and her son to *a demonstration for peace in Vietnam that turned into a general stampede: rocks flying, fascists stirring things up, police charging, Pasquale punching, Lila shouting insults*.

Mirroring her friend Lenú's observations, Lila begins to come home from political meetings mad at her son, or at least the fact that she has to take care of him. Just like the young woman Lenú had seen, Lila eventually comes to speak at a political meeting of students *with Gennaro fussing in her arms. She began slowly, then she continued on amid a general silence, perhaps her voice was too loud. She said jokingly that she knew nothing about the working class. She said she knew only the workers, men and women, in the factory where she worked, people from whom there was absolutely nothing to learn except wretchedness. Can you imagine, she asked, what it means to spend eight hours a day standing up to your waist in the mortadella cooking water? Can you imagine*

what it means to have your fingers covered with cuts from slicing the meat off animal bones? Can you imagine what it means to go in and out of refrigerated rooms at twenty degrees below zero, and then ten lire more an hour—ten lire—for cold compensation? If you imagine this, what do you think you can learn from people who are forced to live like that? The women have to let their asses be groped by supervisors and colleagues without saying a word. If the owner feels the need, someone has to follow him into the seasoning room.

Lila goes on like this, spilling the beans on the dirty sausage factory, and the eager communist students turn her words into part of an agitational pamphlet titled *Investigation Into the Condition of Workers in Naples and the Provinces*. Her boss, a former friend from Ischia, claims to know she is responsible for the pamphlet, even though the students printed it without her knowledge, and he not only threatens her and her new friends, he institutes a policy of constant harassment against her on the factory floor. Faced with this level of abuse, Lila finally snaps, achieving her great epiphany, one we all should aspire to: *Ah, to push men and drive them like obedient beasts toward goals that were not theirs. No, no, enough, in the past she had done it for different reasons, almost without realizing it, with Stefano, with Nino, with the Solaras, maybe even with Enzo. Now she didn't want to anymore, she would take care of things herself.*

La Gioia Armata

When she's on the verge of taking action, Lila confronts one of her radical student supporters and demands she take her family in should anything happen. In the heat of this conversation, she looks the student in the eye and thinks, *I, if I want, can smash everything much better than you: I don't need you to tell me, in that sanctimonious tone, how I should think, what I should do.* While her male comrades debate leaving the Communist Party for its corrupt, compromising nature, Lila grows even more convinced that the only way to save herself was *to intimidate those who wished to intimidate her, she had to inspire fear in those who wished to make her fear.* The final straw of her patience snaps when Pascà insists she appeal to the Party to take up their cause at the sausage factory, only to be rejected, as she knew she would be. This is enough to make the men leave the Party and join her in the bloody days ahead. If you hadn't gathered it by now, I'll make it clear: Lila is the anarchist hero of *The Neapolitan Novels*.

After this outburst of violence, everything becomes clear. The boss summons her to his office where Michele Solara is waiting, the true owner of the sausage factory. Lila finally understands that unless they can assemble an army greater than the Camorra and the fascists, there is no point in asking for any lire, given their enemy controls the local government as well. Lila quits that very day and doesn't look back. The year is 1969.

For her part, Lenú won't stand for this situation and uses her new fame to publish an article about the sausage factory for the *l'Unita* newspaper, further exposing the corruption but doing nothing to pull Lila back into the struggle. As Lila retreats into her computer programming, Lenú begins to rise on her own radical star, literary rather than violent. While Lila returns to the old *rione*, Lenú returns north to Florence, although before she leaves, Pascà gets angry at both her and Lila for abandoning the factory struggle. While the *l'Unita* article had forced a state inspection, those loyal to the cause were fired and the fascists had ambushed another of their friends. Nothing was resolved, but Lila is too cautious to say what is obvious: total violence is the only answer.

Lenú returns to Florence where she gets married and becomes pregnant for the first time. As her belly gets bigger, she goes from picket to picket, agitating on the front lines, viewing herself as *an unstoppable force*. A few months before giving birth to her first daughter, Dede, NATO-trained fascists detonate a bomb at the Banca de Agricoltura in Milan on December 12, 1969, a massacre now known as the Piazza Fontana Bombing, an act that killed 17 random people and wounded many more. The state immediately blames the anarchists of all people and quickly assassinates Giuseppe Pinelli, a prominent anarchist organizer in Milan who had been born in 1928, a living link with the old world of Italian radicalism, one that the authorities hoped had been crushed during the war, but yet survived.

Lila eventually blows her lid with the students as well, asking, *so in your view, I've done all this work and am putting my job at risk to allow all of you to have a bigger meeting and another pamphlet?* With one question, she simultaneously demolishes and radicalizes every student in the room. She fights alongside these students outside the factory gates when the fascists arrive and start tearing down their posters, *carrying chains and metal bars. Fascists, mostly from the neighborhood, Lila knew some of them. Fascists, as Stefano's father, Don Achille, had been, as Stefano had turned out to be, as the Solaras were, grandfather, grandsons, even if at times they acted like monarchists, at times Christian Democrats, as it suited them.* These fascists engage in a brutal attack on the student agitators before speeding away, although not before taking the time to call Lila a bitch.

The next day, the same neighborhood fascist who cursed at her is there with his gang, blocking the gates of the sausage factory against agitators. When he gets in Lila's face, a fight breaks out, followed by Pascà and the crew rolling up with metal pipes and savagely beating all the fascists to a pulp. They trash the factory guard-booth before taking off, barely ahead of the approaching police. *Yes, she thought, you have to strike fear into those who wish to strike fear into you, there is no other way, blow for blow, what you take from me I take back, what you do to me I do to you.*

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Meanwhile, our anarchist hero Lila is doing nothing but raising her son and helping her platonic partner understand the latest IBM computer. As she tells Lenú in 1970, *the central unit of the machine is as big as a wardrobe with three doors and it has a memory of 8 kilobytes. You can't imagine how hot it is, Lenú: the computer is worse than a stove. Maximum abstraction along with sweat and a terrible stink. She talked to me about ferrite cores, rings traversed by an electrical cable whose tension determined the rotation, 0 or 1, and a ring was a bit, and the total of eight rings could represent a byte, that is a character.* Working as her partner's programming assistant in an underwear factory, the two of them earn 220,000 lire a month, collectively, making them richer than Lenú, and fully independent. As you can imagine, while her male partner makes 140,000 a month, Lila makes 80,000.

Despite this retreat into programming, Lila still keeps up with Pascà and relates to Lenú all of the dark events that followed the Piazza Fontana Bombing: one of their friends was beaten to death outside his university and the fascists had then invaded the *rione*, beating everyone radical they could find, including Pascà. These are the infamous Years of Leads playing out across the lives of characters, although Lenú remains largely untouched, now having given birth to a second daughter, Elsa.

Lenú tries to interest Lila in some of the new feminist literature Mariarosa has introduced her to, *but then she just laughed at titles like The Clitoral Woman and the Vaginal Woman, and did her best to be vulgar: what the fuck are you talking about, Lenú, pleasure, pussy, we've got plenty of problems here already, you're crazy.* One day, Lenú's northern tranquility is disturbed when Pascà and his guerrilla lover show up in Florence, demanding to be housed for a vague *trip* they are taking, likely to commit one of the many armed attacks in 1973. The battle on the streets gets worse, with Lenú's former lover being beaten by fascists in Milan and losing an eye in *the underground war that occasionally erupted into the newspapers and on television—plans for coups, police repression, armed bands, firefights, woundings, killings, bombs and slaughters.*

It turns out that Pascà and his lover have gone completely underground. No one in the *rione* has seen them. According to his sister, *there were now daily clashes in the neighborhood, anyone who was a comrade had to watch their back, the fascists had even threatened her and her husband. And they had accused Pasquale of setting fire to the fascist headquarters and to the Solaras' supermarket.* Shortly after talking to Pascà's sister, the fascist gang-leader of the neighborhood is *murdered in broad daylight in front of the pharmacy, shot in the face.* The police immediately raid Pascà's sister's place, given they work for the fascists, but are unable to find the anarchist guerrilla.

Lenú begins to grow suspicious of how much Lila knows about all this. On the surface, it appears that Lila is only interested in computers, but yet she is always up to date on who is missing, on the run, dead, or in need of help. By day, she goes to a new IBM lab, no longer working in the underwear factory, and plugs away at the System 3 Model 10, now earning 100,000 lire to her male partner's 350,000. It's up to the reader to imagine where this money is going during these Years of Lead, or to whom.

Amid this violence, Lila tells Lenú a theory she's had since they were girls: Don Achille, the man who funded their purchase of *Little Women*, had actually been killed by Manuela Solara, the Cammorist mother of the neighborhood, who slit his throat in order to take over. With his death,

Pascà's father, a Communist, was quickly blamed, having publicly threatened Don Achille in the past, and once Lila tells her this theory, Lenú can't stop thinking about it, because it's obviously true. They both came from a place ruled by a violent woman, literally.

In August 1974, shortly after the fascist bombing of the Italicus Express, *a commando made up of two men and a woman had burst into a sausage factory on the outskirts of Naples. The three had first shot the legs of the guard, Filippo Cara, who was in very serious condition; then they had gone up to the office of the owner, Bruno Soccavo, a young Neapolitan entrepreneur, and had killed him with four shots, three to the chest and one to the head.* Before all this went down, Lila had asked Lenú to take her son to Florence, which she did, and Lenú slowly realizes just how committed her brilliant friend is, *a woman who doesn't say things, she does them; Lila who is steeped in the culture of the neighborhood and takes no account of police, the law, the state, but believes there are problems that can be resolved only with the shoemaker's knife...Lila who has connected, is connecting, our personal knowledge of poverty and abuse to the armed struggle against the fascists, against the owners, against capital.*

That fall of 1974, as the days rolled by and Lila failed to come collect her son in Florence, Lenú's brain goes to many places regarding her friend, confident that *Lila would know how to devise the most effective plan, she would reduce the risks to a minimum, she would keep fear under control, she would be able to give murderous intentions an abstract purity, she knew how to remove human substances from bodies and blood, she would have no scruples and no remorse, she would kill and feel that she was in the right.* Beyond just these simple truths, Lenú fears that *she would be arrested, like the leaders of the Red Brigades, Curcio and Franceschini. Or she would evade every policeman and prison, imaginative and bold as she was. And when the big thing was accomplished, she would reappear triumphant, admired for her achievements, in the guise of a revolutionary leader, to tell me: You wanted to write novels, I created a novel with real people, with real blood, in reality.*

With these high hopes in her mind, Lila finally calls Lenú one day in October, 1974, and explains that, instead of being a *revolutionary leader*, she is now operating an IBM computer rented by Michele Solara, their mortal enemy, her monthly pay now 400,000 lire. Lenú doesn't understand, not even when Lila cryptically says, *I don't do truthfully anymore, Lenú. And I've learned to pay attention to things. Only idiots believe that [things] happen unexpectedly.* Not once, at least not for years, does it occur to Lenú that her friend has chosen to work for the Camorra to achieve a very specific objective, one that will require patience and time.

The Days of Abandonment

Unlike her friend Lila, Lenú continues her plunge into the feminist Italian underground, and when she and her radical friends *learned that the security forces of Lotta Continua had attacked a separatist women's demonstration, we grew bitter to the point where, if one of the more rigid participanats discovered that Mariarosa had a man in the house—which she didn't declare but didn't hide, either—the discussion became fierce, the ruptures dramatic.* It is now 1976, seven years deep into an abyss of armed violence and fascist terrorism, and eventually the police close in on Lenú's friends. It starts with the police going to her husband and showing him pictures of Pascà and his lover, only he claims to not know who they are, a lie which soon breaks apart their crumbling marriage, given he's a Communist Party man-child.

Lenú loses herself in this moment, but soon Lila calls from Naples with news from the neighborhood: Manuela Solara, the Camorrist matriarch who ruled the *Rione Luzzatti*, had been assassinated in her own apartment, although few knew exactly how. According to Lila, *the Solaras have gone crazy, they are competing with the police to find the killer, they've called people from Naples and outside, all their activities have stopped, I myself today am not working, and it's frightening here, you can't even breathe.* Lila asks Lenú to take care of her son in this dangerous time, but Lenú is off chasing a fantasy I won't spoil for you, and when she returns to Naples in late 1976, the reader is now into the final volume, *The Story of the Lost Child*.

Naples now has a Communist Party mayor, although it's hard to notice any difference in the functioning of the city. Lila was still working with computers, saving enough to buy her parent's apartment and *give them some peace of mind.* She's now working with the IBM System 32 computer, *a white case that incorporates a tiny six-inch monitor, a keyboard, and a printer.* However, *apart from the machine, everything was shit.* As she goes on to explain, Naples is *disgusting, exactly as it was before, and if you're not teaching the monarchists, fascists, and Christian Democrats a good lesson for all the filthy things they've done, if you just forget about it, as the left is doing, soon the shopkeepers...will take back the city, along with the city bureaucracy, the lawyers, the accountants, the banks, and the Camorrists.* Like any decent anarchist, Lila didn't give a damn about politics or parties, her goal was *taking advantage of all the predators...starting over from zero.*

After the assassination of Manuela Solara in 1976, Lila takes control of the neighborhood. In the process of handling the Solaras' data, she also learns all their secrets, better equipping her to fight them and their allies: the police, the fascists, and the Italian state. Having been gone from the neighborhood for so long, her old friends keep certain information from her until one day Pascà's sister asks Lenú to help find and protect him because *the problem isn't the carabinieri, the problem is the Solaras. They're convinced that he murdered Signora Manuela.* Not knowing what else to do, Lenú goes on the road in France giving lectures about the situation in Italy, constantly drawing on her recent visits with Lila, her secret inspiration.

In the first part of 1977, the friends from the *rione* learn that Pascà's lover has escaped from Italy, but upon learning this, his sister exclaims, *I don't want the children of the rich people to get out and not the ones like my brother.* While this nationwide hunt was on for the urban guerrillas, Lila becomes *less and less interested in what happened outside the neighborhood. If she became excited by something whose dimensions were not merely local, it was because it concerned people she had known since childhood.* While Lila stays rooted in their birthplace, Lenú continues her lectures abroad, this time travelling to West Germany and Austria.

As she explains to the reader, *one night when we were driving back to the hotel, the police stopped us. The German language, in the dark, in the mouths of men in uniform, guns in hand, sounded...sinister.* Lenú is then interrogated in a small room where *on one wall there was a long row of photos: grim faces, mostly bearded, some women with short hair. I surprised myself by looking anxiously for the faces of Pasquale and Nadia: I didn't find them.* Despite all of this repression triggered by the Red Army Faction and its guerrilla war against the German state, Lenú presses on with her lecture tour, championing her friends in the armed struggle and boldly declaring, *we must be careful not to become policemen of ourselves. I said then, the struggle is to the last drop of blood and will end only when we win.*

She travels to insurgent Bologna, *the city of freedom,* home to Radio Alice and epicenter of the most anarchist version of *autonomia.* Tanks are sent in to crush an uprising that engulfs the city after the police kill a young communist and Lenú runs *into constant police checks* and is forced up

against walls at gunpoint. As she explains, *I began to shout, I slipped into dialect without realizing it, I unloaded insults at the police for pushing me rudely*. She keeps going with her lectures as the Years of Lead come to a close with *the wailing police sirens, the checkpoints, the crack of helicopter blades, the murdered*. She is in Rome when the Christian Democrat Prime Minister is kidnapped on March 16, 1977, less than a week after the uprising in Bologna. After his corpse is discovered a month later in the trunk of a car, Lenú refers to his kidnappers, the Red Brigades, as *murderers* at one of her lectures, immediately enraging the audience, who scream back, *the fascists are the murderers*. All Lenú can do is repeatedly ask, *if one murders someone, is one not a murderer?*

Later in 1978, a comrade's brother speaks with Lenú about Pascà, only now this man is a member of the Proletarian Democracy party. He claims that anarchists like Pascà *had been the ruin of an extraordinary political period*. Lenú and her friends ignore this type of nonsense because *Pasquale was our Pasquale. We [loved] him, whatever he had done or was doing*. Meanwhile, Lenú's lover becomes more and more neo-liberal, now appointed *director of an important research institute financed by a large bank*. All of this leads Lenú to ask herself if she *would kill this man, plunge a knife into his heart with all my strength? Should I restrain this shadow—my mother, all our female ancestors—or should I let her go?* In these dark days, one of the characters cynically remarks that socialists and communists play *the role of capital's crutch*, a statement which is illustrated by this insufferable liberal.

Back in the neighborhood, Lila has formed her own computer company, Basic Sight, and she is the undisputed boss of the *rione*, eclipsing both the Solara brothers, who are nothing without their mother, whom Lila now embodies. Lenú, living back in Naples, leaves her daughters with Lila during a 1980 lecture tour in the United States, and when she returns they've bonded with their new *aunt*, forever endeared to their hearts. Soon after her return, the fascists detonate a bomb in the Bologna train station on August 2, 1980, killing 85 people and injuring hundreds, an event that coincides with the beginning of Lenú's third pregnancy, as well as Lila's.

As they get bigger, Lila exclaims to Lenú, *let's reestablish the group from when we were girls, ah, how nice it was, we should have said fuck off to all those shits and thought only of ourselves*. Both of them are 36 years old at this point, and despite this desire for comradeship, Lila and her friends still keep things from Lenú, mostly so she stays uninvolved and safe in this time of increasing darkness. When Lenú tries to defend responsible drug use as a liberatory form of release, Lila retorts, *what release, Lenú, the son of Signora Palmieri died two weeks ago, they found him in the gardens...he had heroin trouble*. She explains to Lenú that all of this junk is being dumped into the neighborhood by the Solara brothers, desperate for money after their mother's assassination, and *in a flash drugs stopped being what they had seemed to me, a liberating game for wealthy people, and moved into the sticky theater of the gardens beside the church, they had become a viper, a poison that spread through the blood of my brothers*.

On November 23, 1980, the Irpinia Earthquake levels multiple section of Naples, including in the *rione*, and soon after this epicly described event, Lenú and Lila give birth to their daughters. As they nurse these babies, the drugs continue to flow on the streets below, just as the earthquake reconstruction money is siphoned off to the Camorra. Lenú's daughter is born in January, 1981, but all this time she has been living on Via Tasso, several bus rides and a funicular train away from the *Rione Luzzatti*. While their childhood neighborhood is built on the flat plains near the train-tracks, Via Tasso is way up in the hills where the ocean is visible, unlike in the *rione*. Her friends want her to move back and *stand behind Lila as a guardian deity*, given how dark everything is becoming.

As the months progress, Lenú's lover becomes even more of a right-wing neo-liberal, claiming that fascists *aren't always wrong and we should learn to talk to each other*. This parasite of a man did nothing for himself, *every responsibility he got was the mediation of a woman*, and we soon learn that the wife of a NATO officer got him a job consulting for a shady US foundation, implying he is now in league with the CIA. Luckily, Lenú comes to blows with this man at the end of 1981, although unfortunately she doesn't kill him, as most readers might hope, given the amount of destruction he leaves in his wake.

I'm going to leave my summary here, just before capital begins its counter-attack against anyone who dared to rebel in the 60s and 70s, including the friends of Lenú and Lila. The final novel in *The Neapolitan Novels* is perhaps the darkest, and I won't spoil any of those conclusions for you. Just know that Lenú never describes her friend Lila as a communist, not once in the nearly 2,000 pages of text. The only ideology she ever ascribes to her brilliant friend is *anarchism*.

Conclusion

That you may reach Italy, to Italy you shall go and freely enter her harbors, but you shall not gird with walls your promised city until the wrong of violence towards us sees you punished.

-Virgil, *The Aenid*, Book III (The Harpie's Curse)

I heard about *The Neapolitan Quartet* in late 2015, shortly after the final volume was published. I read the first two novels in the summer of 2016, the last two the following summer. By some miracle, I read them all in the same place, a beach in a place called Chuckanut, which is an indigenous North American name, if you hadn't guessed. I laid there in the sun reading books with cheesy pictures on the cover, getting sneered at by all the hipsters, but none of them could suspect I was no longer on the wild coast of this indigenous land, I was in the ancient city of Napoli. If only the author could imagine her books being read on some beach at the end of the world, a place covered in ferns and cedar trees.

From what I hear, *The Neapolitan Quartet* were the beach books of the Obama era, the mom books of the tech era, the NPR books of educated liberals. I don't know a single anarchist who read them before me (just as I still haven't met an anarchist who has read *La Storia*), but what really ignites my curiosity is just what the fuck all those readers in the US made of the story Ferrante told. Did any of the above events mean anything to them? Did they understand a single shred of the anti-politics, the praise of violence, or was it all some liberal commentary on a beastly people who desperately pray for neo-liberal capitalism? While the covers of the US editions might jibe with the Obama era, the content absolutely does not, what with its making heroes of anarchist assassins and championing those who take matters into their own hands. Maybe that was its power: in an era of social pacification, Ferrante planted millions of seeds in a million minds, seeds that are more than likely sprouting as we speak.

Within two years of *The Neapolitan Quartet* coming to a close, I watched a Trump supporting fascist shoot someone in front of me. All of the violence and conflict in those books was now very much a daily reality for those in the US, only no one in this country knew what to do. As Ferrante explains, dark forces gathered in Italy in the 1990s, ushering in the rule of Silvio Berlusconi, a fascist-supporting villain from the 1970s who was given *carte blanche* by NATO and the west to

turn Italy into his brothel, just as Trump tried to do in the US. Italy had already suffered under a deranged, orange-skinned buffoon, so it was with some amusement that many Italians laughed under their breath when Trump was elected, knowing the US deserved it for the violence it had inflicted on the world.

What's even more astounding about Ferrante's books is that they are only about white people. I could try and claim southern Italians experience racism from northern Italians, but that's not actually racism, that's just bigotry, prejudice, etc., and no matter what any other critic tries to say, *The Neapolitan Novels* are about a bunch of psychotic, traumatized white people living in a former Roman colony that has existed for over 2,000 years. It deals with patriarchy, feminism, classism, poverty, and explores the trans identity in depth, but it has nothing to do with race.

The characters exist in the very epicenter of Empire as we know it, trapped inside its mouth as it endlessly crumbles, and because Ferrante is so sharp and clear in her writing, the reader will hopefully realize that when she compares some illiterate shoe-maker to an ancient Roman politician, she's being deadly serious: all of the miserable violence of imperialist white people is contained here in Naples, in these four novels, in this story of a group of friends who struggle desperately to end a history that Elsa Morante once called *a scandal that has lasted 10,000 years*.

As I write this, over 16,000,000 copies of *The Neapolitan Quartet* have sold across the world, with the books translated into over 40 languages. Ferrante has finished the work begun by Elsa Morante in *La Storia*, only with much more success, both in Italy and abroad, thanks in part to her anonymity, something Elsa did not have. If one reads these five novels together, they will know where they stand at the culminating chapter of this vile history, just as they will know which side they are on. In the cleverest way possible, Ferrante has given us a true anarchist hero, one who never breaks like the characters in *La Storia* but rises above every challenge until the enemy is defeated. Obviously, this hero is a woman, and because of the world people like Lenú and Lila helped change, this hero is not only realistic, but necessary.

The first season of the television show *My Brilliant Friend* came out in 2018. While several million people watched it in Italy (about every 1 in 6 people), scarcely a quarter of a million people watched it in the US, probably fans of the books like myself. The second season came out in 2020, and the first episodes of the third season were just released in Italy. It's one of the best adaptations of a book that I've ever seen, adding something to the story rather than diminishing it, so if reading this essay is a stressful chore, go ahead and watch the show, because Ferrante anonymously wrote the script, and she would want you to watch it. In fact, now that *The Lost Daughter* has been turned into an English-language film (directed by a woman) and Ferrante's newest novel, *The Lying Life of Adults*, will soon be a Netflix mini-series, there isn't a single work of Ferrante's fiction that won't have been translated into cinema, of which she approves and oversees via email.

I'm going to illegally download the first two episodes of *My Brilliant Friend's* third season as soon as I finish this first draft. By the time these words go up on the internet, you will have your choice whether you want to watch all of the guerrilla warfare described above, let alone learn something from it. Obviously everything that Morante and Ferrante wrote applies to us today, and both of them did their best to spread their anarchist propaganda across the globe. Morante was able to saturate Italy in 1974, just as Ferrante was able to saturate the west by 2015, and the scale of their collective ambition is enough to make me bow my head, for any of us who work with words and images should aspire to the same eternity these women set their eyes on, and

none of us should stop until we get there, the ruins of this dark century smoldering in our wake.
Until then, I wish you all the best. Ciao.

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The Dark Century of Elsa Morante and Elena Ferrante
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