

THE CHOICE by Mark Curl

Prologue

The young man walked down the mountain path that ran alongside the torrent stopping occasionally to look at a point in the distance, down in the valley, which was still immersed in the morning fog.

He was descending the mountain with the naturalness of someone who was familiar with the area and who was aware that the early hours of the morning possessed fragrances and colours that would no longer be the same once the sun started to warm the ground. The rustling of the torrent was louder than all the other sounds in the woods and its pounding against the rocks filled him with the kind of strength and security that gave his steps a hurried pace. His ideas were in harmony with the environment, which surrounded and enveloped him, and his thoughts rolled from one stone to the other, leaving a small trace of their passage on each stone. The flow of his thoughts followed its own turbulent, and almost unrelenting course, to which the sound of steps on the beaten path were like the tune keeping of this orchestra. The young man had a handsome face and an intense look. Each time his gaze fell on something, he let it linger for a few seconds and then looked away with difficulty, and one could almost detect a slight pang. The path opened out to the right moving away from the torrent, and then curved brusquely to the left and crossed the torrent with a sharp angle. In order to cross the torrent, it was necessary to jump with precise leaps over three masses, which were ideally placed, and then to take a last leap to reach the small shore on the opposite side. He repeated these movements many times each summer, and he was always surprised that those masses stayed in place year after year as if they were aware of the importance of the role they played. The other side was more exposed; the wood withdrew towards the inside as if afraid to push itself forward too far, so close to the water. The young man now advanced with less determination. His look darted from one side to the other of the path becoming more watchful as if in search of a particular place. He suddenly stopped and, smiling, he went with a determined step towards the inside of the wood walking under a large fir tree whose lower branches hid a small clearing covered with pine needles. The place had something magic about it because the crown formed by the branches did not touch the ground, thus giving this small oasis a wide area and keeping the other fir trees at a certain distance.

The area was unique for that wood and, at the same time, it was well-sheltered from the casual glance of someone walking along the path.

The awareness that that summer he had again found the place where he had grown up filled him with joy; that particular summer, he hoped that a decision regarding what he would do in the future would have emerged from the harmony of those surroundings. In fact, he had a difficult choice to make before him, a choice that would affect his future life forever. He had to choose whether it would be better to dedicate himself completely to sports, which was giving him much satisfaction at the time, or to dedicate himself to science, a fascinating world, in which much still needed to be done. At such a young age, it was impossible to know which choice would be the best one to make for the next ten, fifteen or thirty years that were to follow. By definition, every choice requires giving up at least one alternative course of life, often placing two very distant realities against each other.

So many times his mind had lingered over an impossible situation, that of not choosing at all and to face both possibilities by following both paths at the same time, and as a full-time activity. How could he avoid smiling at the thought of such a possibility, with before him the weight of two parallel lives to be lived by the same person.

It seemed to be just a game of thoughts, but these thoughts wanted to impose themselves strongly and to detach themselves, almost, from the person who generated them, in order to be able to materialize in a separate life. The spiral of thoughts, combined with the two different possible lives, began to produce two streams of thought, which began to separate and to pursue each other, so that each one could finally come out and express its own life.

Chapter one

That evening Mark resumed his competitive sports activity as a volley ball player, and this gave him a peculiar sense of anxiety. The start of the sports season always filled him with a certain excitement, because it was the moment in which he had to prepare himself mentally for a year full of uncertainty and challenge. The challenge was the mainspring of that energy that would gradually be released in the form of complex athletic activities carried out with the naturalness that derived from having acquired the necessary automatisms. And, that year, he particularly relished the challenge, because the choice of playing volley ball had become the choice of his life, a life dedicated to sports, almost a mission and a message to be transmitted to young people, even when he would no longer have the physical strength to play at the competitive level. That choice had caught his parents unprepared. Perhaps they would have preferred a life dedicated to study for him, with the possibility of having different, yet similar prospects as those that had been available to his brothers.

Meeting with his team mates was always a pleasant moment. New faces were welcomed warmly and with the dread of having a new competitor. There would be time to discover the worth of each individual, and to see a group take shape, in which each one would have to accept the capabilities of the others. Like every year, reporters formed a ring around the newly arrived players and the comments that the veterans always exchanged with each other were a learning experience: "It seems incredible that at the start of the season the glory goes only to the newly arrived players, even if they still have to prove their worth!", said Patrick sententiously. The others laughed and began to go towards the locker room carrying their bags over their shoulders. During that time of the year, everyone in the group had very well-kept tans and very short hair, and like every year Mark thought they could all belong to a paramilitary group. In fact, you could think of them as military men because, from that moment on, they would all have to observe only one important rule, i.e. that all other sports activities were banned for the next eleven months, so as not to jeopardize the precious work of the entire group.

In his heart, Mark smiled, but at the same time, he was proud to be one of those boys and to be able to say he was there too. Like every year, the coach was all ready and was waiting for everyone at the entrance to the indoor stadium; he shook everyone's hand and wished them well in their work. Mark looked into the coach's eyes for a second and, as always, he saw the will and determination to do a great job, in order to succeed in getting

the most from those boys, who were often too spoiled and already rich enough to make an industry worker mad. The locker room had a pleasant smell, a mixture of sweat, camphor and bath foam. Mark seemed to be breathing in deeply when, lowering his head slightly, he walked through the small door of the locker room. He noticed that the others did the same and, for a moment, he thought that they could be considered the drug addicts of sports, who “sniffed” the air of the locker room, or even better, as Sean used to say, “gym animals”. Now you could only hear the shuffling and the noise of the bags dropped roughly on the benches, but they all remained in silence, aware of what a great moment was and religiously took from the bags their socks, knee pads, briefs, shorts, tee shirts, and began to get dressed in silence. From that moment, each one began to charge up his batteries so as to be ready to jump out on the court a few minutes later to begin that first long and extenuating opening week, which would serve to get rid of all the effects of inactivity accumulated during that short vacation. “Boys, forget that the ball even exists!”, said Patrick, while he quickly left the locker room. The others’ murmurings were lost in the narrow corridor of the locker room, but they were all aware that that was the sad reality of the first few days of training. It was like the first day of school, and everyone was very happy to start right away. If you thought about how happy they were when it was time to stop training for vacation, because everyone was fed up with that work, it was surprising to see with how much enthusiasm they started the new sports season again after such a short time. The next three hours went by slowly, and in his heart, Mark felt that the initial enthusiasm had diminished, giving way to tiredness, which, as always, demanded insistently that an end be brought to that torture. “Tomorrow, I’ll feel as if a trailer truck had crushed me during the night!”, said Sean, and everyone laughed, not for the novelty of the comment, but because they knew well how they would really feel the next day. All these rites were being repeated over and over, and everyone was subconsciously happy to have started to eat up the miles around that volleyball court again and up and down those bleachers, which were just perfect for working up each single muscle.

Chapter two

Walking up the steps that led to chemistry seminar room A, Mark felt proud that he had finally entered the temple of science, which was there to give him the tools he needed to become a good researcher. The memory of the difficulty and insecurity he had experienced in taking the exam admissions for the University were now a thing of the past and only his great desire to learn kept him going during those moments. The moment in which he had decided that science would be his companion for the rest of his life was clearly present in his thoughts. That recollection still brought tears to his eyes and a cold chill gripped the nape of his neck. As always, he looked around for fear that he could be seen with that suffering attitude, which would have only revealed his weakness. “David, David – called a voice inside himself – why aren’t you here to sustain me, to keep me company and to comfort me with your presence and your words?” He almost did not notice that he had whispered those words and that a girl at the end of the corridor had turned to look at him. Science had been powerless to prevent his brother’s death, which had taken only ten days and had left him helpless and unable to continue with his life. That day, Mark was sitting outside of the intensive care unit still hoping that his brother's condition would change and that life would continue normally with his beloved brother at his side. The sudden appearance of the doctor distracted him from his thoughts and the words that followed put an end to a period of his life: “Are you David's brother? He just died”. The light went out of Mark's eyes, and an empty, noisy thought began to fill every corner of his mind. The tears, which had never stopped flowing during those days, had dried up and words had lost their meaning. At that moment, the meaning of the end of that intense, beautiful life was not immediately clear to all those who had known David, but for Mark that was the moment in which he took up his challenge with science: he would become a researcher so he could help to eradicate the disease that had killed his brother.

That lecture hall aroused fear and respect. It was still one of the few halls that had not been renovated like the new biology institute, and it was little used, even if it played an important role, which was respected by every student. Once again, Mark was overwhelmed with the same sadness that had accompanied him from the age of six, when his mother had left him at the elementary school to begin his career as a student. He watched his mother go away and his eyes filled with tears that he did not want to cry, but could not hold back. On that day again, that same rite of abandonment was taking place, and Mark had to overcome the emptiness of his loneliness with his own strength, so he

could have the possibility to reach the top of the hill of knowledge, from where he would be able to see a little further ahead.

Mark sat down in the higher, more distant, part of the lecture hall, for fear of standing out too much and to be able to have a partial view of the audience. This was a defence mechanism that always gripped him whenever he walked into a new environment and, inside himself, he felt that it was a losing attitude. Mark had been carrying that losing feeling with him and he knew that the feeling would have stayed with him for the rest of that first day. Mark still remembered the day when the feeling of being a loser had begun to lurk inside him. It had all started because of a stupid bet made by three boys. At stake was the superiority of each in demonstrating his virility, which consisted of nothing more than of being the first to kiss Nicole, their beautiful and intelligent classmate. Mark knew it was a game and considered Nicole to be too intelligent a girl to let herself be fooled by the class Latin lover, but the loser of the bet would carry that defeat with him forever. Mark could still clearly remember that clear sunny morning in June when Karl proudly approached him and said in a low voice: "I won the bet!" Mark knew very well what he meant, but he only managed to show a questioning look without being able to say a word. "I kissed Nicole, it was a real kiss, actually many kisses, and she kissed me back, a real success. There was never any doubt, you are a loser, while I'm a winner." Mark still smiled at that thought and at all the years that had gone by since that day; and yet he knew that since that day, he had faced all situations with determination, but also with great humility. The university professor's entrance erased all these thoughts in a second and Mark concentrated (on the lesson), assuming the attitude of the student whose only task was to empty his mind to make room for those notions which have formed the bases for building the knowledge, which would have allowed the scientist to express his gifts of rationality and inventiveness allowing him to contribute to the progress of learning. Mark felt pleasure in listening to that flow of words, which entered his mind easily collecting themselves in the free spaces of his mind. Occasionally, some of the sentences found a reference in some of his recollections, which ran towards them through the infinite mazes of his mind, happy to have found a corner that was not empty. Mark would have repeated that operation many times. Mark let himself be carried away completely by the professor, who, in turn, tried to establish with his students what would have been his basic interactive approach for the duration of the course. However, that day Mark noticed a discordant note in his approach because the professor was trying to impose a role of superiority, which was out of place. No one would have questioned the professor's superiority, it was only a matter of needing

to grasp the charismatic role of the person whose qualifications were decidedly superior to those of his students. This discordant note would have been noticed in every course and would have jeopardized the respect and devotion towards the teaching class, which was too busy imposing its “power ego”, instead of expressing its “competence ego”. The four hours of lesson went by quickly and, at the end, Mark concentrated his attention on the other students. His thoughts began to revolve around the expectations of all those potential colleagues who would have a strategic role in the work world a few years from now. The work world would receive an enormous boost, which was capable of reshaping the course of the future with the entrance of this new work force. Mark smiled at these thoughts and his glance unintentionally glided over a group of young people that was advancing in that moment. It was a group of young women and men who already expressed a sense of completeness and harmony that projected great strength. It was not a physical, but a mental strength capable of confronting obstacles with a total approach. The group consisted of several persons capable of combining the gifts of physical strength, intelligence and cleverness in such a way as to transform these distinct individuals into a dream team. At that moment, Mark felt fully aware inside himself that that group model would be the right model to apply for the research group in which he would work in the future. “Get your feet back on the ground!”, as always, the rational side of his consciousness was trying to bring his thoughts back to a more realistic dimension. His thoughts always tended towards idealization. “The ideal situation does not exist”, Mark repeated to himself, “the only thing that exists is the need to satisfactorily adapt the unpleasant sensation of incapacity!”

Mark greeted all those he met not with participation, but with naturalness, trying to show the security and tranquillity he did not possess. Most of the time he did not receive an intelligible answer, but vague and already distant verbal sounds. In a second, he found himself in the street without any more interest for that group of peers, and the great heat of the asphalt at noon left him gasping. He went with a firm step towards the small park, which covered a small part of the city with grass. He had only discovered it the day before and he had found a sense of cozy comfort in that place, which had given him a small thrill. The park took away the feeling of loneliness that had attached itself to him from the first day he arrived in that city, and this made him think: “The irony of life is that the child begins to become an adult when he starts to live alone and he loses the security provided by those who love him and are always close to him”. Mark thought that he had grown up when he lost his brother David. Now that he had had to leave everything behind for his

studies, he was discovering once again the value of that physical nearness, now lacking. He reached the park very quickly, but he was overwhelmed by a sense of powerlessness when he saw all the people that had invaded that grassy area. He turned back downcast and started to feel the anger rising inside himself. Mark understood that this set of circumstances was affecting his mood and he knew that his spirit of observation and capacity for meditation would also be dimmed.

Chapter three

Sitting at the usual corner table at the sports centre bar, the group consoled itself by drinking the usual bottles of orangeade, which were part of the rituals that accompanied the opening of the sports season. This group of friends had been meeting there for the past two years and a certain team spirit had grown among them, which continued even outside of the stadium. Mark, Patrick, Thomas and Sean were friends and they shared the same objective, which was that of emerging in sports. Sitting around a table after a game and enjoying the pleasure of relaxing while drinking something was part of training itself. At the beginning of the sports season, conversation during those days was monopolized by the still recent summer vacation. Patrick and Thomas, the most active in conquering ladies' hearts, competed with each other in telling about their experiences. Mark was happy to be a part of that group of friends and he shared the cheerfulness of those moments, which would be replaced by moments of great tension at the start of the championship games. Mark felt a certain anxiety that night also when he returned to his apartment. The large apartment he shared with the boys of the group was disorderly, the type of personalized disorderliness that characterized every living space. The land lady did not sympathize with this personalization. When Mark had agreed to move to the city from the small town where he lived with his parents, he was happy about having the opportunity to live independently. He enjoyed the freedom that came with not having to respect schedules and family habits, yet this freedom conflicted in the beginning with the discovery that he suffered great loneliness, which was quite real even though it was not physical. His discussions with Thomas about this did not succeed in freeing Mark of that feeling of abandonment, but Thomas insisted by saying: "Loneliness doesn't exist, it's something we invent to have an excuse to have to look for someone of the opposite sex to console us. In fact, when we're with people of the same sex, we continue to feel lonely, so stop looking for excuses, and get busy." Thomas's interpretation of life always left Mark dumbfounded, and Thomas always practised what he preached. Mark had never met anyone who was so active with the opposite sex. Only Sean was in disagreement with the group's attitude with regard to their emotional life because he was involved in a real relationship. Sean had a serious friendship and love affair with Alice: Alice was four years older than Sean and had a five-year-old son from a previous unsuccessful marriage, when she was very young. She came to visit Sean twice a month and would spend one or two days with the group. She was a very determined girl and had an almost maternal attitude towards the young

men in the group. When Alice was there, they avoided going to the restaurant where they had a price agreement; she prepared the meals, complained about the disorderliness and carefully tried to restore some order temporarily in the apartment. Then, when she was relaxed, she revealed all the fragility that was concealed behind the strength of being a single mother. Sean tried very tactfully to keep her happy and light-hearted, because when her past surfaced in her thoughts and conversations, it became difficult for everyone to remain insensitive to her sudden outburst of tears. Her little five-year-old boy was her only strength, but when Alice came to visit Sean, she always left him with her parents.

The other women who passed through the house were unworthy of note because most of the time they were a pleasant passing element of the décor. Often the exhausted group would meet after the evening training session for a last drink together and the topic of conversation was, as usual, the young ladies who served as “loneliness killers”, as Thomas called them. Thomas was the one who always went after breathtaking women. Mary Jane was one of these: bleached blond, one meter and eighty centimetres tall with Aegean blue eyes and the figure of a yachtswoman. The sight of them together was spectacular, two athletes with sculpted bodies that sometimes resembled a single body when they walked. Yet, in spite of the ease with which he found these beautiful girls, he never fell in love with any of them. Thomas was not handsome, but he was a great connoisseur of women's feelings; he satisfied all their whims and alternated slavish attitudes with cold, aloof ones. The result was that he never suffered from “loneliness”. That evening Thomas said: “I'm getting tired of Mary Jane, she thinks there could be a love story between us; she doesn't realize that romance only exists in books and not in real life. She's good at making love and nothing more.” He was always a bit brutal with his remarks, but he was never vulgar. Patrick was the handsome one of the group, but he was often unlucky with women. He always fell in love with girls who were complicated and socially committed. That evening, Patrick said: “Jamie insists that I attend boy scout meetings because, that way, with my sports experience, I could help the little kids that participate in these activities to grow. Fortunately, the training sessions and games give me an unassailable excuse for refusing, otherwise, my life would be a real disaster. Plus, she's never free, with all those provincial, regional and national meetings, not to mention the tight control on the part of her parents, who consider me to be someone without a real occupation.” Patrick was often quite sad, and yet there were large groups of girls at each training session just waiting for a sign to be able to put themselves at his disposal and adore him. Of the group, Mark was the one who exaggerated the least and who was not

particularly subject to lonely moments due to the unavailability of “loneliness killers”. So, that evening he said: “Look, here are my brave musketeers, who are full of regrets and sad thoughts for some reason or another. If you came up for air every once in a while, you would feel less obligated and stressed.” Their comments did not take long to arrive and, as always, they ended up saying altogether: “We always have to drag this dead weight of Mark with us!” Mark really believed what he said, because commitment to sports required a great deal of energy and he did not often feel that he had other commitments that were in any way binding. He wanted to distinguish himself as a player so he could become a team leader and take the group by the hand and lead it to victory every time. These thoughts, which he could not share with his friends, made him smile to himself. He was still too young and lack of humility could damage him quite a bit, he thought. These nightly meetings went on until one or two in the morning, and then they would go to bed reluctantly. After the first week of training, everyone was still very tired, but, at least, the muscle pains were beginning to disappear. This made things easier given their imminent departure for a retreat in the mountains, where they would spend ten days dedicated to “rest and beautiful walks”. The retreat was always a moment of great anxiety because they knew that the team's characteristics would emerge during those days with the possible selection of regular and reserve players. It was unlikely that anyone would be unhappy to find himself among the reserve players, but re-entry in the team with the regular players would require double the effort. Mark fell asleep with these thoughts.

The place selected for the mountain retreat was very beautiful, as always. They had a lodge in the middle of the woods, which accommodated only the members of the team. The alarm rang at eight in the morning, breakfast and departure around 9:30 for an hour's run up the nearby paths. Mark smiled at the thought of the care he would place in noticing the trail signs along the paths; he recalled the countless summer excursions that he made with his entire family. Often the red paint on a rock or the trunk of a fir tree was enough to encourage you, letting you know you were on the right course. The uphill runs were tied to dares with his brothers; a signal was enough for everyone to get lined up and ready to jump up and race the 50-100 meters at breakneck speed to the finish line. What joy, what happiness to feel the breathlessness and the need to double up to let air enter your lungs. Short flashes of memory accompanied Mark as he ran through those woods in a different company. At the beginning of the run, some subdued shouts could be heard, but after the first ten minutes time was marked only by the sounds of steps on the rocks or on the roots. For about fifty meters, the sprints were alternated by rundowns, and then finally they came

out on a stretch of level ground located on the hill. They all stopped slightly gasping, and no one paused to look around and enjoy the spectacular view that surrounded them. They all felt programmed and focused on one sole objective, all the rest did not matter. They always welcomed their return to the lodge with joy where they took the table, set with glasses and bottles of mineral water, by storm. These were small pleasures that everyone appreciated.

Everyone felt less uncomfortable that afternoon in the gym. It was a more familiar place; the odours were the ones they knew; their attentive gazes went towards the free areas around the outer edge of the court, towards the ceiling to check its height, the position of the lighting equipment and the material covering the ground. The whole of these four outer edges made it possible to make an immediate evaluation of the sports complex. It was incredible how capable these boys were of evaluating certain logistical aspects of the sports facilities with the precision of an architect and how many times they were disappointed by what they found. Mark often thought about the fact that the designers of sports facilities must never have practiced any type of sport in their entire life (judging by what they designed), so to him they were just “drawing-pens” incapable of initially seeing the practical aspects of what they were drawing in their mind. That indoor stadium had very bad lighting and the ground had very little spring in it.

Outside, Sean blurted out: “Now how can I show you that I’m still the best volleyball setter? This place puts my natural and instinctive gifts to a difficult test.” It was typical of Sean to comment naturally on the environment seeing only the subjective implications it had for his role. In reply to this, Patrick said: “If you keep looking for excuses, you’ll find yourself off this team, and you won’t know how to accept it. A real player is capable of making the most of any court and of adapting himself to any deficiencies in its facilities.” At that moment, Harry was next to Mark, and from the height of his ten years of experience, he said: “I’ve played in hundreds of stadiums, and yet, it’s always difficult to find the optimal conditions that allow you to play at your best. I don’t think it always depends on the physical conditions of the player, but it’s precisely the colours, lights and sound of the parquet, on the whole, that add a plus or minus to each one’s performance.” Harry was a good fellow who had considerable charm. He had joined the team that year, and his experience was always a source of great interest to Mark. These would be his last years of sports activity at the competitive level, but what he succeeded in transmitting to young people was his great desire to work and to show that he was still very competitive. For Mark, he was an example that deserved to be imitated. Later, he mentioned this to

Thomas, who displayed his scepticism, as always: “I wouldn’t believe that too much – he said – he has just come to fill his bag with money. Now, he’ll work hard for a while, so he can convince the directors that they made a good choice, and then you’ll see him seated on the bench as a reserve, so he’ll work even less.” Thomas could sometimes be very harsh in his judgements leaving Mark puzzled. Thomas’s life, like that of many other players, was simple and attentive to daily matters, as compared to what Mark envisaged for himself.

Those ten days of retreat together also served to help create a certain team spirit, which would be very important for the whole period of the championship. And yet, during those days, Mark had already realized that an essential requirement was missing. The group was close, but it lacked a common overall vision. Their common objective was a place as regular player on the team, not participation in the championship and the desire to come out among the top teams: the individual objective stood out in what should be a group, the personal objective was not the same as the team objective. Those sensations came out strongly during training, but confirmation of this tendency would come only with experience.

Chapter four

Mark returned to his room and continued to meditate on what he had learned that day. He had taken in many sensations that had left him stunned and that he was now unable to observe with detachment. He was too impatient to understand what his future would be. Four or five years of studies would take away a considerable part of his life, but would give him the tools that he would need for his career. He feared only one thing at that moment, and it was death. How terrible it would be if he were unable to put into practice what he would be preparing for and spending so much energy for. Perhaps life was to be taken more simply. If he were to die that moment, he would leave many regrets behind him. Instead, a person should live every day with the certitude that he was ready to die any time without leaving anyone with the feeling of having been abandoned. He found himself helpless before these thoughts, because quick soul-searching showed that his sudden death would have caught everyone unprepared. His parents, who had made many sacrifices in life to give him and his brother the opportunity to study, and his friends, with whom that thread of kinship resulting from the many moments spent together, would have been broken. He was becoming sad, so he decided to go down to the street to eat a sandwich at the bar. He found a place quickly in a narrow street not far from the apartment. He got a sandwich with vegetables and a beer and sat down at a table outside of the bar. Few people went by and they were all young, probably students like him. These people were rarely alone, but in groups of three or four young people, who light-heartedly occupied the entire street, with the usual command and arrogance of young people when they are in groups. As usual, Mark felt out of place; he always regretted the fact that, in order to be able to express himself a little, he always needed to feel included in the game and he never knew how to give something of himself by improvising. He would have needed time to fit in with the other students and to create the type of routine that is essential in order to feel comfortable. At times, he thought that if he had learned to play an instrument or had practiced a sport at the competitive level, he would have learned how to fit in more easily in life, instead of by fits and starts. It was like trying to go into a bag by first merging oneself with it and then finding oneself inside. Instead, he was always forced to make a hole in the bag initially, which was usually made too small, so as not to disturb others too much, and then he widened and ripped it on all sides, to get through it, thus making a huge tear in it. "Ciao!". He almost had not noticed that the greeting was for him, he was too intent on pursuing the thoughts that were crowding his head, making him totally inattentive to what

was happening around him. Before him was a young blonde who was smiling. "Ciao", he replied, still not sure whether the greeting was addressed to him. She presented herself extending her hand towards him: "My name is Mary and I saw you in class this morning." "I'm Mark and I didn't see you in class this morning." He felt ridiculous as soon as he had pronounced those few words. In such moments, he always thought of David, to whom a witty remark always came naturally, making people feel immediately at ease. He remained silent. She took up conversation again with a cheerful ringing voice: "I noticed you in class this morning because you remind me of a friend I met one summer, when I was on vacation with my parents in the mountains, and for a moment I thought you were actually him." Mark was no longer listening; that shudder that gripped his neck and moved down his spine was unmistakable. Two things came immediately to his mind. The first was the black and white photograph that hung in his mother's bedroom, which had been taken in the garden of the school where his grandfather worked as a janitor. His arm was wrapped around David's neck, they were both small children of almost the same height, and were dressed the same way; they looked so similar that people often took them for twins. The second was that August of two years ago, when David returned from a short week of vacation he had taken from his work at the hospital where he was a doctor. He had come back beaming and shaken by an event, which he said had made him discover the beauty and harmony of an emotional relationship between a man and a woman. Mark remembered David's story very well, and could almost remember his every word in telling him about that casual, yet strange encounter. He had met a girl much younger than himself, who believed that their encounter had been a sign of destiny. They had met by chance during a walk through the wood, which was just outside of the town. A young girl advanced along the path inside the wood singing softly and dancing, letting herself go happily to the joy that probably came from her young age. David suddenly felt himself to be tuned to that natural, cheerful expression of joy, almost imagining her to be a young doe, an integral part of that environment. They met in the middle of the path and began to dance lightly on the pine needles scattered along the path, which muffled their steps. They continued dancing for a few seconds and then exchanged a bow. Mark could still see that scene in the middle of the wood in his mind, as if he had experienced it himself instead of his brother. The girl's name was Mary. They spent much time together during those three days before David's return to the city. They had lived those days intensely, two lives that were destined not to never meet again. David had not talked much about those three days, but he had always stressed the harmony that existed between them. Mark smiled as he

thought about his brother's description of those blue eyes with their intense color and gaze. Only then did he realize that he was getting lost in those same blue eyes and in that same strange and intense gaze. These thoughts had made him lose his awareness of where he was, and when he had collected himself, he said: "... would you like to sit down, would you like to have something ..." "No, I have to go home, I'll see you tomorrow in class." Her answer took him by surprise and he was unable to retort with a single word. He watched her walk away lightly, as if dancing. The sadness that had seemed to disappear for a few minutes began to intrude upon his feelings again. His mind became crowded with the words he would have liked to say, clever, pleasant phrases were formed and faded away playfully. The thought of David became more intense. Why, thought Mark, why had he not introduced himself, why was he unable to react naturally in unexpected situations? And now that a period of his beloved brother's past life was opening up, he was unable to grasp it, and was letting it go by. He felt a secret anger explode inside himself, he left the bar and began to walk aimlessly around the city. He hated himself, his life, his incapacity and he only wanted to do something that would completely absorb his mind. He quickly reached the apartment and picked up the notes he had taken in class that morning and began to read. After a few minutes, he realized that his thoughts were taking a completely different course and the ink marks on those pages were meaningless at that moment.

At that point, he decided to write a letter to his parents. He imagined their joy in receiving and reading it; he could almost hear the gentle voice of his mother, who would have read the words out loud, filling them with the feeling that only a mother could give them. His mother would have softened and magnified those words filling them with meanings he had not even expressed. This thought managed to free Mark's mind of the disorder it had found itself in shortly before, and the sun seemed to break through his dark pessimism. In his letter, he tried to describe the anxiety of those first days of university life and his impatience to learn very quickly. He also tried to transmit his first impressions of this open and adult environment, so different from that of high school, where horizons seemed much more limited. And yet he knew that his parents had already felt all these sensations when his brothers had gone through all these same things before him. In a second, this thought took away his desire to continue writing and he closed the letter brusquely promising to provide more information at his next visit.

His thoughts were concentrated on Mary again, whom he would see the next day and who had been so close to him that afternoon. His brother David had shared moments of deep harmony with her; this made him feel as though he already knew her. And yet, he had

been afraid to let her know who he was. On the contrary, he knew he had not roused enough interest in her. Almost without noticing it, he had taken an old notebook from his desk, one which had been used many years before in elementary school and which had a paper towel attached to the last page, a souvenir of the times when they used to use a fountain pen and ink stand to write. He had no idea where David had found that notebook, but it contained comments, phrases and drawings that he had written down over the years. It was the only inheritance that was left to Mark, and when he had moved away from home to study, he had decided to take it with him, as if it were a good luck charm. The notebook contained a very mysterious drawing: it was a pencil sketch of the face of very beautiful girl, but it had no mouth. Many times David had told him that he had been unable to reproduce that detail of her face the way he would have liked to, although it had remained strongly impressed in his memory. Now Mark looked at those eyes, with their strange and intense gaze and he saw the sheet of paper come to life under his eyes; he could clearly see the mouth that was missing, now he heard the sound of that voice in his mind, now he again saw the head tilted to the side, and the tears began to flow from his eyes again as they had during those days when he sat on the chair outside the emergency room. That was Mary's face! This discovery made him sad, but elated, knowing that he would be able to see her face again, a face which had now become so well impressed in his memory.

When you plan something in your mind, you should always take into account reality, which often is something quite different. Not only was he unable to go near Mary the next day, but for almost a week, he was unable to notice her among the other students. For the first few days, he felt enormously frustrated, but then his daily work at school began to absorb much of his energy and Mark managed to put aside his thoughts of Mary. In class, he began to concentrate on the contents of the various lectures given by his professors, but something seemed to be out of tune. He observed again that his professors did not succeed in communicating the interest and passion that every scientific subject possessed and the mix of information that was supposed to create enthusiasm in the student. Mark tried to find all kinds of excuses for them, the repetitiveness of the work, the university environment's difficulty in stimulating students properly, but essentially he was convinced that they themselves were responsible for the scarce enthusiasm. The chemistry classes were taught void of any context surrounding the subject; they were full of formulas that were temporarily hung on the blackboard. The textbook was always cited as a valid support for study and often it was the only support for study. They did not realize that students needed to give life to a textbook and this was possible only with the professor's

contribution. Therefore, Mark knew that even if he skipped a few classes, he would have suffered no consequences, because he would nevertheless have to give life to the textbook himself.

He saw Mary again only two weeks after their first meeting. It was while they were changing classrooms to go to histology class, and they almost bumped into each other in the corridor. Mark felt his heart beating wildly inside him, and his gaze contemplated that face, which he had already known subconsciously for a long time. His gaze lingered on that mouth, the full lips, at the same time cheerful and sullen, which perhaps explained his brother's inability to reproduce them. Neither one spoke and Mark felt that this was uniting them more than any word could; he felt a wave of happiness fill his heart. Finally, the two simultaneous "ciao!" collided in the space that separated them and they both found themselves smiling. It did not seem possible that they could be the same two persons who had met two weeks before. Both seemed to want to avoid saying anything to keep from ruining the enchantment of those anxious seconds. Mark asked: "What are you doing after class? Would you like to have a drink together?" Words that were almost whispered and searched for slowly, leaving a suspended silence for fear of receiving a negative answer. Her look was uncertain, but then she nodded in assent and they went off towards lecture-hall B. That sensation of incompleteness and suspension remained between them while they entered the lecture-hall and they sat down next to each other in the third row. Mark was unable to take notes, while Mary carefully wrote down her notes neatly often using a different colour pen to highlight important concepts. A sense of incompleteness and uncertainty continued to reign between them, which Mark felt so strongly that he was troubled. He accepted the situation only rationally and waited anxiously for the lecture to end. That girl was bewitching him and was binding him intensely to a past he was trying in every way to forget, or better to interpret. David the even-tempered one. David the pleasant one. David always the happy one. David the intelligent one. David the unassuming one, came back almost physically through that girl, whom Mark did not know, but who had left a mark on David. Anecdotes of the life spent with his brother spilled over and superimposed themselves in his thoughts, causing his eyes to moisten. Mary's profile was close and he occasionally stopped to look at it with fear for just a few seconds, afraid that she would notice. He did not realize when the professor concluded his lecture and he was brought back to reality only by the movement that took place all around him. Mary was putting the finishing touches on her notes and did not notice Mark's anxiety; however, he felt guilty for not having paid attention during the lecture.

They went out into the pale October sun without knowing where to go. They started to walk on the bank along the canal and enjoyed the warmth of autumn, avoiding any conversation that could be inappropriate at that time. Mark said: "Nice day, but it's difficult to interpret." Mary understood immediately and said in an almost declaiming tone: "We are part of this environment, small, imperfect and insignificant animals before the grandeur of Nature!" They exchanged a look and burst out laughing, neither one had been born to be a poet, instead, they were two simple young persons full of life and expectations for the future. At that point, Mary, suddenly lively, said as she ran: "I'll see you at the bar at the end of the walk." Mark was taken by surprise and when he started to run after her, the distance between the two of them was too great to fill. He caught up with her at the door of the bar and said, gasping: "Nice race, but the next time I'll start first." That race had given a fantastic interpretation to that beautiful autumn day, thought Mark. They ordered two glasses of fruit juice and his mind went to work on trying to predict the next moves. He was afraid to lose her and knew that the thought of it alone was already a signal that he was doing something wrong. They sat down at a table and the conversation moved immediately to their new experience with the university. Mark asked: "What do you think of these first few days of classes?" She replied: "Every topic discussed is very appealing and the appeal is enhanced by our ignorance of the subject. The parting of the doors of knowledge slowly opens our minds to new possibilities, so that our minds can open up to a new and vaster horizon. I'm very upset to discover how ignorant I am and how much difficulty I have in projecting the small things I discover each day inside a more complex vision."

Mark was struck by her enthusiasm, by her positive attitude towards the lectures, which he considered to be so empty judging from the professor's contribution. He had never thought about the actual contents of each lecture, about the true meaning of their studying. She continued: "When I was small, I always tried to investigate every subject I came across as much as possible and, even now, my father remembers with terror those times, when he felt so unable to answer my persistent questions. The continuous search for new answers and new challenges every day, even with regard to things I know nothing about, often guides my actions." She stopped and took a long sip of orange juice. Mark looked at her more carefully and realized that he was letting himself be conquered by the light manner with which she told him about herself. Her long blonde hair fell straight to her shoulders; her eyes were of a blue that perhaps was a little green; and her gaze was always seeking to make eye contact. Her nose and mouth harmonized well together above an almost

receding chin. Mark closed his eyes and saw his brother's radiant face as he walked into the room and explained with an unsmiling face that that drawing would remain unfinished forever. And yet, that girl's eyes were full of curiosity and intelligence, and the absence of the mouth served only to create even more mystery. He re-opened his eyes and saw that he was not dreaming, she was in front of him and her enigmatic mouth was smiling. Mark continued to examine her casually and he was attracted by that slender, but well-shaped body, and her athletic step gave her a very confident look. She looked like the classic girl who had practiced every sport with ease. When he found her eyes again, he noticed her questioning look and excused himself by saying: "You're a very attractive girl and these thoughts suit you perfectly. As a matter of fact, I had never looked at things with your same participation. Actually, I realize that I had stopped at the first superficial stage, where the lack of participation on the part of the professors had completely obscured my capacity for analysis. I'm very grateful to you for having made me see the real road that I truly want to take, i.e. the one that inspires my decision possibly to explore the field of science with the critical eye of a researcher. I certainly don't want to teach according to the rules of university teaching, because I think that this is a mission, which one should dedicate himself to with care and competence. Instead, I think about the small daily lessons given in the field that make up the real nature of the researcher. I feel almost like crying at the thought that only ten days have passed since the university opened, and that there is still very much road ahead. Nevertheless, as my mother says, "There is a time for everything!" She seemed amused and quickly said: "Those dear old popular sayings that keep our expectations inside very narrow limits, which leave little room for the imagination." That sentence made him feel that girl very dear and close to him; he would have liked to hug her and kiss her delicately on the mouth. Instead, he said: "Enough with these thoughts, which will one day somehow see us in action a few years from now, if we're lucky, and let's talk about something else. Do you know if this city offers some nightly attraction, where I can spend a few carefree hours, maybe by drinking a good beer, or seeing a good movie that one should not miss?" "There are plenty of places you can go to for a beer, but I'm not much company for you for that because I don't drink. However, I can suggest a few places. As far as cinema is concerned, there are some new movies, even if the most popular genres in this summer season are of the Rambo series. The people in this area are not too fond of social events, because, in most cases, groups of friends are pre-established and tightly knit structures, which do not easily let new people in. So, in your case, it's best if you socialize with the other students who are not natives of this city and who go home on

the week-ends. In fact, most of the social activities take place during the week-ends," Mark was perplexed by these statements, as if they were meant to exclude any type of interaction between the two of them, so he timidly said: "Therefore, you are excluding the possibility of going out with me one of these evenings to show me some of the local attractions, so that I can become more familiar with life in this city. " Dear Mark, I already have a boyfriend so I doubt that any such eventuality is possible; I'm sorry." The tone of her voice had become very different. He noticed a tone of slight disappointment, which Mark was unable to interpret; he wondered whether it was his fault, because of something he had said, or whether it was just something he thought in his head. In any case, she finished her drink in a few quick sips and got ready to get up. Mark hurried to do the same, but she signalled him to remain and moved away without leaving him any other possibility, and then she left the bar in a hurry. He did not know what had really happened, or what had caused the sudden change in her mood. He was stunned and unable to move. She had slipped away from him a second time and now he knew that it would have been difficult to get near her during the lecture as well. He would never be able to resign himself to losing that girl. To him she meant the possibility of continuing to have his brother near him and of living and enjoying the life that he had ahead of him.

On the other hand, he was afraid to force the course of events and let himself be guided by a fatalistic attitude. His mother's expression "Whatever happens is best!" came to his mind. Something positive had come from that meeting, and it was that he needed to assume a more critical attitude during the lecture, by paying more attention to the contents than to the form.

The days went by quickly and he had no more occasions to meet Mary. A certain camaraderie had begun to establish itself among his fellow students and the students formed many groups, which met in the different halls of the university to study and then to go eat together in the various university cafeterias. It was a cheerful environment; they still showed no signs of nervousness because the calls for exams were still fairly distant in time, not until the early months of the new year. He went home every fifteen – twenty days and it was very pleasant to sit around the same table, around which they had sat when they were growing up, and find that they were still close enough to joke and tell each other about the latest events in their lives. A part of everyone's memories, however, always turned to the person who was absent, David. His presence could be felt in any case, because each one of them knew that David, especially, would be happy about those get-togethers. Mark found himself thinking of Mary, about that subtle thread that connected

him to his brother's past, but he had decided not to discuss it with anyone in his family for the time being. He also thought that the only one who would care about that story would be his mother, who was so sensitive, but still too fragile to let herself be caught by the memory of her son. Mark's parents were the most vulnerable and they looked at all their children with special tenderness, as if they were afraid to see them go away before them, thus changing the natural course of life once again. They had always been totally dedicated to their children, and the results obtained had in many cases been superior to their expectations, which they had actually never shown. Now that they were no longer young, everyone's new worries very often got the upper hand, obscuring that harmony, which disappeared as if by magic. Nevertheless, for Mark, going home was always a very happy time, and this was also because the security he felt in knowing the places and the people allowed him to enjoy the kind of spontaneous tranquillity that was not rationally controlled. On Sunday evening, goodbyes had a dull and sad sound, which made going away with a light heart impossible.

He knew that they would get used to this too, and perhaps time would have made those moments pass quickly. They were always torn because sometimes they wanted to live each good or bad moment of life intensely, while at other times, they wished they could already be a few years into the future so that their lives could take a very different, and much more interesting turn, they thought. The train trip took two hours and during that time, Mark felt very sad; now only the thought of Mary and David gave him comfort.

Chapter five

They would be playing their first friendly match with the local team that evening, and at lunch, each player could already feel the tension, which was very difficult to hide. In any case, those were the favourite moments of the coaches, who were the only ones, instead, to show no signs of tension at all. On the contrary, for them, it was another occasion to measure the psychological resistance of each player. The coach alone already knew the short-list of the regular players who would be the first to enter the field. Everyone knew that this did not mean much, yet that initial decision would be important for the subsequent changes that could be made. Mark suffered like everyone else and he knew that he would not be one of the first six players to enter the field. It was hard to explain why, but it was possible to understand how much rapport was being created between the coach and the player by the coach's look, the tone of his voice and the number of words he used to correct a badly done exercise. This would then have an influence on the coach's opinion and on the player's performance. In fact, it is impossible to be indifferent to one's feelings. The relationship between each player was essentially different, because, unless a player's superiority was recognized, the relationship that was established was one of camaraderie. In the relationship between the coach and the player, instead, the coach would add a subjective analysis to the technical gap existing between the players, which would, nevertheless be impossible to interpret. These thoughts were crossing his mind while he superficially followed the conversation of his team mates, which was not following any logical thread, but consisted of comments coming from different sides. In any case, a technical work-out was to take place in the afternoon. The coach wanted to go over some basic exercises that had not been taken into consideration during the first days of training. The afternoon went by very quickly and there was a certain electricity in the locker room in the evening. The coach, who was very relaxed, emphasized the friendly nature of the game, which was not so important in that preparatory stage; but served rather to make them understand certain mechanisms, which only the competitive nature of the game could make it possible to carry out completely. In any case, the game would have made the local team very happy. Mark could not understand why coaches always tried to hide the real reason for a competitive match at that stage of training, knowing very well that to each player, a game made sense if it meant fighting for victory. If it did not lead to a final victory, every technical and tactical decision would be wrong. In his life, he had met few coaches who thought of the team this way, and he asked himself whether their desire to

have decision-making power was not the real reason for the way they acted, regardless of the effectiveness of their choices.

The choice of the six main players was only communicated at the last minute and everyone showed great determination during the pre-game warm-up, as if they could change the tactical choice for the game by putting themselves on show for that half hour. Mark was not very surprised about his exclusion, but he was surprised that Thomas and Patrick had been left out too, Their roles were interchangeable, but they could not both be left out. This situation immediately created some tension in the entire group, and those who started among the six main players threw a puzzled look at those who had been left out. "You can't mess around with the truly valuable players right from the first game. This could compromise the rest of the training period because everyone will remember this initial tactical choice.", said Mark out loud. Thomas seemed to be indifferent to the choices made and said: "You'll be able to judge when you find yourself having to make the same choices as a coach, and only then!" Mark was stunned and continued to be shocked by the fatalism of that young man who had much more experience and charisma than he did, and who used a certain detachment in dealing with others, without allowing anyone to give him a stand with regard to anything. He seemed to have created a mask of indifference to protect himself from some unknown fear and Mark decided that there was no need to reply, and tried to concentrate on the game. The lack of balance between the technical merits of the two teams was very clear, considering that the local team played in the C series; but there was a lack of imagination and precision in the more titled team, which lowered the game's level of quality, thus leaving wide margins for competition, clearly to the benefit of the locals. Mark continued to be surprised by the components of the starting sextet and could not understand whether it was just a misjudgement on his part. This sense of confusion made it impossible for him to be happy when the coach told him to warm up. He knew that he could only perform badly at that moment, and that with this attitude, he would have difficulty in pulling the joker out from his deck, thus changing the course of the game. He made the last two points of the set they lost, also due to an error on his part in the final stage of a spike. The rival team was charged up even more by that initial advantage and the beginning of the second set saw Mark and his team mates go under seven to zero. At this point, the simultaneous entrance of Thomas and Harry radically changed the course of the match. With determination and by saying appropriate words in the crucial moments of the set, the two veteran players restored the confidence of the younger members of the team and finished the set in fifteen minutes. The next two

sets were of no consequence, a real cinch to win. The coach dared to make many other changes, but the two winning players never left the playing field. Experience had come into play, and with it the ability to play all the balls to the best advantage, even the most difficult ones, which were supposed to end up with the ball on the ground. Mark remembered that game and the lesson it taught him forever. It was impossible to understand the importance of a coach's or a player's experience until you see it in action. Once Mark reached the locker room, he found the courage to say to Thomas: "Sorry for what I said before the game." He felt embarrassed, but even more, he felt sad because he was realizing how difficult it would be to achieve the kind of maturity as a player that allowed you to understand when it was necessary to intervene and how. Thomas did not answer, but his smile told him that he understood. The next five days of the retreat went by peacefully, and they were all very happy the day they returned to the city. Getting away from the "maddening crowd" for a while was useful, but afterwards, everyone felt the need to get back to their own environment. When they got into the car to go home, Mark was very happy and he thought that the presence of the other three members of the group contributed to his happiness. During the retreat, they were even forbidden to use cell phones. The aim was to create an environment that represented a total change from one's normal habits for a period of time. The players were only allowed to make telephone calls to the technical staff, in case they had an emergency. The phone began to ring as soon as they had put their bags down; it was Mary Jane. Thomas did not give her a chance to make conversation and brusquely told her that they could only see each other after the evening training session. "I'm not ready to put up with her for a whole afternoon, let's try to take her in small doses!", he said as soon as he had hung up.

The next call came after only five minutes, and it was for Patrick, who accepted a date with Jamie with pleasure; strangely enough, she was free for the afternoon and ardently wished to spend it with him. "That girl certainly has a way about her – said Sean – she keeps him on tenterhooks, so he doesn't get away, but every once in a while, she loosens the line."

When the switchboard had cooled down, Sean called Alice with the composure that distinguished him. His voice was calm and cheerful, as is typical of a person in love. Mark called his parents to let them know he had returned to the city. He did not regret that he did not have a girl friend at that time. He felt the need to take a moment to reflect and clear his mind about his expectations in a love relationship. When he thought about his past experiences, he felt a deep emptiness and was afraid that if he continued to have affairs

he did not believe in, he would end up destroying his feelings. He was pleased that he managed to put up with being single, even if it was very difficult at times. They were always in touch with plenty of available girls, who believed that they were growing up and staying in step with the times this way. All the players took advantage of this fact without having any scruples. The result was not very gratifying.

Perhaps what had made him decide to be more careful with his love life was a situation in which a fellow team member, William, had found himself. Like many members of the team, William also came from out of town, but in spite of this, he already had a relationship with a girl from his home town, Jennifer. They saw each other on week-ends and lived the few hours they had together very intensely. Jennifer was a sweet girl, who was very much in love with William. Her kindness and light-heartedness had made her a friend to everyone. She was often with the group when they went out on week-ends. She was pretty and very discrete. When she became pregnant, everyone felt involved and sorry for that girl who was still so young. All they talked about was Jennifer's pregnancy and the opinions on what had happened to her were very different. Mark had been very shocked when he started to hear talk about an abortion. Perhaps it was due to his upbringing, perhaps it was his desire to counter adverse situations. Many times Mark found himself thinking about that situation and he wished he had had the strength to talk to Jennifer about it, like everyone else did. Instead, he felt that he had nothing to do with that event, not so much because he did not feel the weight or suffering of it, but because he felt that his words would have been useless, not up to the task they were meant for, which was to make Jennifer understand the immense value of the life that was growing inside her.

Many times he put together sentences in his head, which could perhaps have made her think a little more about her situation. His indecision hurt him even more when he learned that Jennifer and William had decided for an abortion. Mark was alone in his room that evening after training and he wrote these few lines on a small note pad: "Jennifer you are extinguishing a light in yourself, I hope that you will never need it in the future."

Mark's eyes were moist with tears, but anger was of no help in those moments. She only needed to stay in the hospital one day for the operation. The next day she wanted at all costs to come watch a small practice match. For the entire game, Mark was unable to take his eyes from her as she sat in a corner of the bleachers struggling with an uncontrollable nose bleed. She looked like a drug addict and her sister was helping her patiently. William was not particularly upset and kept saying that everything had gone well. That evening, Mark passed by William's house to pick up some documents and he found him with a new

girl. He felt enormous contempt for him and, maybe, that was the reason why he had left Ann, for whom he did not feel any emotional attachment, and had decided to take a pause to think. Two days after the abortion, Mark spoke with Jennifer. She was suffering very much because of the treatment she had received in the hospital. Her voice was monotonous, without those sudden changes of intensity that were typical of the way she spoke. Her gaze was lifeless and her words penetrated Mark like blades in an open wound. "When I arrived at the emergency gynaecology section, the nurse behind the glass looked me up and down with a contemptuous look. And yet, I could see in her a precious and valid helper for a mother who had reached full term of a pregnancy and about to give birth. I realized that I was going to the wrong place to do something that was unnatural, where I had to be segregated as someone tainted." The suffering that Mark heard in those words said by a young girl, who had to grow up suddenly, left him feeling empty and incapable of giving her any comfort. She continued: "I almost tried to make my presence less annoying and to leave that place as soon as possible. I was not angry with the nurse or with that hostile environment, but my mind was struggling with doubts that had never manifested themselves up to that moment. The efficiency of the doctors and nurses contributed to making the decision she had taken seem even more oppressive." At that moment, Mark wished he could go back in time and take that still pregnant woman far away from the environment, in which she had had to live, and allow her to have her child, so he could take care of it. He knew it would have been a crazy idea, impossible to carry out, but now that feeling was very strong in him. He took a long look at her face for fear that he would forget the intensity of those features, which had forever replaced the light-heartedness of her age on her pretty face. When she left, Mark became aware inside himself that Jennifer's unfortunate experience had added something precious to his feelings, it was "participation".

Like all his team mates, Mark belonged to an environment in which life was apparently very easy, and where money made many things possible. Mark took the liberty of bringing this subject up with Harry, who was much more mature, and who answered: "You could go on like this for a long time, but then the time will come when you will be disgusted with yourself; that will be the moment in which you will really have to start growing up, and as a result, even your relationship in a couple will take on a different meaning." Mark nodded, but he had not really understood the meaning of what Harry said; it would have taken quite a few more years for many of the things he had experienced in his past to become clear.

The pace of the training sessions was becoming increasingly pressing because the championship was going to start in about a week, which was when the validity of what they had done up to that time would be judged. The tension in the locker room was growing more and more each day. The younger team members could feel much nervousness in the older players. Mark realized that for those who did not have an important sports background or a certain charisma, it was twice as difficult to impose oneself, so the only alternative was to accept, possibly without any big shocks, the excessive power of the senior players. Mark could rely on his past years of breaking-in, so it was comparatively easy for him to survive in that environment.

The first championship game was being played away and the bus trip immediately offered the usual propitiatory routines: card games, reading of sports dailies, reading of books and comic strips. Everyone had their set of things to do, which they would continue to do at the restaurant and which would end inside the locker room. There, each single action was repeated with the great detail of a parachutist folding his parachute, for whom making an error meant risking his life. The coach's last recommendations were perhaps superfluous, but even he needed relief from the tensions that had accumulated during the entire pre-championship period. The little conversation made by the players was trivial. It was obvious that each one was taken up with his own difficulty in concentrating himself. Mark remained silent and only a smile of circumstance occasionally appeared on his face. Sean tried to joke, but his witty remarks were a little awkward and not very brilliant. Patrick was very nervous and unapproachable. In these moments, Thomas managed to be naturally cheerful, as if he wanted to play down the event and make their entrance onto the court easier. Even if the main sextet had already been chosen and Mark and Patrick, among others, had been excluded, everyone felt the burden of the game in the same way, and the players on the bench felt even more motivated to have the opportunity to emerge and earn a place in the starting sextet. The young age of the players sitting on the bench also helped to make them aware that a door could open suddenly and that it was not too late. It would have been a test for everyone, including the coach; first, a test for the players themselves, and then for the public, directors and friends.

All of these elements were perceived proportionally, but the result was the certainty that it would have been a very difficult enterprise, for which they gladly welcomed a pinch of good luck. Entering the field for the warm-up was very important and everyone's eyes cast quick glances to scrutinize the faces of the few fans who had already flocked to see them, ready to exult and urge their favourite players on. The first steps of this light race gave

them the strength to begin eliminating many of the emotions, which would have done little to improve their athletic performance. Those first steps allowed them to reconcile themselves with their habitat, allowing each one to be a part of his own world, in which all the steps and actions performed had something natural about them. "Gym animals", Sean's famous expression, returned to Mark's mind, and he never felt it to be so true and profound as in those moments. It was a matter of training, and those boys had been trained to have the greatest motivation since they were young, i.e. that, with the physical gifts they all had, they could emerge. The only certainty they should have had was that they could have distinguished themselves, it was just a question of dedication and training. If someone had distracted these boys from this primary goal, he would have succeeded in producing mediocre players, who would have always been half way between possible careers, all equally probable, and all probably mediocre. Excellence could be achieved by concentrating ones efforts and motivations only in a single direction, any other effort had to take second place. Not all the players were convinced of this. and the result would be seen in their lives. The moments went by quickly, and the pace of the warm up was very fast. They were all ready to switch, in unison, to the warm up with the ball: that moment made their anxiety grow even more. Those warm up shots with his team mates in that particular moment would contribute greatly to each one's performance. Only if they performed certain athletic movements naturally during the warm up and during the spike, would they be able to play the game, knowing that they could do their best. Each player was aware of this and Mark was assessing these moments as he exchanged the ball with Harry. He felt that their movements were sufficiently fluid and that certain quick movements were performed with naturalness. He felt inside that it would be an important moment for him if he played. Yet this eventuality was unlikely to occur very easily. He realized that this was just a fleeting moment of exaltation. Harry seemed to have read Mark's mind and tried to spur the young man on so he would improve his exchanges. They were quite charged when they reached the net and the first test spikes were made with hesitation, as if to test their own physical abilities. A few moments practicing spikes and then the moment of acknowledgement by the referee marked a fundamental moment, six minutes to go. For the players, it was like the prompt that a formula one driver sees before him at the starting grid, which signals the few minutes left before the start. All of them would have been ready to jump to it as quickly and powerfully as their bodies allowed them. Those last moments would only be used by the starting players, who would thus have a greater number of shots so as to be at their best mentally and physically at the start. The whistle two minutes

before the game signalled that game time was really near, during which there was only enough time for a few serves from the end area. The public was ready to sing songs and was just finishing up the last cheers, which would leave an annoying buzz in everyone's ears.

Chapter six

They faced the first university exam with a certain lightness, because they did not know what it consisted of; in fact, there was considerable excitement, which mixed with fear and tension, made the moment a memorable one and worth experiencing. Who knows why, that day Mark thought that it gave you the same sensation you felt on your first trip in an airplane. You were happy to try the experience; it was an important and necessary passage, in order to be able to face more easily the next time, which would then be simpler. Instead, you discover that it is impossible to get used to any exam, just as you never get used to airplane trips. You are always aware that you could fail the exam, and often, this does not depend on you, and therefore, everything becomes uncontrollable. There is no one who can help you in those moments; the morning of the exam, Mark began to create routines that, in case he passed the exam, he could repeat each time. They are small things that you repeat at first without paying too much attention to what you are doing, but later you remember them clearly because they are very important for your being imperfect.

There was much participation at the first call for each exam session and everyone was tense. They all knew each other more or less well, but at such times, even those you knew the least became like old friends.

Each student was also fascinated by the test he had to face, and that he would give his best by pulling all the details out of his head, even those he had paid less attention to while he prepared for the exam. It was a clash between the professor and the student, which was certainly not on an equal level, but which would serve to create that power play, which would then be a constant of social life, as a whole.

When his turn came, Mark felt very nervous and began to realize that the time had actually come after he had sat down and had gone through the identification procedure. At that point, his concentration was at its peak and Mark felt that only the professor and himself existed, and nothing else. The first question put him at ease right away; it was on a subject that he liked very much and that he had enjoyed studying. This type of question excited and then relaxed him, making his concentration diminish. The second question caught him unprepared and recovering his concentration and maintaining the quality of the exam with the subsequent questions revealed itself to be very complex and difficult. His final grade was comparatively low, but he would not have given up that grade for any reason on earth. He was somewhat disappointed for not having managed to express himself at his best: the

comparison with the teacher had been a defeat for him. He got up and went out of the hall quickly exchanging only a few nods to take leave of the other students in his same course. Once he was outside, he was happy to have passed the exam, but he felt a little resentful for having passed it at less than his best. He felt a strange sense of incompleteness, as if he had taken part in a racing competition and had had to slow down when he was half way down the track. At the end, you still receive a consolation prize, but it is not what you wanted; you accept it because it is difficult to turn it down after having used up so much energy to prepare for the competition. He went out to the fresh air of a February afternoon. He was still confused and did not know whether he had done the right thing in sitting that exam without having first attended other exams. He went into a bar, the first one he found near the University. He called home, and after three rings, his mother's voice made him quickly forget the insecurity he had felt shortly before. That sweet and comforting voice made him feel the strength and tranquillity he needed. He quickly felt the relief that telephone conversation gave him and told her about the exam he had taken and his grade. His mother immediately rejoiced with him and his father also cut into the conversation joyfully and congratulated him. Everything was changing, he was beginning to taste the happiness of that moment, which he had always tried to imagine, without even coming anywhere close to it.

In fact, every undertaking, whether large or small, always brings some dissatisfaction with it, and often you feel the need to be surrounded by people that are capable of letting you see the positive side of the matter. Mark felt a great sense of gratitude rising inside him toward his family who knew how to let him enjoy the pleasure of his success. The phone conversation continued cheerfully and when it was almost time to hang up, his father reminded him that they would all celebrate that event together on his next trip home. For a few seconds, he stayed there with the phone in his hand, while the disconnected signal could be heard. He smiled and was almost sad at the thought that he could not already be home to see his parents' faces, while he enjoyed those moments of joy. He sat down at a table and ordered a glass of orangeade. He was too nervous to eat anything, even if he had eaten nothing since that morning. He was unwinding from the nervousness and tension he had inside him and wanted to do something important to make that day memorable.

Mark closed his eyes and thought about David, and as if by magic, Mary's face appeared clearly in his mind. He had never seen her again in class and he did not understand what made her so complex and unsure inside. Maybe she had changed her faculty, maybe she

had just become tired of going to class, so many questions with no answers. And yet, he would have liked to see her again and to look into her eyes to try to read something about her inside them. He immediately realized what he could do on that important day. With uncontrollable anxiety, he began to look up a name in the phone book he found in the bar. Lorener, a single last name, which almost looked in Mark's eyes as if it were written in larger letters. There was just one and no other name. It could not be true; Mark dialled the number frenetically. After a few rings, a male voice answered almost discouraging Mark, who had to make an enormous effort to say: "I'm Mark, could I speak with Mary?" "Hold on a moment, who shall I say is calling? "

"Mark, I'm a classmate." The person covered the receiver with his hand and then he finally heard Mary's voice: "Hello.." "Hi, it's Mark, we saw each other in class a couple of times, then I never saw you again, but I would like to see you right away, if that's possible!", he said hurriedly, because he knew that otherwise he would also lose this opportunity, which, he knew inside would be the last. "Oh, Mark ciao, what's happening, why is this call so urgent, where are you?" "I just passed the zoology exam and was thinking about you. Where did you disappear to?" "I've been busy, and now I work part-time. So lately I have been neglecting my studies." "Can I see you?" "When?" "Now!" "Let me think...". "Please, don't leave me now, I have many things to say to you, but I can't on the phone; actually I would just like to look into your eyes." "OK, OK, tell me exactly where you are, so I can meet you?" "I'm at the bar in front of the chemistry department ..." "I'll meet you in about half an hour, an hour, ciao!" The connection was cut off. Mark's mind was full of thoughts, excitement and joy. His worry about the exam had passed, disappeared, and its place had been completely taken up by Mary. Mark thought that David would have been happy to see him in her company too, even if Mark would have liked to know how to choose the right words and behave with the same lightness and ease as David. He felt as though he were sitting at the table with David and that together they were awaiting the arrival of their mutual friend. He felt his eyes moisten and tried to call to mind an image of David that would bring back some memory of him. And suddenly, he saw David in his recollection of the day in which, sitting in their living room listening to music in the dark, they talked about the possibility that two girls could be sitting in the dark listening to music in some other part of the world at the same time. This thought had been a source of sadness to them, but they also knew that those moments of sharing would, in any case, have been a source of happy memories. In such moments of relaxation, David would start talking about a topic that was very dear to him: the existence of life after this life. And they would make

arrangements that would have allowed them to be in touch with each other should one of them lose his life prematurely. When it actually happened, Mark found himself completely unprepared.

These memories were sad, but they were of great company to him and almost made him feel as though his brother were sitting next to him. Imaginary company, like in Woody Allen's film "Casablanca". David and Mary, two persons who seemed to him to bring together the past and the future, merging it into a single thing. He looked at the drink in his glass and was unable to calm down. He began to plan the meeting that was about to take place and was beginning to let himself be caught by the lack of spontaneity that would result from the meeting. This time he managed rationally to force himself not to plan a single thing and to think about something else. While he made this mental effort, he began to feel a wave of happiness and satisfaction rising inside; he tried to fight the force that aimed to destroy their friendship, which had not even begun, but which could be destroyed by his rationality. For a moment, he saw scenes from the past come up again in his memory and the regret that followed when his expectations were not fulfilled. Yet, those expectations came from his twisted and unprepared mind; the persons who tried to be close to him had no blame. He fantasized about the ideal approach in a love relationship, which came from living together, from acts that were not false, but were felt, and that came from the instinctive nature of a person, which could not be controlled. He fantasized and only her questioning look as she stood before him managed to bring his mind back to reality in that moment. Mark's face relaxed and his eyes lit up. He took her hands and invited her to sit down. Her touch thrilled him. She was there. He hardly knew her and yet he ardently desired her company. He could not bear the idea that those eyes could look at someone else with sweetness and passion. He was terrified of saying or doing something that could have kept him from knowing her and from spending time with her. "Ciao!" he whispered. "Ciao!" she answered. "I'm the happiest person in the world; you're here after so much time. Now I've decided not to let you go again. You have deprived me of your presence for the past few months and I don't want this to happen any more."

"Mark, calm down and tell me what's happening to you." she said with a sweet, firm tone (in her voice). "Mary, I've discovered that you are very important to me, I want to feel your presence close to me, or rather, I want to know you better and spend some time with you." "All of a sudden, just like that, only now after all these months you discover that you want my presence; I'm sorry, but all of this leaves me somewhat puzzled." "Let me explain! I've been in town for six months, I feel much more comfortable as far as my logistical

arrangements are concerned; I have made many new friends, and on week-ends I go home to visit my old friends and my family. One day, many months ago, shortly after I arrived in this city, I was approached by a girl who left the mark of her existence inside me, with her intense smile and light movements. From that moment, for a few months, my mind was always fixed on my blonde dream. I thought about you and I searched to find a way to get close to you, to spend a little time with you. Instead, I failed in all these attempts; they were too much a product of my mind and did not come spontaneously from my heart. After all these months, my heart managed to tell me what the right move was only now, and I have made it become real by calling you a little while ago, a spontaneous move, which comes for much suffering." She did not take her eyes off him for even a second, as if she wanted to make sure that his words and the expression of his eyes were both equally sincere. Without thinking, Mark's fingers looked for hers and he began to play gently with her hand. She did not pull it away, and he felt a pleasant sensation of quiet spread inside him, while he felt an instinctive nervousness rise in him at the same time. She let him play with her fingers, without any participation on her part. "Mark, the other time we met I told you that I was already committed, but that was not true. I had just left my boyfriend after being together for four years. I don't want to make the same mistake again by starting a new relationship with someone, with the risk that it could end badly and that I could get hurt again. I'm very afraid of this, so I would like to ask you not to insist and to give me time to get over this situation." "I don't want to appear too insistent, but you need to try to leave these bad memories behind you by bringing new, positive experiences in your life, which can be lived spontaneously and without shock. Let's try to live some experiences together and then we'll see. For example, I just took an exam and I passed it, so let's go somewhere to celebrate. Let's take a train and go to Trulli to see the lake; we can have a pizza and then come home." The moments that followed remained impressed in Mark's mind, and even now, they stand out clearly in his memory. As if by magic, her fingers began to respond to his caresses, then she said; "OK! Let's go, just let me make a phone call and I'll be right back." Mark watched her move away and felt that his life was changing, it was becoming stronger and more beautiful.

They walked along the street with a determined step and held each other's hands naturally. Their gazes met every once in a while, and they both smiled unsure of what to say. Time was kept only by their steps, and the train station neared slowly. At the ticket office, they learned that a train was leaving in five minutes. They ran happily towards the track.

Mark looked at her mouth and thought about his brother's unfinished work. The train was almost empty and they sat down in front of each other near the window. He felt as though he was living in a dream, but instead, it was all so true. Their conversations were short, and they occasionally let their gazes wander over the country side, which sped by. The trip took half an hour, and time passed very quickly. Mark was enchanted as he looked at that girl. He could not help thinking about what had crossed his brother David's mind when he had met that girl. The calm, cheerful David always naturally disposed towards others, in general; what had he intensely felt for that young girl. Questions and more questions to which he had no answer and to which he would perhaps never be able to give or receive an answer. Mary was near him and did not seem to notice that note of slight tension in the way Mark clasped her hand. Mark held her hand with intensity and delicateness, happy only to be so fortunate in that moment. They went out of the station quickly and headed towards the lake. "Do you know that it's the second time I've come here?", said Mark, and she replied: "For me it's the first! I'm kidding, but I haven't been to the lake for a really long time. Maybe because, when I was small, we came here so often that now, I no longer like to make this trip nor do I feel attracted by this place. My father always told me that being able to go to the lake for an outing was a necessity to him after spending a week in the factory, so we could never complain. Instead, we would have preferred to stay home and play with our friends. Now that I'm more grown up, I would say he was right. And yet, each one of us wants to have a life of their own to organize and manage independently, and this causes you to be more or less impatient." For a few seconds, Mary's thoughts took her away from Mark, and her eyes dreamed of and relived, in small steps, some of her past experiences. "Dear Mary, our parents have always wanted the best for us and we will only be able to understand the meaning of much of their attentive behavior towards us only when we become parents too. I only hope that I will have the time then to be able to look them in the eyes and simply say thank you. These thoughts make me sad, but I think that we will inevitably have to go through this stage of life." They remained silent and continued to walk hand in hand. Mark was taken up by many thoughts, and he was trying to decide when the best time would be to talk to her, to tell her that their life lines had been destined to meet. Mark was finally awakened from his thoughts when he heard Mary's voice reach him with a certain delay; "... it's really strange!" He had only heard these last words, and so he said: "I'm sorry, I wasn't listening to you, what were you saying?" "That's precisely what I was noticing, that you sometimes seem far away, so absorbed in your thoughts that you don't listen and you don't see what happens around you." "Mary, when we arrive, I'll tell

you a story that will perhaps please you, but it will probably upset you. I just want to find a place where we can sit and I can talk to you calmly." She was surprised, but she said nothing; now both of them continued walking absorbed in their thoughts. Their hands were still clasped, and this was very comforting to Mark. They reached the lake and walked a few steps along its shore and then stopped on a small terrace of grass, where there was a bench. They sat down and remained silent for a few minutes as they watched the sun's reflections on the slightly rippled water of the lake. The air was crisp, but the sun made the afternoon warm. "So, what about this story, you have made me quite curious. The tone of your voice was so solemn, that perhaps you have frightened me a little too." Mark started: "Mary, this story is an integral part of my life and also of your life, so I hope you can help me." "Stop being so mysterious and start talking, or I'll open your head to try to read the story by myself." "Once there was a young boy who did not know what studies to take up at the university. In high school, he had passed all his subjects easily, always receiving close to excellent grades. This boy was very pleasant and cheerful and he was very good at communicating and socializing. He got along well with everyone and knew how to make himself liked by everyone. He would become a great leader, because he had great charisma. Recognizing these gifts in him, an elderly aunt of his used to say, since the time he was small, that he was destined to become either a doctor or a priest. This way he would be able to help others, in one way or in the other. Influenced perhaps by these opinions, but decidedly not prone to living a solitary life, he decided to enter medical school. It was difficult for him from the beginning, because he had been used to not having to work too hard to get good grades; he did not realize that university studies required method and perseverance. Instead of stepping into line, this boy decided that continuing his education was not for him, and decided to enter the military service. He could not enrol himself quickly, so in the meantime, he started to sell books in one of the city's well known bookstores. That was a very happy and carefree period for him and the young man thought that that would be his life outside of the student environment. His letter of recruitment arrived unexpectedly three months later, taking him far away from his city. The year he spent in the military went by and upon his return, he found that his job as a bookseller was also gone; he had no alternative but to go on with his studies. His return to school was even more difficult than the time before; even though he achieved some good results, they were not the best. He was becoming increasingly discouraged by this enterprise. He had exhausted almost all his energies as a student. At that point, the time had come for him to measure himself against the first of his most difficult exams. He could

not fail it otherwise it would mean that he would have to abandon his studies. Everyone in the family felt that the moment of truth had arrived. The day of the university exam arrived after four months of hard work, and that morning the young man got on his bike, as usual, and headed for the university." Mark occasionally looked at Mary intensely to see her expression as she followed the story and to notice if there was any reaction on her face. He also wanted to give her a brief summary of his brother's life, even though he knew that David would have kept his past strictly to himself, because he considered it too boring for any listener. Mark continued: "An observer at the exam met the young man outside the university institute at the end of the exam. He saw him turned and bent over his bike as he opened the lock that held his bike in place. After removing the lock, he took the university booklet from his bag and opened it; a smile lit up his face. It was a difficult smile to interpret, but it was a completely relaxed and joyful smile. The observer called him and the look on his face was enough to fill the entire world with happiness. He had received the highest grade possible for that exam and, in returning the booklet, in which he had written the new grade, to him, the professor who had tested him had said: 'My dear young man, your true worth is shown by this exam'. The success of that exam unleashed a devastating force which enabled him to obtain the highest grade in all the exams that followed almost every time. He received his degree and got the highest grades." Mark interrupted his story; thinking about his brother's achievements made him feel happy, but he then sighed sadly. Mary then said: "It's a nice story, but it seems to contain a sad element that is still hidden, which I cannot see. Does it end like this, or is there still something to come?" Mark answered: "No, it's not finished; the best and more meaningful part has still to come".

After getting his degree, the young man took up postgraduate studies. He had decided to dedicate all his time to working in the hospital ward without wasting precious energy in all those commitments that many doctors take up to earn more money quickly. His work was very hard and the first year of graduate school flew by quickly. The exam at the end of the first year was another success and he managed to do better than everyone else, even better than a doctor with well proven surgical experience, who had entered graduate school for his specialization only that year. He worked that summer too, and decided to take only four days of vacation. He decided to spend his vacation in a lodge in the mountains. Something would happen, during those four days, which would leave a mark in that young man's life. In those few days, he later told us, he had discovered and contemplated the harmony that could exist in a relationship between a woman and a man for the first time. The woman he was talking about was a young girl he had met by chance

on a mountain path." Mark continued his story without pausing, but he kept his gaze always fixed on Mary's face. He did not want to miss the moment in which she would recognize herself. "The strangeness and fascination of that encounter lay in the spontaneity of the events that had led these two young people to meet and to discover that they were in tune with one another. That encounter had opened the way to Love, whose sublime meaning lies in the immediateness with which it manifests itself. There is nothing comparable to this." This last sentence, which had come from his heart, and which perhaps also concerned him in that moment, had caused him to take his eyes off Mary and to let himself go to the vivid memory of his dead brother. The sadness was in Mark's eyes, but tears were falling from Mary's beautiful cheeks. There was silence between the two of them, then Mary began to speak with a slow, tremulous voice: "I danced on that path with a young man I didn't know, but who had a reassuring smile. He was tall and he held me in his arms delicately. At the thought of him, I can still feel the chills along my back, and a certain tension, which was due, perhaps, to surprise. For a few minutes, it was as though we were suspended in that slow, awkward, but gratifying dance. Then our gazes met, discretely and illuminated by the brilliant light, which I saw in him and which I knew was in me. We continued to walk along the path, slightly apart, and I still have his words impressed in my mind: 'The lightness and intensity of a few dance steps are worth more than wasted words and deserve a stolen kiss!' I wrote these words down at home; just a few words that contained strength, determination and devotion." At this point, Mary said the name David in a low voice, and with quick movements, she dried the tears that continued to flow from her moist, shiny eyes. She continued to whisper David's name and Mark felt helpless and sad to see her sudden pain. She continued: "The three days that followed that first encounter were lived as if we were in a dream, but they are closed in my heart as if shut inside a precious case. I won't let anyone see what's inside, only David will be able to re-open the treasure chest."

She stopped speaking again and the silence that fell between them helped to calm their souls, now so upset by the tempest in their memory. Memory always holds an irresistible force, which we are unfortunately unable to use in a positive manner. "The day that David left, he told me that my intelligence and joviality were wonderful natural gifts and that it was my duty to always use them in a natural manner. He also said that he loved me and that he despaired only at the thought that he had not been born ten years later. We planned to continue seeing each other, at least I insisted on it, but he said that I deserved someone much better than him. I never had another chance to see him again, even if, for a while he

sent me some post cards in which he wrote words of comfort, like the words that someone who knows you well, like your best friend, could say to you. I saved them all at home, and every once in a while, even now, I feel protected by his presence, which is contained in these few lines. All at once, it all ended, and now you're here to bring me back the memory of the man I loved more than other person. Mark, please tell me where I can meet him again? Why haven't I heard from him for all this time?" With these last words, her voice took on a higher, more strident tone. Mark did not speak, this was not the way he wanted things to go, and he tried uselessly to bring the conversation back to a more acceptable tone. He thought quickly and asked David to help him think of what he could say in such a situation, of the words that would have made it less dramatic, of the words that would have first surprised her and then made her laugh hilariously. He was too sad to be able to think coolly and rationally, so he said: "My dear Mary, David was my brother and for me he was always the example to imitate, even if I never came very close to achieving this goal. After he came back from that short vacation, he had changed and had become another person; he had become even more positive and cheerful than before. One night, while he hovered over his books to study the details of the surgery he had to perform the next morning, he explained the reason to me. He told me that he had met you by chance and about how surprised and upset he had been by the passion of your encounter. He spoke of you as if you were a force of nature, a strong breeze that had cleared the sky of his thoughts. Your naturalness and young age had enchanted him and to him, those three days had been better than an entire month together. I heard him express his passion for you in words of respect and praise, even if his words were very measured, for fear that he could have offended his beautiful and sincere memory of you by exaggerating in any way. I also remember that I felt great envy towards him, but perhaps more than envy, I felt this because I would have liked the same thing to happen to me in the future too. The only thing I did not agree with was that, because of the difference in age, he did not want to get you involved with him to avoid hurting you, and so he left you free to live your life without influencing you.

I hoped that time would have changed things, and often I tried to find out more about you. And so I ended up falling in love with this girl too, a girl I had never even met. One day the drawing of a beautiful girl appeared on the door of an old closet that we used as a wardrobe; it had been drawn with clean strokes. The eyes and the line of her nose were very harmonious, but her mouth was missing. He just said to me: "This is the young girl who has entered my life, but I can't exactly remember the expression of her mouth". Now

her mouth is here before me, and it all seems to be a dream. The next evening, when I got home, I didn't find him there waiting for me to have supper with our parents: He was in the hospital with viral hepatitis. The evening we spoke of your drawing was the last time we spoke; he went into a coma after three days and died eight days later."

Mark's eyes filled with tears. The anger started to grow inside him again and the days he spent sitting in front of the entrance to the intensive care ward returned vivid and real to his mind. They were long hours of waiting, with the only hope that it was all a bad dream.

The silence that enveloped the two of them was vaguely intense, and at the same time, they could feel a magnetism come from the similarity of thoughts and feelings they shared. Mary's hands searched for Mark's hands and held them tightly. Their gazes were no longer fixed on each other and each of them sought comfort in something that was far away, more a part of their mind than of their surroundings. The light breeze that rippled the lake's waters seemed to have picked up strength and from the beach in front of them they heard the light swashing that lapped against that small stretch of sand and clay. Mark felt empty and guilty. Having shared the weight of those memories with another person had relieved him, but he immediately realized that he had given the girl the same burden of sadness that now accompanied him continuously.

He had been selfish; he had dimmed the beauty of a memory, of such an important encounter for her and for his brother David, with the darkness of pain and sadness. Almost as if she had read Mark's thoughts, Mary began to speak, instead, with a different voice, soft and almost cheerful: "You have finally allowed me to arrange those memories of an ideal, dream life that was full of illusions. I forgot that all of this would have been possible if the illusion that that made up my dream had come true, but I was wrong because life does not bring back what non-life has taken away. "

Chapter seven

The wood of the bench always had a calming effect, even on those who sometimes sat on it for the entire duration of a match. The two teams competing with each other had conducted a very careful transfer campaign, in an attempt to avoid unbalancing the team's already well-tested structure. Strangely, that first championship match had brought together two very well-balanced (equally competent) teams, which sometimes applied an imaginative playing style, but one that was regular and predictable for most of the game. A well performed reception and the setting up of slightly risky, and therefore, fast attack combinations allowed the forwards to rely on an untidy wall, and therefore, a more easily surmountable one. All those boring training sessions that concentrated on reception should have given excellent results in the light of the attack tactics used. In any case, this would have been the best playing formation for a sufficiently all-around team, but which could not dispose of a very strong player who could do a 90% close of a ball served high and knocked off the hand. The starting whistle made the tension rise even in the players that were sitting on the bench, and everyone knew that the first points scored would be decisive for the course of the match. A difference of one or two points was very important; it was extremely important to always maintain contact when you were losing. The lightning start of the rival team, which was playing at home, always had to be checked and the visiting team had to limit their psychological advantage as far as possible by playing a clean, calm game, so as to be able to measure an environment unknown to them until then. Sean's ability to hand out balls made it possible to solve the problem of well-aimed receptions at the start of the game, but not that of the correct distance from the net. The rival team's walls could easily measure, so the spikes might not be very effective. The first time-out was requested when the score was seven to three in favour of the opponents. The coach tried to restore calm among the players, insisting that the hitters should force the spike hit without being afraid and also asking for harder and riskier shots. They were too fearful and this made things easier for the opponents, who could effectively make their play with an easy reconstruction. The opponents' score continued to be higher and the set ended after just twenty minutes with a score of twenty-five to seventeen. There was no change of player during the first set and the coach sent Mark in to warm up only at the beginning of the second set. Mark found it very difficult to get up from the bench and to recover the concentration he would need for the game. He tried to make use of the few recommendations that his limited experience suggested: do a good warm up and enter

the court with the utmost determination. The first spike would have greatly contributed to the success of his performance. The beginning of the second set seemed to be the continuation of the first. With the score at six to three in favour of the rival team, Mark was called in to replace William in the hand play. Mark knew that the score was very touchy and that scoring points at that time meant retaking the game. The opponents' forceful strike did not catch Thomas unprepared, and he served Sean an excellent ball, who in turn served the newly arrived Mark a expected ball, going against the rules of the game. In his very angular spike intended to avoid the wall, Mark drove all the anger he had stored up in that long pre-championship period in which he had been a reserve. The point caused the enthusiasm to grow in his team mates and it thrilled Mark. With the high spirits typical of his age, he started to give advice and suggestions to his more experienced team mates. When a volleyball setter finds a sure source of strength in a hitter, he can more easily help his other team mates' moves because he knows that he has the support needed to score a point. That shot of confidence transformed the team, which now began to take up the game again with order and incisiveness, managing to close the set with a four-point advantage. In such moments, a coach who is getting ready to set up a formation for the start of a new set has to take some psychological factors into consideration. Mark was highly motivated and, in that moment, also technically effective. William was on the bench and he felt that he could remain benched for the entire game. William was technically strong, but psychologically vulnerable: his exclusion for the entire game could mean that he would be left out of some of the next games. Mark could not understand how many and which aspects had to be considered if he were left in the opening sextet. That moment the coach was taking a risk that could open up a completely different future for Mark. The only one who was really surprised by that choice was Mark, who was putting his gym suit back on. The coach yelled at him almost violently to take the gym suit off and to get ready to start playing as a regular at the start of the third set.

Thomas's encouragement was of great support to Mark: "Your time has come, show them that you're the best!" It was an extra boost that gave him great pleasure, even if it was unexpected. Mark felt unstoppable. He knew that he could play the ball naturally; only a few balls were recovered by their opponents. The rival team's wall seemed incapable of remaining compact; this made all the point players become turn players, under Sean's knowing deliveries. The third set also ended with a win by Mark's team. The fourth set would be the most critical moment; they would have to stay concentrated in order to keep their opponents from regaining courage. Mark and his team mates got off to a lightning

start, but when they had a seven point advantage and everything looked easy, the rival team responded with the pride and class of a top level team. The score became even; they progressed with one point each reaching a score of twenty-four to twenty-three in favor of Mark's team. Mark felt that that moment would have meant a lot for him, for his morale and for his career. It was time to take responsibility for leading the team to victory. He got close to Sean and asked him with decision to serve him. In making a game choice in a decisive moment, a setter must have the awareness that one of his hitters is ready to take responsibility for closing an end ball. The imprecise reception left Sean with very few alternatives, but for Mark that ball meant gaining independence and he hit the ball angrily against the rival team's wall, sending it out of the field. There was an explosion of joy from the whole team, which invaded the field to hug Mark, whose performance had contributed greatly to the first success of the championship. The success achieved through the work of a group of people teaches many things, which the same members of the group sometimes cannot appreciate. The euphoria that results from such success is not always capable of making people understand the meaning of the objective that has been achieved. The will-power and dedication of everyone had made it possible for one person to express himself at a higher level, and everyone now recognized him to be the main author of that victory. And yet, none of this would have been possible, if each thing had not been placed in its correct perspective by the whole of those events, making it possible for that young man to express his strength of mind. No one would be capable of understanding this and the continuation of the championship would only confirm that the real value of a team consists in holding back and then expressing altogether the strength of one individual above all the others, who, in that moment, can only act as supporters. That had been Mark's moment, a young man who had the will and determination to be the best.

Their euphoric return to the locker room always held the irreplaceable pleasure of a sense of fulfilment, which detached itself from a simple physical desire, filling them with a mental strength made of energy. Mark was submerged by the joy he felt inside, which he shared with his team mates. The compliments he received made him feel embarrassed and his response often came out false, almost detached. The coach shook everyone's hand and congratulated them; when he was in front of Mark, he said: "Young man, if you have the will to emerge not just with your hands but also with your head, as you showed us tonight, you will do great things. Thank you and congratulations." "The merit goes to the whole team.", Mark answered with decision, and in his heart he felt that that recommendation would have been very precious for the future. Mental strength is that extra element that

each person should know how to use with parsimony and determination, in order to turn a good performance into something excellent. The precise dosing of this strength leads to success, which is the only motive for one's everyday commitment. In the field of sports, success means continuous dedication, always keeping in mind the objective that is to be achieved, and mental presence means its completion and consolidation into a whole.

The noisy buzz of conversation, the sudden, sometimes excessive, laughter, the pelting of the showers and the rising clouds of steam created a padded environment isolated from the rest of the facilities, where the people's outlines moved in slow motion. At that moment, Mark felt himself to be an integral part of that environment, where he could enjoy performing all those activities, and where each person had his own space, inside which he knew he could do anything he wanted. There were no limits to one's freedom if one stayed within his own space, and it was also possible to determine easily the space that belonged to one's team mates. Mark's personal success was the team's success and this fell within a common space, in which everyone could enter; but inside his own corner, that day, Mark could consider himself more satisfied than the others. It was a pleasant sensation – thought Mark. Only in moments like these did Mark remember how pleasant it was to be at the center of attention and to be considered important for a few seconds. Thanks precisely to that performance, he became increasingly convinced that he could stand out from his peers and his friends. Sports would be the fulfilment of that wish; however, it required great effort, which would take years to understand and assimilate. For him, team effort was the highest expression of power and coordination, the work of several individuals that is united to allow a single entity to function with the naturalness of a single body. However, all of this meant just one thing to him: united to win. He let his mind wander and did not notice that Thomas and Harry were talking about him: "Our champion seems to be immersed in a dream from which he will soon awake. Anyway, let's allow him to enjoy these moments, which are so important to us players.", said Harry. "Every game is experienced as a separate dream. Sometimes the dream is beautiful and romantic, other times it's a scary dream, from which you are always fleeing; in either case, you can't manage to wake up on time. Mark's dream will last for as long as he is capable of enjoying these moments without letting them go to his head. Only then will he be mature enough to observe the life of an athlete from the right point of view."

Mark could not hear these comments, he was too caught up in his day dreams, but Thomas came closer to him then and said: "My compliments again champ, but make sure you learn how to handle the joy of victory with sobriety, because in that way you will also

learn something about the suffering that comes with a defeat and also find something pleasant in it."

Mark smiled and answered: "I am thoroughly enjoying the joy of victory so I can learn to appreciate the meaning of the sacrifices I've made up to now." He felt almost like a philosopher capable of expressing important opinions, as were, on the other hand, those of every experienced player. The athlete who lives sports as a profession feels deprived of the experience of "professional" studies, where you are able to learn about the humanistic, physical and mathematical sciences, and where you take in many notions, even if you are not capable sometimes of turning them into culture. So the athlete feels like a man of the street who is only capable of assessing human history with the sensitivity of a vagabond, who has seen many things with the careful eye of a stranger. Perhaps the fact that the professional athlete is considered to be a rich boy, but not an educated one, leads (him) to cultivate a certain attention to human nature, no longer in a superficial way, but with the attention of someone who is excluded from society. An entry ticket is money that can buy many things, even the consideration of an educated society. This thought caused suffering in Mark and he was sorry inside that he had not had the opportunity to undertake a educational career. Yet, he knew he had chosen of his own free will. He also knew that he could not give up the pleasure of playing, even as a professional, and that he was totally dedicated to the achievement of the best result, regardless of the amount of effort this required. As a child, he had received this teaching from his father, who was a perfectionist in everything he did, and who had always succeeded, with dedication and enormous ability, in obtaining the most from his inventiveness by reinvesting it each time in new experiences. His sons had always tried to imitate him, but they lacked a fundamental feature, i.e. the mainspring that had always guided their father's behaviour, which was, the need to give his sons a better life than he had had.

Mark suddenly felt a sense of emptiness, too many things in a short time; the nervous tension that had kept him going for the entire game was beginning to defuse. He finished showering quickly and dressed in a hurry, no longer paying attention to the euphoria of those around him. He suddenly felt very sad and alone; the moment in which he would be able to emerge, so that he could express himself at his best, transmitting to those around him his ability to lead and the charisma that every leader is capable of giving his team, seemed very far away. He felt a physical force inside him, which he knew would explode inside him sooner or later making everyone aware that the person before them was a sure, firm leader. With regard to this, he thought about how a child sees a sure point of

reference in an adult in which he is able to reflect himself and identify himself. It is that feeling of tranquillity and security that everyone sees in the small familiar things that revolve around one's daily life. Under these circumstances, he felt that no one could give him that support and that, in order to achieve his dream, he would first need to understand the meaning of the words application and dedication. In his heart, he felt that he had the strength to express himself at a higher level, but he also knew very well that he had not yet learned the right way to apply himself: he was still too moody, disorganized and, at times, distracted. Nevertheless, the answer to all these questions and insecure feelings was inside him, ready to be discovered. At such moments, you would like to be older and more mature, because going too fast and the bite of impatience would always be ready to play tricks on you. It was not possible to find any motivation in the people around him, unless he was a great leader, of the kind whose methods you sometimes do not approve of, but who always shows that he can reach his objective.

He went out of the locker room and headed with a determined step towards the exit, where a group of girls surrounded him as they waved little sheets of paper and note pads, asking for autographs. His lips showed a slight smile and for a moment, he calmed down and started to sign autographs; and then that devilish sadness gripped him again. Why leave a name on a sheet of paper that would mean nothing a few months or years from now?. Why leave something in the history of someone else, who will completely forgotten those moments once they have grown? So, he had also turned that moment into suffering. He found himself out in the open; suddenly, in the silence of the outdoors, he heard a buzzing in his ears, which were still suffering from the noise he had just fled. He looked at the sky and saw the moon all lit up, solitary and gigantic: "...it looks like an omelette in the middle of the sky!" The recollection of this amusing expression by a childhood friend made him smile and he did not notice the girl who was coming towards him, shyly saying: "You were great, you can become a champion!" She squeezed his hand delicately and walked away. Mark went after her and, looking into her eyes, he just said, "Thank you!" She smiled and went off again. Mark found himself day-dreaming for a moment. Looking up at the moon, he thanked it in a low voice. It's wonderful to meet and listen to people who, with a smile and a handshake, are capable of giving you the tranquillity that often you are unable to maintain.

Chapter eight

The silence was almost unreal. Perhaps this is how it seemed to Mark and Mary, seated and apart from each other, their thoughts travelled at the speed of light, even if they converged into a single source from which they emitted, who was David. They were like flaming rays that went out of him and returned to him, who was their origin and destination. David's face was very clear in Mark's mind, while in her mind, Mary recalled the memories of the time spent with David. In his heart, Mark would have liked to be able to read her mind so he could be more attuned with her thoughts. His eyes suddenly lit up again with new anger and suffering, as if he wanted to express hate and love as a desperate force. Minutes went by and the tumultuous forces inside their minds began to assuage themselves, and Mark said: "David always wanted to transmit to me the ability not to take my problems and worries out on others. I have never succeeded in this and now I'm throwing all the burden of my pain on you, perhaps making it weigh on you even more. If he had been in my place, David would never have given you this burden, or perhaps, if he did, he would have done it with much more tact, and with much more delicacy and attention towards you. Please excuse me for this, but I hope, nevertheless, that the most important and beautiful things remain. I think that the brief relationship you had started then was destined to continue and consolidate itself." At this point, after remaining silent for a few seconds, Mary said: "I always tried to place this encounter inside a familiar setting. Even now, I cannot define it, but I can say that it was a beautiful and pure, I would say romantic story, like a story in a fairy tale book. I can still remember how, when he left me, he asked me only for a kiss, as if he wanted to place a seal on our love story. I can still remember my hesitation and my feeling almost incapable of giving him that sign of affection, and how he, instead, held my face delicately and gave me a quick, light kiss on the mouth. Our gazes wanted much more, but the beauty and sincerity of our encounter made it possible for that kiss to give it a thousand different meanings. He then gave me two more kisses, and we left each other this way. The beauty of all of this is so impressed in my heart that perhaps it has conditioned my future life, because I have always looked for something similar since then, that something which I think is the premise for the true love that should exist between a man and a woman. David was like a meteor that warmed and lit my heart with his brief presence. And yet, those few days spent together had convinced us that each one's presence was something solid and capable of expressing itself as a great emotion, if only we had been able to let our senses go freely. We were

already sure of each other, it had just happened at the wrong moment. It was strange how we both said that perhaps in the next life, we might be able to meet again with more timeliness, even if, in my heart, I thought that things would have gone differently, in any case."

Mark suffered in hearing those words. He wished he had died instead of his brother; his brother knew how to live life better than he did. His voice was different now, and his mind seemed to be detached from the words that came out involuntarily: "The flame that burned in my brother's heart was capable of lighting up the lives of the people who were close to him. He transmitted a soft, non-blinding light, capable of giving the kind of human warmth that made you feel you were not alone. He wasn't a friend, but an anchor, always there, standing a bit to the side, but always available. We shared so many dreams, we discovered so many illusions that could not be realized. Yet, what emerged in the end wasn't discouragement, but the awareness that he had achieved another important goal, which he could not avoid, his death! He probably knew how much suffering he had caused and in the period right after his death, he was present repeatedly in everyone's dreams, and the message he brought us was one of serenity and joy for a new life, in which he had the possibility of expressing himself at a higher level, one that we could not understand. He had been capable of passing to that higher level in a much shorter time, because of his extraordinary dedication to others. His death was the acknowledgment that he had finally deserved a better life, a life that was superior to the mediocre life that we were living on this earth. We do all this discussing just to find an feasible explanation for what we've gone through, but it's difficult to live without the physical comfort of someone we love."

Evening had fallen quickly and it was cold. Mary and Mark discovered only in that moment the coldness of everything that surrounded them. Every once in while someone passed quickly, deigning to look at them only in passing. They got up feeling cold and headed towards the nearby town on foot, side by side. Both knew that they had opened a treasure chest where they had found the wealth of recollection and the sadness of reality. Their thoughts were now confused, incomplete and alternated with their recollections. Now they were walking quickly as though they wanted to flee from the burden of their recollections. Mark, in turn, felt a sense of emptiness and did not feel like inviting Mary for a pizza. They went silently towards the train station and, fortunately, ten minutes later, they found themselves sitting in front of each other near the window of an empty compartment. They spent most of the time looking out the window and when their eyes met, they exchanged

timid smiles, which expressed all the sadness in their hearts. They reached the city quickly and when they found themselves in front of the station building they started to speak again for the first time since they had left the lake. At this point, Mary said: "Mark, everything was nice even if it was sad; I promise you that the next time it will be different, but now it's best that we allow our memories to placate themselves, and to do this, we must be alone. Thank you for everything, and I'll talk to you soon." They gave each other a quick kiss on the cheeks and Mark followed her with his eyes while she went towards the bus station to go into town. Mark just needed to be alone and he walked towards his apartment. He sat on the terrace, once he arrived, and prepared his pipe very accurately. The long walk to go back to his house had given him a sense of tranquillity, and now he was reconciling himself with the memory of his brother, and he was grateful to him again for having helped him one more time. He looked at the street lights from the terrace and felt comforted by the ringing of the nearby church bells. The smoke came slowly from his pipe and, almost curious, he inspected everything around him without giving importance to any particular detail. Mark felt dizzy and could hardly remember when he had smoked his pipe the last time.

He was not hungry. His thoughts bounced around as he went over his intense day. Mary's eyes, now surprised, now attentive, now sad, now frightened. The expression of her lips, her head bent to the side and the little smile she sometimes gave, which indicated that she was very attentive. David's girlfriend, a dream that had never come true, but which had created the circumstances for Mark's next date with Mary. Mark was sorry that he had not had the possibility of getting to know her better through his brother's description. Yet, he could not continue to demand something that had its meaning only in the brevity of his existence, but which had left a deep mark in his behaviour. The ringing of the bell brought him back to reality again, with the pipe now burned out in his hands, keeping his memory warm.

The train trip home to go visit his parents on Friday evening seemed endless. Everything seemed to take place in slow motion and the shouting around him annoyed him. Mark tried to focus his mind on something pleasant, and the thought of the exam he had just taken and passed helped him for a few seconds. He thought he should buy some pastries and a bottle of sparkling wine to celebrate the event deservedly with his brothers and his parents. It was a tradition started by his older brother; it was necessary to celebrate every exam that was passed, by toasting with wine, or in his particular case, with different types of beers. Now he smiled thinking about all the times he had celebrated and shared those

moments of gratification and joy with his brothers. Now that he was going down the same path too, he was enjoying the same pleasures in part. He finally felt like an adult who was included in the circle of adults. He could finally consider himself an adult and once again he felt inside himself the pleasure of his personal achievement. He had succeeded in immersing himself in the memories that were part of his family, in everything that he had created and experienced with his brothers and his parents. In such moments, Mark felt protected by a shell, his family, which protected him from the external world. He was afloat in those memories, which then slowly brought him towards that door of sadness, when his brother's death arrived so distinctly and inexorably. Then the harmony disappeared, the unity of his family fell apart, and the life that followed no longer had the same colour, the same taste or the same pleasure. The shouting around him once again became noticeable and fastidious. Fifteen more minutes and I'll be home, Mark thought. In front of him, a student was explaining some rules of mathematics to his friends, He was showing off his talent and was making haughty comments to everyone, towards whom perhaps he felt contempt. Mark looked at him and did not see a man, but saw in him eagerness to succeed at all costs, with the desire to always be ahead of everyone else, even at the cost trampling on them.

Mark hoped he would never become like that student, so knowing, but so bent on his own success. The train finally began to slow down while the lights of the small city came towards him, and then it stopped, He got off the train quickly, and looked for the friendly face of one of his brothers, which he saw a short distance away. It was always Steve, the oldest brother, who came to get him; they shook hands warmly. "Congratulations" said Steve "you've broken the ice too, now try to get your degree quickly, because biology is an easy degree to get!" Mark smiled, without replying. Steve updated him briefly on the latest family news and then gave him the most important news: "Sonia is getting married!" He said it with little emphasis, but he knew that it would come as a big shock. "Who? Sonia, - said Mark – she didn't even have a boyfriend?" "Yes she did, and she has decided to take the big step. In the past few years, she must have discovered that maybe having dedicated the best years of her life to study and work had not been such a great investment. The wedding is tomorrow." Mark clearly saw Sonia's face in front of him the way he liked to remember it, when she used to accompany her brothers to help with the grape harvest. He noticed considerable strength and great maturity in that girl, who was of David's age, Sonia had studied medicine, she had completed her studies in the least possible time; she was determined and no obstacle had ever stopped her. She was a

pretty girl, who had become a woman almost suddenly, and almost half-heartedly. She had other goals to achieve first and her becoming a woman could have prevented her from achieving the various goals she had set for herself. Consequently, Mark knew her well and in his mind, he went over her various love stories; (he knew) all of this because David had been aware of them, even if he remained detached. David had always been good friends with Sonia, whom, however, he considered too bent first on studies and then on work. Mark recalled many anecdotes he had shared with David or that David had told him about, In his mind, he saw the image of a pitcher full of memories, which was always full and brimming over even while it continued to pour memories in the glass. The friendship between David and Sonia had been accompanied by so many memories, so many happy hours, and so many disappointments.

He had visited her just two days before he had become ill, and that meeting had also terminated with the usual final comment. "Sonia is too taken up with other things, it is very difficult to carry on a love affair with her." So completely different from the spontaneous relationship he had been able to create with Mary, in those few days. Now Mark longed to have Mary close to him so they could share all the sadness and the unpredictability of life. Mary and Sonia so different, and now they were being compared through the memory of his brother. In doing this, Mark felt like a judge sitting in the midst of those three persons, whom he now also knew, and who were so dear to him. Steve's sudden braking suddenly brought him back to the car headlights that crossed their way, and his thread of thoughts was suddenly interrupted.

His embrace with his parents always had a special meaning, it was like rejoining electrical wires that had been disconnected for a period of time. Once the contact was restored, life immediately lit up with a powerful strength, and Mark also felt that those moments were full of cheerfulness and intensity. After those first few moments of distraction, he noticed the presence of Victor and Laura. It was a big reunion, like old times; everyone congratulated each other and put in a good word to give serenity to that environment; and after a very long time, he saw a smile of satisfaction on his mother's and father's faces. Supper was ready and once seated around the table, everyone recalled their first university exam. Mark felt that he was beginning to relax and that the presence of one's family gave one the the kind of warmth that no other environment could provide. He asked himself if he would ever find his soul mate and set up his own family, and if he would succeed in creating an environment as positive and supportive as this one for his own children. It was nice to lull himself in those thoughts, and his mother caught a different light of amusement in his

eyes. It was nice to be seated at that table and to be able to sit in the corner “seat” on the kitchen bench, and to silently observe his parents move slowly through the house. He then thought of his brother David who was perhaps moving through those rooms watching his parents and his brothers, sometimes smiling or sometimes wanting to break in to make some spontaneous or humorous comment. When Mark began to speak, he knew he would give his parents reason for discussion and perhaps he would have upset their tranquillity. "In these past few days, I have once again seen a person who represents a strong link for me to a past I was not able to experience, but which now exists intact and uncontaminated. Do you remember the year David went to the mountains for a few days, just before he died? Well, on that occasion he met a girl who now goes to the university with me. In those few days, she got along so well with David that she was enchanted by him. She had never known that he had died, just as we had never known about her. In any case, this young girl has kept David's memory deep in her heart; in some way, she managed to understand him well in a short time, and this has left me very impressed. Maybe, you also remember that drawing he did of the girl without a mouth, it was a drawing of this girl. For me, seeing her again now and discovering the presence of my brother through her words is like learning of the existence of an old film about our family, that we knew nothing about. David gave her such a detailed description of us that it has remained impressed in her mind for all these years. What is still surprising to me is that she had a boundless love for David, which time has not affected, but has only kept it frozen as it was then without idealizing or diminishing it. A few days ago, I told her about what happened to David, and now I'm a little sorry I did, mostly because I feel selfish for having done it. I'm afraid that all her memories could disappear, as if the shock this news has given her could destroy the pureness of his memory. Actually, I'm afraid to lose her, because, besides my liking to be near her for the person she is, being near her also brings David's presence with it." Mark remained silent for a few seconds, absorbed in the vivid thought of her, which merged with the stinging memory of David. The silence that reigned in the room was interrupted by the calm words of his mother: "You must be careful not to confuse your love for David with caring for this girl. The two things must remain separate so that you don't hurt yourself, hurting her at the same time, She should be capable of doing the same with you. Nevertheless, the proof of the pudding is in the eating!" This last comment made Mark smile, and for a few seconds, his thoughts were overwhelmed by the memory of David, who had never been very inclined to such sayings. The ease with which their parents made use of these popular sayings made their striving desperately each day

almost useless, or rather, it made their search to rationalize many of their attitudes useless. This was because everything had, in any case, been rationalized and coded in the past into a fatalistic attitude.

David believed that by putting all these popular sayings together, it was possible to find an immediate cure for the greatest evil of our generations, i.e. the everyday stress we are all subject to. All popular sayings contained a fatalistic element, which was not indicative of passive acceptance, but which was only intended to transmit the right amount of calm energy, which was immune to the toxins of neurosis. In life, there were so many things that could be done to try to find new solutions for staying well now that the standard of living had improved. He was distracted from these thoughts by his father's comment, who always tried to bring conversations back to a more practical level, and who was saying: "Try to be sincere and correct with this girl. Time will help you understand, but don't deceive yourself."

It was very difficult to find an optimistic attitude in his father, and all this had to do with his fear of otherwise running into unpleasant surprises. Therefore, he often had a negative attitude, and if anything positive emerged, he would have always considered it to be an unexpected surprise to be accepted gladly. In fact, Mark remembered that once his father had allowed himself to be optimistic, and the result had been exactly the opposite: it was when his son David became ill! From that day, he did nothing but remain faithful to his decision to consider everything under its most negative and pessimistic aspect. All of these thoughts made Mark sad, because he would have liked to receive some help from his parents, by sharing a part of his joys with them. Instead, and perhaps this was the right thing, it was difficult to involve any other person in something that seemed very important to him. This thought led him to try to conceptualize this aspect of his interpersonal relations for a moment. Often, in a relation involving communication between persons, one assumes a critical and evaluative attitude. This is a successive phase, which is not always requested by the person you are talking to, who is asking, most of the time, for a participative and supportive attitude. However, this does not exclude the possibility of contributing with criticism, which is not always requested. We should have the ability to understand which of the two attitudes is required during interpersonal interaction. All these thoughts were clear in his mind and it made him sad inside that his parents had not been capable in that moment of giving him the enthusiasm and participation he needed so much. The conversation had taken a turn for the worse and now he had lost the will to fight. They started to talk just about local news, until it was time to go to bed.

He sat on the bed with his gaze following the shadows that were projected on the wall, Mark recalled the moments he had spent with Mary and he tried to set his mind on some fragment of his recollection of those moments. He had gone over the moments they had spent along the lake shore many times, and he regretted many things. He had used that girl to throw the story of his brother in her face, without having thought for a moment that he would make her very sad by doing this. He longed to know what their future would be and he could not wait to take the train to be able to see her again.

Sleep was late in coming and his gaze wandered in the dark. The shadows that were projected by the light on the street moved on the wall in front of him, picked up speed, became confused, and then there was much light, many intense colours and he could hear the sound of voices.

Chapter nine

The coach knew that Mark was still not ready to take the big step to become a regular on the team. At the opening championship game, he had sensed this possibility, but the young man still lacked the meanness that was necessary to be able to help his teammates play against their rivals. To make this happen, the coach made a risky move, which could have completely ruined the young man's chances of making it. At the next game, he kept Mark on the bench without letting him ever play, even though sometimes William's performance was far from brilliant. In certain moments, Mark felt that he could do better than William and that he could have been more useful to the team in the field than on the bench. Nevertheless, he did not express his opinions to anyone and tried to hide his disappointment from the other players. The coach looked at Mark once in a while and he could see that everything was going as he had planned.

Mark was suffering very much and he showed some signs of tension at the training sessions for the entire week after that. He felt his wish to emerge grow inside him; he wanted a position as a regular on the team and began to complain when his team mates' did not produce positive results for the entire team. Sean was the first to notice that something had changed in Mark's attitude and that he began to be more silent and nervous. One evening while they were going home after training, Thomas asked Mark: "If you could choose right now between going home or doing another hour of training, what would you choose?" Mark was very surprised by this question and tried not to reply at first, but when even Sean and Patrick began to press him, he answered: "I would do another hour!" They all burst out laughing, and Sean added: "....., but next Sunday I want to start out as a regular!" Thomas then said: "You mustn't expect anything from anyone, you must earn the position on your own, no one is ever going to give you for free anything; anyway, you have the talent to emerge, so try to be patient for a little longer. There will be moments, in which you will ask yourself why they don't replace you with someone on the bench with the same intensity with which you now want to play, and then you will have to understand that the reasons for that are much more complex and that you must make sacrifices for the team." Mark was happy to know that he had friends near him, perhaps not true friends, but friends who were sincere. In that moment, he felt joy at being able to receive the advice of those young men who had dedicated their lives to sports, and who had thus received lessons on life only through sports, but who had also developed the gift of comradeship and sharing that was above other gifts. Mark was thinking that he would

miss that group, if it became necessary to leave the team to go play in another one somewhere else.

The day of the championship game had arrived; it was being played at home against the winners of the previous year's championship. That would be the moment in which they would show their supporters whether the team was worth all the marketing operations that had been conducted during the summer. It was always a highly charged moment psychologically when the home supporters would express their opinion of the team. When Mark entered the locker room to change, he felt he had the right charge, and he even managed to smile at the various comments of his team mates. The coach's speech was calm, as always. He went over the technical information regarding the rival team with them, which they had already reviewed during the projection of the midweek game. When he began to speak about their team, he said: "Today we're going to try a new entry at the start of the game. Mark will play instead of William." Everyone looked at Mark, who gave an embarrassed smile, while from behind, Harry said: "Relax, young man!"

Mark participated in the pre-game warm-up applying himself carefully and sensibly, and the first spikes seemed to go in easily. The public was beginning to flood in and carefully observed the athletes moving around the court. Mark looked at those unfamiliar faces and tried to understand what they felt and why they came to see these events. He asked himself, if he would do the same in their place, if he had no one in particular to watch or if there was a sentimental reason for doing so. And then he realized that the sentimental reason was not exactly for one person, but it was for the entire group and what they were able to show at the technical and sports level. The last six minutes of warm-up had begun. It felt strange to be part of that privileged group and Mark felt a cold chill run down his spine. A quick glance towards the public made him notice that maybe someone out there was curious to watch him. Every professional player in any sport, is conditioned by the environment where he works, which is comprised of all its components, including the public. The game began at a fast pace without leaving much room for reasoned playing, also because the tactics of both teams were very similar. Mark's team managed to win the first set thanks only to their better concentration and to the advantage provided by the public cheering for them.

The kind of precision that would allow them to change the pace of the game was lacking in their reception. The coach was referring to precisely that when he recommended that Sean make better use of the plays of the central players. It was necessary to give the game a different pace, and this should have come from a higher number of winning plays

made at the centre. Only in this way would it be possible to also make the best use of the players that were making more expected plays. Mark finished the shots that he was served with a high percentage of success, but his contribution, which could turn the success of an entire action to their advantage, was missing at the wall. During a time-out requested by the rival team during the second set, Harry got close to Mark and said: "Close transverse pass in zone four, there's a defence gap." Mark knew what the possible result of that move would be, and that it entailed a greater risk of making errors, because by taking the ball high and angling it, it would fall very close to the lines that delimited the playing field. They tried the shot during training, but without insisting too much, because it could be a very risky choice. Until that moment, Mark had not felt like trying it, but the incitement of his friend and team mate convinced him to do so. He spiked the first shot he was served when the game resumed with force, taking it high and turning his wrist quickly; avoiding the wall, he succeeded in bringing it to the ground where he wanted it, in zone four, five centimetres from the touchline. That type of spike also carries a great emotional impact, because it demonstrates great physical, as well technical superiority. It also has a spectacular effect on the public because the shot is fast and violent.

The efficacy of that kind of spike, when repeated, also makes it necessary for the rivals to move their wall in order to better control that type of shot, thus exposing their defence much more to a parallel attack in zone one. Mark knew very well that he would have this possibility later, and he could not wait to put it to good use. In seeing how well that shot had gone, Sean did not want to insist for fear that Mark could make a mistake with the next move, but he found himself forced to serve him the ball and realized that Mark was capable of putting the ball in exactly the same angular position. The repetition of these alternated shots marked the turning point in the game, and Mark and his team mates were able to bring the entire match to a close with a sure win.

The joy of that victory was slightly dimmed by the ease with which it had been obtained, but for Mark what mattered was having overcome an important obstacle, his debut and having finished the game with the best result, and having distinguished himself as one of the best players in the field. They all headed towards the shower shouting with joy and joking. As usual, Mark was the first to leave the locker room. He felt like a stranger in that environment, a new addition, and the public was to him an entity that still did not belong to him. On leaving the locker room, he found himself surrounded by a group of young girls waving small pieces of paper for autographs, and in leaving his signature he knew that perhaps he would leave an even deeper mark in the hearts of many persons. When the

girls had left, with the corner of his eye, Mark noticed that a girl was looking at him with a questioning look. At first, he thought that her attention was not meant for him, but then he was forced to realize that it was. At that point, he looked at her more carefully, but could not remember if he had already met her somewhere else. She approached him bravely and introduced herself, her name was Helen. At that moment, Jamie, Alice and Mary Jane arrived, and cut in greeting Mark with hugs and kisses. The camaraderie that had created itself among the four young men had consequently extended itself to their girlfriends. In the confusion that followed, and amid the exchange of congratulations and humorous remarks, Helen left and Mark only noticed her again a few minutes later. He was a little sorry for what had happened, but he did not have much time to think about it, because the other players were coming out of the locker rooms, and the confusion increased proportionally. It was a joyful moment, and it was a great surprise to Mark to see that Eric was waiting for him. Mark ran towards Eric when he saw him and hugged him tightly. For Mark, Eric represented real friendship: he was the person with whom he had created a lasting friendship, of the kind that did not require that they see each other all the time, and for which spending a few minutes together, was enough to immediately recreate the closeness that existed when they went to school. His surprise was great and so was the pleasure of seeing him again. Eric started by saying:

"Champ, you've really made an name for yourself. You are really good." "You have no idea what a pleasure it is to receive these compliments from you. What are you doing around here?", replied Mark. "I was passing through here, because I had gone to visit my brother, so I said to myself, why not go visit that old sponge, Mark, now that he has become a very rich man, regardless of us university students." It was very easy to feel attuned to Eric, and their closeness had grown as they realized that they could count on each other without needing to ask for much; it was as natural to help each other out when it was necessary, as it was natural to see each other at school every day. Eric was a very cultured and a very good person; he was capable of imposing long hours of study on himself and stood out among the group of students. Compared to Eric, Mark had always been a mediocre student, who had always managed to survive, and when the opportunity had come to leave his studies for an athletic career as a professional volleyball player, he did not think twice about it. He was not cut out to be a student; it was necessary to leave the role of professor to gifted persons. Mark had stayed in school. however, to obtain a diploma so that he would not displease his parents too much, and then he had become an athlete. Every once in a while, Mark still talked with his school friends, but the great closeness with

Eric had remained and everything returned as if they had just seen each other the day before, as soon as they were together again. Mark admired Eric for his ability to emerge naturally, to impress his leadership without needing to impose it. Often Mark thought that he would have liked to work with Eric in the future, so that he could learn from him how to be with the persons you work or interact with. Eric gave you the impression that he would become a great professional and the university studies he had just begun showed that he was an excellent student. These thoughts went through his mind quickly, making Mark laugh almost with pleasure. He asked Eric if they could have dinner together. At first, Eric tried to refuse, but then he let his friend convince him. Mark then said good-bye to his team mates, who quickly began to make witty comments about the elusive top model he was going out with, and then they let him go.

They found a pizza restaurant not far from the indoor stadium, and after ordering two mugs of beer, Mark asked him how things were going in their town. The news consisted of small anecdotes not worth much consideration, which made Mark laugh, causing that same atmosphere they knew so well and which they had experienced so many times, to hover over their table. Instead, towards the end of dinner, Eric suddenly became sad and started to tell Mark about the unpleasant situation that had arisen in their family: "My older brother is going through a bad period. He has found another woman, who has made him lose his head. His wife is desperate right now, and their children, now three, are beginning to be affected by the clashes that go on in the family. This situation is leaving its repercussions at all levels and my parents certainly do not find themselves faring any better. For them, it is as if everything they have lived for is falling apart, because to them, certain fundamental principles of Christian life should be an integral part of our education. Now, they see everything lose its meaning, or rather, there is only one meaning that matters, i.e. their failure, and the sadness and perhaps the desperation they will have to bear during the final years of their life. It's really a bad shock, and the help that we can give as brothers is marginal and of little account. It's impossible to talk with my brother, who is an adult and, of course, he is unwilling to give up certain attitudes just to please us. It's impossible to give my parents back the tranquillity they have now irreparably lost. How can I make them understand that they are not to blame, that at this point in life, everyone is the maker of his own life and answerable to God for it. Certainly, their pleas are necessary, but they should not be destroyed by the choices their sons make. Maybe, it would have been better to have been brought up with a more Anglo-Saxon idea of the family, in which children are let go to wander alone in the world without the need for the family to act as a guardian angel. I

think that the education we received, which was the same for everyone, was rather good and that now we are ready to pass on these same fundamental principles to our own families in the future. "Mark noticed a note of sadness in his friend, which was probably due to the sense of impotence you felt when faced with such situations. Mark and Eric were too young to fully assess the implications that such situations could have on their future lives, but they were nevertheless aware that this would leave a mark in both their lives. "I still remember - said Mark – that time I came to study at your house, and how much fear or rather dread I felt at the sudden arrival of your older brother. It felt like a blast of cold air entering the room, which had immediately left us petrified; and I felt a great strength in his words, letting a glimmer of warmth and goodness come through. Later I was able to get to know him better, and my initial impression appeared under a completely different perspective. However, that first meeting left me with a certain impression of him, which, now, in the light of what you tell me, allows me to see something I had not noticed then. With our intrusion in his study, your brother had felt that we had deprived him of his freedom to be in charge of his space." "It's exactly something like that - resumed Eric – a strong, almost violent reaction now controls his behaviour, which is totally illogical. It seems as though the self-assuredness he always showed has been undermined at its base, because now he is driven by an instinctive, irrational force. The only way it would be possible to talk with him would be if he regained control of the rational part of himself, which he is now using to demonstrate to others that he is capable of keeping everything under control. He should rid himself of this compulsion so that he can see how things really stand, and then he could think about repairing some of the damage he's made, if this possibility still exists. I feel like I have to worry about things that are outside of my life, instead, they concern me closely. "The silence that followed was only accentuated by the babble that surrounded them, but the two young men were immersed in their thoughts. Mark asked for the bill, paid it and then they left. The noise of their steps on the sidewalk was occasionally interrupted by the noise of the passing cars and by the chatter of the passers-by they met. The porticoes that lined the sides of the street always cheered Mark up; they communicated a sense of protection and ownership, but at that moment, he was unable to delight in them. How easy it was to upset the balance inside an environment that was so important for one's emotional sphere. Mark felt that he had partially escaped this environment, because his not being present in the day-to-day life of his family, meant that he was on his own. By not sharing day-to-day life with his family, he was protected from the difficulties that could arise when the balance represented by the repetitive actions

inside a family was upset. The discussion of this situation had made a happy evening turn sad, or to say it more clearly, it had caused them to focus their attention on a problem they would probably have preferred not to ever discuss. Eric said: "Who knows what the future has in store for us; who knows if we will ever have to go through something like that, and how the persons close to us would react? Anyway, let's try to give this evening some tone and discuss something else. I was surprised to see how much you have improved technically; when you are in the playing field, you seem to be a different person from the fearful boy I always knew. You seem to be surrounded by an aura of respect. You are one of the youngest players, but you make others feel your worth naturally." At hearing these words, Mark brightened and his friend's comments took away the sadness that had taken possession of them. He said: "I've been lucky to find a good coach and my team mates are fantastic." "Stop being modest, we all know that you are an incurable narcissist!", Eric replied. They burst out laughing, and then the porticoes became beautiful and protective again, the street lights and car headlights made them dream about a world that only remained the American dream.

It was not very late, but Eric had a few more hours to travel before arriving home, so they walked again towards the indoor stadium, where Eric's car was parked. They always felt great displeasure in saying good-bye; they both regretted not having been able to talk about other things.

After his friend left, Mark continued to walk with nowhere to go. He had taken just a few steps, when a car approached him, stopping near him. It was Thomas, who, leaving him no time to say a word, told him to get in and drove off again. "We're invited to a party and you can't miss it. You won't believe it, but I've been driving around twenty minutes to find you. I am lucky to have found you, it's going to be a great night." That outburst of affection on Thomas's part almost touched Mark, who was becoming more and more convinced that their team was made up of wonderful people."

To tell you the truth, it was a good excuse to get rid of Mary Jane, now I'm free for the whole night. At dinner, everyone sang your praises, but I insisted that they leave you alone, because you need to grow in a tranquil environment, without too much pressure and stress." Mark would have liked to know what they had said about him, but on second thought, he understood that his friend was right. There was no reason to let it go to his head. The car pulled up in front of a beautiful house on the outskirts of the city, a great noise came from inside. They went in furtively and were immediately enveloped by the smoke and noise, which separated them. Mark immediately regretted having let himself be

dragged into that mayhem. Now he was stuck there, without a car and having to rely on others to get home. He reached the corner where the drinks were and got a beer. He sat on one side and watched the many people there go by, and he stopped to consider the different reasons that had driven these young people to go to that party. He did not know most of the people there, and it was strange to see the frenzy that characterized their behavior. This activity was giving him a sense of tranquillity, and, strangely, he felt that he was relaxing, and that in spite of all the uproar that surrounded him, he was able to isolate himself from everything, and he thought again about his meeting with Eric. He could still feel the satisfaction he had felt in being able to share some of his friend's worries with him, and in having been able to speak openly with him right away, as if they saw each other every day. This aspect of their friendship, i.e. being quickly attuned, was peculiar. He had exulted too quickly, he saw Sean and Thomas coming towards him and knew that they would not leave him alone: "Mark, get up from that chair and come with us!" He got up reluctantly and followed them into another room where the smell of smoke was even more intense, and where a cloud hovered at mid-height of the room. There was a round table at the centre of the room, where some people were playing cards. Alice was standing on one side talking to Patrick and another three persons. Mark recognized one of the three, it was the girl he had met outside the locker room, Helen. He was introduced to all three, Helen, Deborah and Eric. Right away, they began to talk about the game that afternoon and the comments on Mark's performance became the main topic of discussion. Mark was happy to receive that attention, but he also felt a sense of detachment, as if that discussion was more of an abstract one, and that it did not refer to persons, but to cars. For a few seconds, he heard only cold words, which were not even able to stimulate his desire to participate in the conversation. This sensation was strong in Mark, but Helen's question broke this sense of impersonalness (unoriginality): "What's more important to you, life on the playing field, or all that you can build from it or around it?" The question was important, but the setting and the timing could only result in a quick, superficial answer on his part: "Only the playing field pays you back for all the efforts you make, only the field is the true referee." This question touched off a lively discussion, but, inside, Mark felt himself heating up from the warmth and intensity contained in that question. For a young man like Mark, it was difficult to distinguish the difference between immediate things and things that could be of much more importance at a later time. For him, playing and the immediate gratification that came from performing well were more important than the teachings which could be derived, instead, from an overall view of things. His mind was becoming lost in

these thoughts, and he then paid more attention to Helen, who, indifferent to him, seemed very intent on the conversation. All of a sudden, Mark felt tired, he wanted to be alone and to go home, so right in the middle of the conversation, he blurted out: "Who can give me a ride home?" Objections were raised immediately, but Helen casually cut in: "Come, I'll take you, I was about to go home anyway." This put an end to all the protests and Mark and Helen left. Seated in Helen's car, they recalled one of those old American films in black and white, in which the superficial appearance of things could make them be taken for granted, instead there was only silence, bringing some peace after that noisy party. Helen's driving was accurate and relaxed, much more similar to a man's way of driving than to that of a woman. Mark did not feel like going home, but he did not want to think about where to go either, so he let her drive without speaking. The street lights caught his attention, drawing him into a children's game. Looking ahead of himself, he felt the warmth of the girl sitting next to him and every once in a while, he noticed a hint of nervousness in her movements. All at once, Helen asked: "Don't you remember me?" That question shook Mark violently, and he suddenly felt as though he were in the midst of a rough sea, where it was impossible to find some hold to keep from being beaten violently against the rocks. He could even see the scene in which he was brutally beaten against the rock, or fell from the wall of a mountain. His mind was working frantically in search of some small clue that could remind him of that girl, something in his recent past that he had forgotten. He was embarrassed and tried to gain time. He turned slowly to look at her more carefully under the intermittent light of the lamps that sped past them. The scene of the American film in black and white came back to his mind, and he felt absorbed in a part that was not his. That girl knew him, or claimed to know him, and he was trapped in a frantic search as he opened the doors of the memories inside his mind. Mark had never been very good at remembering the details of the faces of those who were around him. Now, as he watched her face, he saw her amused expression and he felt a bit ridiculous. He did not want to admit that he did not remember her, so he said: "If all of this is not a trick, I'll finally find that small light inside my mind that will lead me to you. In any case, I will need a little more information."

Mark was sure that it had not been a very recent or meaningful encounter, because otherwise he would not have forgotten her. The silence between them seemed to be a prelude to something important. Helen was not a familiar name, it did not hold any recollections for him, but everything was disconnected and confused. Yet, something was slowly and vaguely coming back to him, while taking him floatingly back to his

subconscious mind. It was certainly not her name that was making its way in his mind, but a detail of her hands, which he was now looking at, while absorbed in his thoughts. Those fingers and the way her hand firmly held its grip reminded him of someone he had met in high school at one of his school mates' parties. There had been a collision in a room with a girl he did not know, who had accidentally fallen against him, and whom he had held up to keep her from falling. The touch of her fingers and the grip of her hand had given him a sense of security and they had remained in an awkward embrace, holding each other's hands, for a few seconds. He vaguely remembered her face; at that time, only the touch of her hands had impressed itself in him, he had erased all the rest. While he raised his eyes in the semi-darkness of the car, his eyes had lit up and he saw an amused expression on her face. "You can't possibly remember me, it would be too difficult, but that day is still impressed in my mind, even if that embrace lasted only for a few seconds."

The past always stirred inside of Mark. He preferred to take shelter in his memories of the past, because the past never held surprises. He had never been able to build any relationship with the many of the people he had met in his life. He often asked himself how things were going for the people with whom he had in some way interacted and whom he had never seen again. Now, this young girl had suddenly reappeared and was trying to find him in some way, lighting up a small part of his forgotten past. Helen was saying: "The night we met, I was doing everything I could to be noticed by you, but I was too young to be of any interest to you. And just the moment I was leaving, I tripped on the step and ended up in your arms when I fell. I felt guilty and very embarrassed, so I slipped away quickly, but at that moment, I felt that I would have seen you again sooner or later." Then Mark looked at her more attentively and said: "You won't believe this, but I remember that young girl who bumped into me at the Patterson's party, even if some time has passed. To tell you the truth, I was struck by your hands and by your strong, firm grip, which is so hard to find in a girl. Now, here you are, self-assured and independent, quite different from the awkward and confused girl of the past."

Mark now began to look more carefully at the features of her face, her mouth and the shape of her eyes, in a shameless and intense manner, as if he wanted to impress details he did not want to forget in his mind. He reawakened from his thoughts only when Helen said: "I've passed the test! You don't need to take an X-ray of my face, and besides, that intense look scares me." Mark had heard people say these words so many times, when, often spellbound by a face, he would stop to look at it as if he wanted to impress the distinctive features of that face in his mind. He did not know what to say, he was uneasy,

he felt embarrassed, and at the same time, he felt that something was breaking, or rather, opening itself in his way of feeling; his body was being pulled away from that seat, from that situation; he was no longer in that car, with that girl, in that life. The film in black and white was fading away, he had been swallowed by the fog, he lost himself, and suddenly there was a great light, many bright colours, and he heard voices.

Epilogue

The voices, the colours, the light, and the young man woke up. He sat up and looked around him; he saw the majestic fir tree, the clear sunlight that filtered across the branches, the intense green colour of the mountain. He heard the voices coming from the nearby path, and then he remembered where he was, who he was, the dream he had caressed, the two lives lived together, the difficult choice he would have to make. And in that moment, he recalled the dreams he had had, clear and unfinished and he felt that he had already lived many parallel lives, that he had loved and suffered for those lives with an intensity so real that it troubled him.

In that moment, he understood that the choice that stood before him was not between two noble ideals such as “sports” or “science”. Regardless of the choice he would make, the roads he would take in life would lead to a life made of encounters with other people, joy and pain to be shared with others, and to be lived intensely with them, so that “the choice” would take on the role of extra, while the real leading role would be played by him and by the people he would meet during the course of his life.

The End

Index

Prologue	page. 1
Charter one	page. 3
Charter two	page. 5
Charter three	page. 9
Charter four	page. 14
Charter five	page. 23
Charter six	page. 31
Charter seven	page. 42
Charter eight	page. 48
Charter nine	page. 56
Epilogue	page. 67