

A Noble Friendship

Felice Mazza



Piero della Francesca: “Pala di Montefeltro” o “Pala di Brera”

A Noble Friendship

Felice Mazza

I. Mark

The arrival of Mark Evson at the New Ansedonia High School (NAH), in the quiet and fairly secluded town of New Ansedonia in Southern California, had been the **event of the year**. Mark was an Englishman, and both his parents—who belonged to the upper-middle class—were renowned scientists. They spent their time either in their labs or flying from a meeting to a summer school to an international conference in some remote, albeit not always touristically uninteresting, part of the world. They weren't very interested in children, and even less in teenagers. That included their only son, who was born as an afterthought, more "after" than "thought."

As a result, Mark had always lived by himself, always in an opulent and intellectual environment, but without a real family or a home he could call his own. Now, after spending several years in a few "Boys Only" English boarding schools, his parents had found it convenient to send him to live for at least one year in California, as a guest of his uncle and aunt, who were childless and equally wealthy. They had welcomed him with open arms, but only up to a point; that is, before discovering that this nephew of theirs had an intimidating personality, surrounded as he was by an aura of Old World culture. It was definitely too much for their substantially simple existence and culture, in which all problems were either considered solved (by others) or just avoided.

His uncle and aunt had their selected group of old friends, most of them in their late fifties to early sixties, with whom they spent most of their time. They played golf in the afternoon, barbecued around town, and had picnics on the beach or at some golfing resort in the desert on the weekends. Almost every evening the group used to go out to dine together and engage in other

cultural activities (such as playing bridge). These invariably ended in some harmless, rigorously verbal sexual play, after which they all were just sober enough to drive home (provided they didn't run into a police patrol car). Mercifully, his uncle and aunt thought it better not to invite Mark. In the first nights after his arrival, Mark had politely waited for his uncle and aunt to come back from their parties. He had even gone down to the garage to offer his help if needed, but had quickly understood that he made them uncomfortable, and his support wasn't welcome. Thus, when he heard their car coming back late at night, he would turn off the light in his ample room at the back of the house and pretend to be asleep.

Of course, they knew they could trust him; they were proud of him, and at the age of sixteen, he was free to do all he wanted. Mark was a tall, good-looking boy, with curly auburn hair and dark blue eyes. One could easily attribute seventeen or even eighteen years of age to him, judging from his physical appearance. In intellectual maturity, he could have been much older and escaped all classifications, which his instructors at NAH had tried to administer him. He was elegant in manners and impeccable in dress, always wearing a jacket or a blazer, a shirt, a tie, and perfectly polished shoes. In vain, many among the local friends he had quickly made had tried to make him understand that such a dressing style wasn't required, especially in Southern California, and was bordering on the ridiculous. However, they soon learned that Mark followed a code of his own, albeit without arrogance, but with a measure of tranquil inflexibility, once he had taken a decision.

At school, within a few weeks of his arrival, all his classmates had recognized that he was unquestionably the best student in all subjects. His English was, of course, the Queen's English, and not even his English instructor could read Shakespeare better than he

could. In Mathematics, he quickly solved all problems. In fact, he did so many calculations in his mind that even the Math instructor occasionally couldn't follow his mental processes. Once, one of his classmates had asked him how he could be so good at Mathematics. He had answered nonchalantly that in the "old public school," somewhere in Southern England, he had already studied the same subjects two years earlier. At the beginning of the school year, he had shown some weakness in American (meaning U.S.) history, a subject that enjoyed precious little popularity among all students of all ethnic groups. In any case, it had taken him just three weeks to master American history as well. They asked him how he could have succeeded, and he answered that the whole of American History was equivalent to four chapters, perhaps five, of a book on the history of England. In a word, it was no big deal.

As if all this weren't enough, there was also his primacy in most sports. He didn't play baseball, which he considered an illegitimate son of cricket, nor American Football, which for him was an unsuccessful attempt to play Rugby, which, lamentably, had been invented after the War of Independence. Instead, in no time the soccer team unanimously voted him captain, and thanks to his physical excellence, he was one of the best basketball players, besides being consistently the first in many individual sports. On top of this, his fair play had become a legend whose fame had quickly spread out of the school. It was almost irritating to his companions to see the extraordinary ease with which he could succeed in whatever he attempted. Nevertheless, his innate kindness of heart and upright character made his superiority in all fields almost forgivable.

Of course, in no time all the girls in the school were adoring him and were not so secretly hoping that he would ask them out. There was even an urban legend about his being a member of the

Royal House, but after some research made by the most enterprising girls, they had to content themselves with the assumption that he was a member of the gentry, possibly a Duke.

2. Buck

His success with girls, which Mark apparently didn't intend to exploit, as in the first months he never dated a single girl at the school, was unacceptable to many all-American boys, who felt they couldn't compete with him.

Most annoyed of all was Buck, the school's bully, who was prone to flying into a rage if a girl belonging to his "harem" even looked at another boy. He would then look for the unfortunate male and, if possible in the presence of the female who was the object of contention, would insult and harass him until a fight ensued.

Like Mark, Buck was a big boy for his age, but he added to his physical strength a kind of stubborn brutality, and any fight was a foregone conclusion: the other boy would end up soundly beaten, with his face smashed, and would stay out of the way for good. Inevitably, the day came when Becky, his "girl in charge," started to talk to Buck about Mark, how excellent and admirable he was. Buck, who in general matters had the IQ of a vegetable, but in this sort of thing was as sharp as a razor, saw the symptoms of the disease. He decided that it was high time to cure it by looking for Mark and administering the usual treatment.

Thus, one morning Buck set out to give Mark his first official object lesson on American etiquette. To do so in style, he called his two chief henchmen, Jeff and Stuart, put on a sort of military outfit, with a sand-colored T-shirt showing off his hairy and muscular arms, camouflage combat trousers, and army combat boots. He marched into the main corridor of NAH just before the beginning of classes and started his search. The hall was swarming with boys and girls coming and going, standing in little groups for one last chat, fumbling in their lockers.

Instructors and other adults made themselves inconspicuous at that time because they knew by experience that they would only increase the reigning noise and confusion. However, when he had just started hunting for his prey, another boy attracted his attention.

3. Billie

In the corridor, there was a cute, towheaded kid, twelve or thirteen—thirteen, in fact, but small for his age—who was putting things into his locker. He had bright blue eyes and tousled blond, almost white hair. When he smiled, his smile was infectious.

"Did you notice that kid, Jeff?" Buck asked, pointing his finger at the towhead. "No, what about him?" "That's Billie Farrar. Girls love him. Just watch."

It was clear that many girls devoured the young boy with their eyes: all the girls who passed near Billie would get a good look at him, though he apparently didn't even notice them.

Buck and his companions observed a blushing girl in a tartan skirt who, passing by, almost brushed against Billie: "Hi, Billie," she said suavely, displaying her most charming smile. Billie sighed, lifted his eyes to heaven without turning, and went on re-ordering his locker. He just said, in a studiously bored tone: "Hi, Sharon." Sharon left him.

"I think that kid is gay," Stuart said. "Gay?" Buck retorted. "Maybe I know nothing about summing fractions, but I understand this sort of thing. Believe me, that kid is anything but gay." "So what?" asked Stuart, not very interested.

Buck looked at him with a knowing expression: "We must put a stop to that, or—give him two years—he will be the most popular kid in the school. A real killer." "Why do you care? In two or three years, you won't be in this school anymore." "Possibly, but New Ansedonia might not be large enough for the two of us." "What's so special about him?" asked Jeff, whose face was dramatically losing the battle with acne, leaving him with almost insoluble problems in finding a date with girls at NAH. "Who knows? Ask the girls! Chemistry, they say."

Buck looked around with some attention. "You know what? Now that there are so many students and no teachers around, it's an excellent time to act. Fast."

At that moment, Billie was animatedly talking about some matter of vital interest, at the center of a group of companions, all boys, all small, all seemingly as harmless as little white mice (but harmless they were not).

Buck called him from afar: "Hey, Billie, when are we going to buy you your first training bra?"

Billie blushed violently and was terrified, which was a sight Buck immensely enjoyed. Knowing Buck by reputation, Billie tried to pretend not to hear. However, frantically searching his brain, he couldn't understand why Buck would pick on him, as everybody knew that Buck was interested only in girls, and Billie knew that he had a clear conscience about girls, as he couldn't stand even one of them.

Buck approached with a determined step: "Hey, Billie, William or Wilhelmina, tell us, are you a boy or a girl? From the way you spell your name, one could hardly tell... Maybe we should submit you to a check as soon as possible, once and for all."

Billie understood the implication, and his eyes widened with fear, but before he could escape, Buck, with the help of Jeff, had already grabbed him, lifted him, and propped him against his left shoulder, pinning him there with his left arm around his tiny waist.

In vain, Billie pleaded and cried: "Buck! Please leave me alone... What do you want from me?"

His friends were too small and didn't even think of teaming up against Buck. Besides, they also had to reckon with Jeff and Stuart. So, they just screamed from a safe distance: "Leave him alone, Buck! He has never done anything to you."

Buck ignored them. Then, solemnly: "And now, ladies and

gentlemen, we are going to perform a necessary sex test on this shrimp of uncertain sex."

Some of the students left immediately; some were horrified, others were somewhat amused, still others, mainly girls, were quite curious. Three girls even stopped, giggling, and came very close to Buck to examine the details of the sequel.

Billie was in tears, struggling and flailing at Buck, with weak and ineffective blows, which mostly didn't even reach their target.

Buck, with his right hand, unbuckled the belt of Billie's jeans and tugged them down just above Billie's knees. Then he grabbed the waistband of his briefs, ready to yank them down and expose Billie.

However, at this point, Buck felt the grasp of an iron hand on his right shoulder. An authoritative voice said: "That's enough. Chuck it" (1).

Without turning around, Buck put on a surprised—yet not unhappy—expression: "Chuck it? Well, well, well. This must be our English comrade! What a lucky encounter!"

He turned around to face Mark, who was as tall as he was. Mark had an intense, serious expression. In contrast with Buck and his battle uniform, he was impeccably dressed, as if he was going to a party: navy blue blazer, light blue Bermuda shorts, shirt, and tie—totally out of place in Southern California, at least so early in the morning.

Buck dropped Billie, who quickly slinked to safety. Then, without warning, he instantly shot his straight right at Mark's face, who apparently was expecting the blow and parried it as a matter of course, leaving Buck baffled for an instant. Mark turned his back to him, and walked away.

Buck was taken aback: "Hey, you yellow-bellied limey. It doesn't end there, you know."

Mark stopped and turned around. He said quietly: "I am not

yellow-bellied. I just don't like seeing big brutes like you picking on smaller kids. Have at least the decency to fight people your own age and size." "Fine, you are about my own age and size. Come here, and I'll give you your lesson." "I have no time for your lessons now," said Mark. "Do you know how to box?" "I know enough to reduce you to a pulp in less than one minute." "Super! Let's meet at the Gym at five thirty PM. Bye, now, I have things to do." Mark went his way.

Buck turned to his friends: "It's even better than I expected. Spread the news. I want the whole school at the Gym at five thirty tonight. When I'm through with the face of Master Mark Evson Esquire, even his mother won't be able to recognize him."

Boxing wasn't part of the curriculum at NAH, but the Phys Ed instructor, a boxing fan, had created a small club. He firmly believed that boxing could divert the innate violence of boys and their inevitable conflicts into an acceptable and controlled direction: one man facing another, without knives or other weapons.

Neither Mark nor Buck were members of the club, but Buck thought he could beat Mark at any fighting contest, and therefore accepted the challenge without thinking twice. He didn't say it, but he secretly hoped that if he could disfigure Mark, maybe he would even leave the school in shame, for good.

4. At the Gym

At half past five PM, the Gym was fully packed with students, boys and girls, talking animatedly to each other. The novelty of the match proved to be an irresistible attraction (the vast majority had never seen a boxing fight); there wasn't a free place on the bleachers, and excitement ran high. Billie and his supporters had managed to secure several much-coveted seats in the front row.

The Phys Ed Instructor was a massive man, of military upbringing, definitely not somebody one would mess around with lightly. He came to the center of the basketball field and said: "Boys and girls, I have personally asked to act as a referee for this fight. I want to see fair play, as they say in England."

At that moment, amid the wild cheers of girls and boys, the two adversaries, Mark, followed by his classmates Josh and Al, and Buck, with Jeff and Stuart, entered the basketball field. White adhesive bands on the wooden floor marked the limits of the makeshift ring. Two chairs were at two opposite corners. Mark and Buck wore boxers, socks, gym shoes, boxing gloves, and head-guards provided by the club—a new sight at NAH.

The Phys Ed instructor started the proceedings: "Are the opponents ready?" Mark and Buck, raising an arm, said: "Yes." "Fine. On my right, Bernardo Williams."

Loud cheers and screams, especially from girls, greeted the announcement. Buck showed off his muscles, which, however, were more of the 'bodybuilding' than the 'athlete' type. Besides, he was exceptionally hairy, a quality which girls saw with mixed feelings.

The Phys Ed Instructor went on: "On my left, Mark Evson."

Also this announcement was saluted by loud cheers, especially from Billie's group and other young boys, but also from older

girls. Mark looked well: he was well tanned, had broad shoulders, and the muscles of an athlete. Although he looked a bit thinner than Buck, a closer look revealed that his muscles were well-trained, and he wouldn't be easy to beat.

The Phys Ed instructor was talking to the opponents: "Three rounds, two minutes each. I will be the sole judge. No blows below the belt. Now touch gloves."

Mark advanced with a formal smile to touch gloves, but Buck ostentatiously turned his back on him and said through his teeth, but audibly: "F*** off."

The Phys Ed instructor looked at Mark with a helpless expression, which seemed almost funny on the face of such a big man. Mark just bowed and withdrew.

One could hear all sorts of comments and bets on the bleachers. One girl was telling her girlfriends, with an ecstatic expression: "Five to one that Buck wins. He is my man: just look at his pecs and his gorgeous six-pack!"

On the front row, Billie was sitting as usual in the middle of a group of five or six young boys. Lifting his eyes to heaven and crossing his fingers, he said: "Oh God, how I hope that Buck gets the beating of his life!"

Paul, one of Billie's friends, wearing thick glasses, said in a plaintive voice: "I wish you were right, Billie Farrar, but I don't like at all what I see." In fact, seen from a distance, Mark seemed much thinner than his opponent. However, body hair had something to do with this impression.

With a quick move, Billie took the glasses off Paul's nose, folded them, and gave them back to the proprietor: "There. Thus, you won't see anything you wouldn't like to see."

Paul (without replacing his glasses on his nose): "Still..."

Billie was following his train of thought: "Well, at least let's hope that Mark won't be hurt too badly. For sure, the instructor will

stop the game if it becomes dangerous... I hope."

Now, something happened. Just before the Phys Ed instructor gave the signal to start the fight, Buck threw away his head-guard, saying to Mark with a nasty grin: "Now, what are you going to do, yellow-belly?" "Put that back on!" snarled the Phys Ed instructor.

Mark said nothing. He just took off his head-guard and calmly put it on his chair. Surprise took the Phys Ed instructor. He shrugged. He thought that in any case, a regular boxing match was preferable to an inevitable all-out fight, no holds barred. Besides, this wasn't his class, as he was only acting as a host, ready to intervene if the match turned out to be less than fair. He just kept his fingers crossed, hoping that nobody would get seriously hurt.

He looked at his watch and yelled: "Time!"

Buck flew at Mark, but it was immediately clear that he had no technique at all. He was just a two-handed slugger, with boxing gloves. In stark contrast, Mark, pale and extremely concentrated, kept his guard up, was mobile on his legs, always holding his ground, made clever feints, and at the end of the first storm, he was untouched. Buck took two steps back in disbelief and then came again like fury, with terrible blows carrying all his weight. As in the first assault, he didn't get close enough to touch Mark, and even staggered past him, overbalanced by his ill-considered blows. At this juncture, he looked helplessly at his seconds.

Mistake.

Mark immediately punished him for his lack of concentration with two straight rights, one after the other, like a fast-moving piston, which hit his face twice and stunned him. While Buck was trying to recover, the third blow, a straight left, much more powerful, caught him flush on his face, and Buck collapsed in a

faint. Out.

When the count ended, Buck was still painfully crawling on the floor, not yet trying to stand up. Without even looking at him, the instructor said calmly, amid a thundering, unanimous yell from the whole school: "Mark Evson wins."

Mark took two steps toward his beaten adversary, who repeated his formal greeting as before, this time with a tearful voice, and went away with a bleeding lip, still hearing a joyful carillon in his ears, and crying in humiliation. Jeff and Stuart followed him silently, unprepared to say anything in a situation so unusual for them.

The Phys Ed instructor turned to Mark: "That was perfect: not even forty seconds, including the count. Where did you learn such beautiful boxing? I heard the School Authorities had banned boxing from schools in England."

Mark looked as if he hadn't even had a fight. He still had his twinkle in his eye, and said, vaguely: "Oh... at my old school, we too had a club..."

He couldn't finish. Boys and girls were running down from the bleachers and coming from all sides, surrounding him to congratulate him. Billie was jumping up and down with joy, but couldn't even get close to his champion, who finally retired to the locker-room with his friends patting his back.

5. The Teachers

The next day, in the afternoon, there was a sort of informal meeting in the teachers' common room at NAH. Five or six instructors were having coffee around a big table encumbered with documents, books, notebooks, both chewed and un-chewed pencils, and coffee cups with residues from different geological eras.

The senior member of the group was the English instructor: "Now then," he began. "Our English star is also an accomplished boxer. I didn't know that we had boxing in this school." "We don't," said the Phys Ed Instructor. "And I regret it. So, I set up a boxing club. But Mark isn't a member. I wish he were." "Still," said the English Instructor, "I'm astonished seeing all that this boy can do, considering that he's barely sixteen. You know? When I have to grade his essays, I'm always on my guard. He knows Latin—and well, too. He makes quotations. OK, he could get them from the Web, I see that. Still, I must admit that they're always to the point, and I bet that he knows those darned quotations by heart anyway. I almost came to hate him, although he isn't a show-off. He's a... natural."

The Math Instructor was gay, younger, with a mustache: "Hear, hear! Judging from his performance in Math, I can assure you that he doesn't live only in the world of literature, though."

The Performing Arts instructor was a woman in her late thirties. She was good-looking, practiced many sports, and displayed a peculiar aggressiveness, which not all her colleagues, male or female, appreciated. She said: "I wish we could have him take an intelligence test. He told me that he was administered one in England, but he wasn't shown the results and was asked to repeat it. He refused. Apparently, they didn't insist."

The English instructor commented: "I bet it was because the first result was unexpectedly high." "...Or surprisingly low," said the Performing Arts instructor. "I know that my distinguished colleagues don't share what I'm going to say, but I think that Mark Evson has serious personality problems. Look at the way he deals with girls. Two months and not a single date yet."

The Spanish Language instructor was Hispanic: "I think he's just learning how to deal with them. Our young American girls can be quite dangerous. Remember, our young man has been living in all-male environments all his life."

To which the Math instructor added, somewhat dreamily: "He might be gay." "I'm prepared to follow him personally and help him to get over his problems," added the Performing Arts instructor, with the expression of a dedicated teacher ready to sacrifice herself. "Oh, would you! How considerate! Leave him alone, I say," retorted the Math instructor, a bit sarcastically.

For this time, the English instructor put the matter to rest by saying wisely: "We all have personality problems, and Mark doesn't stand out on that account. You know what I think?"

The Phys Ed instructor softly sighed: "Oh, not again!" Then he added aloud, "Yes, we do." The English instructor heard it all, blushed, and didn't add a word.

The Social Sciences instructor tried to sum it up. He was one of those people who seldom speak, but once they begin, there's no way to stop them: "Let's face it. Mark intimidates us all. It makes me think of the Yankees at the end of the Independence War..."

Here again, some of the other instructors lifted their eyes to heaven. The Phys Ed instructor said: "Holy cow! This is really fresh news! Who won?"

This remark didn't minimally affect the Social Sciences instructor. "...Yes, the victorious Yankees were watching the ships sailing off forever with the English army and the loyalists on board. I think

that besides the elation of the victory, the most perceptive among the Yankees had a feeling of melancholy. They had won, but they had the clear impression that the beaten Englishmen carried away with themselves something, a hard core of invincibility, even in defeat. This boy reminds me of that...and he brought back to me a question I often reflect on: America is now the most influential power on Earth, but does that make it a new empire? Are we teachers of a new civilization? I mean, deep inside, have we achieved full independence?"

The Phys Ed instructor commented a bit sarcastically: "Thank you for your excellent, inspiring speech. Leaving it aside for the moment, I'd say that Mark is an exceptional boy, and I think that we're not yet at the end of the surprises he will serve us."

The English instructor had the last word: "Only, we won't be surprised anymore."

6. The Parking Lot

During the whole day following the boxing match, Billie had tried to make contact with Mark. He just wanted to thank him for stopping Buck...he just wanted to thank him warmly because he had fought for him...He just wanted to implore him to accept him as a friend...He just wanted...He just wanted...He even blushed at his thoughts about all he just wanted.

All his projects had fallen flat. Classmates of his age or older always surrounded Mark, and there was no way for Billie to approach him without being laughed at—not by Mark, of that he was sure—but by the other, less tactful boys and girls.

That evening, at the end of classes, he was following Mark, who was finally alone, at a distance of about twenty yards.

Apparently, Mark was heading for the bicycle shed, moving as usual at a brisk, athletic pace.

He turned around a corner, and Billie, afraid of losing contact, ran. However, as he turned the corner running at full speed, he suddenly bumped into Mark, who was waiting for him. Billie turned hopelessly purple.

Mark's voice and attitude were friendly: "Hey, kid! Where are you running?"

The answer of poor Billie, stunned, was almost inaudible: "Hi...," he bleated. "No reason to be scared. I just noticed that you had been following me everywhere today. May I be of help or something?"

Again, Billie couldn't find his voice, much to his anger against himself. "N-n-no," he finally stammered. "You already have been a great help. You protected me against Buck yesterday morning. Nobody was going to help me...And then you fought because of me. I just wanted to...thank you."

"Now you have, but it wasn't necessary to thank me: I didn't fight only for you; I just wanted to make it known that I will fight all bullies I will catch in the act of bullying, come what may."

Billie, who for thirty-six hours had felt something like Elsa von Brabant after having been rescued by Lohengrin (two characters and a story unfortunately entirely unknown to him), was a bit disappointed: "Still..." "It was no big deal," insisted Mark. "In the U.K., both at school and at the Boy Scouts', we pledge to protect the weaker against bullies, and yesterday you looked like the weaker party. No offense meant, of course." "No, no offense taken. I never dreamed of picking a fight with Buck."

And now, everything apparently having been said, Billie didn't know what to do. He ardently wished to ask Mark to accept him as a friend but didn't know how to go about it. All the flowery speeches he had prepared appeared laughable to him. Mark was patiently waiting, looking at Billie with a gentle smile, which Billie couldn't see, because he didn't dare to look up. Neither of them stirred for a while.

Finally, Mark asked: "Do you wish to tell me anything else?" "Such as?" (Billie was still blushing and looking down at his shoes and some exceedingly interesting ants hurrying on the pavement). "You are a hopelessly complicated boy, Billie—Billie, correct? How about telling me something simple, like, 'I would like to be your friend, Mark'?"

Billie blushed even more, and finally said: "Y-y-yes...but...but what would the answer be?" Mark smiled and said: "That, my friend, you'll have to find out by yourself. You should have the courage to take the plunge. After all, you aren't asking for anything dishonest, and you are offering your friendship, which is the most precious thing a kid can offer. At least, that's what I think." "Yes, but..." "...And, besides, you don't listen carefully." "Why do you say so? I remember every single word you said."

"Then please repeat to me my last sentence." "You said, 'That, my friend...'" (While saying it, a sudden thought struck Billie) "...Oh!" "Exactly," said Mark with a twinkle in his eye. "You see? There you already had your answer." Then, looking at him affectionately, he added: "What a child you are!"

At this, finally, Billie looked at Mark, meeting his eyes for the first time. His look was just a flash of blue-silver light, carrying all the messages he had thought during the day, and much more. The flash unfailingly reached its target and got an immediate reply. They were the messages of two souls that had been looking for each other since they existed and now knew that the search was over. Both boys were overwhelmed and silent for a long moment. They both felt like something was melting within them, so sweet a feeling as to be almost unbearable at the same time.

Still incredulous, Billie asked with a trembling voice: "Can we be friends?" "Sure, we can. I'd love to."

Friendship, a gift of the gods, was quickly flowering, like a golden tree, at sunset in an anonymous concrete parking lot somewhere in Southern California.

Billie felt reassured, but his voice remained hesitant. Now, the practical aspects of the friendship worried him. He said: "But we are in different classes. I am three grades below you. We will hardly see each other." "We'll find something, just don't worry.

For example, how are you doing in your various subjects?" "Not too bad, in most subjects. In Math, I'm not that good." "Would you like me to give you some tutoring in Mathematics?"

Billie, quickly, not believing his ears: "How? When?" Mark, self-assuredly: "When and where you want." "If we could do it at your home, I would prefer." "No problem. In the evening, usually, I study alone at home. You just tell me during the day something like 'Tonight I will come at seven,' and I will wait for you at seven, East President Taft, 157. Just be on time. Simple, isn't it?"

Billie smiled broadly: "Neat!"

At that point, he didn't know what to do. He could stay there forever but didn't want to impose on Mark. So he simply said:

"Then...see you soon...Mark!" "So long, Billie."

Mark went to the shed. When he disappeared, Billie started running and jumping in complete happiness, yelling at the top of his voice: "Yes! Yes!"

7. The Math Lesson: The Preparation

It took Billie a few days to gather enough courage to ask Mark for his first Math lesson. When he finally decided to ask, he was almost sure that Mark had forgotten everything, or, who knows? Maybe Mark would tell him he had been joking. Quite the contrary: Mark gave the impression that he had been eagerly waiting for his request.

That evening, it took Billie more than an hour to dress up, almost like a young boy on his first date. After a thorough shower, he stood for a long time in front of his open wardrobe, wearing only his briefs, while vigorously rubbing his tow-head with a bright red towel to dry it. Then he started selecting, putting on, and taking off, and finally discarding various items of clothing. In the end, he settled for a pair of light-blue and pink-checkered Bermudas, while muttering: "These should be okay." He was happy to find in a drawer a brand new, navy blue T-shirt, still in its original cellophane envelope. He put the T-shirt on and looked at himself in the mirror. Apparently, he was pleased with what he saw: "Here is my OOTD," he said.

He sat on his bed and put on bright red socks. Then he selected appropriate fashionable sneakers. Finally, he stuffed various things haphazardly into a small blue backpack, including assorted pens, books, notebooks, and a tablet computer.

He ran into the garage. In the sunset, his house looked dark, empty, and silent. He found his favorite skateboard, also blue, and went out. Not a soul was around.

Mark was not living very far, as New Ansedonia was not such a big city after all. Billie arrived at Mark's house, which appeared much more spacious than his own home, which was by no means small. Mark's house also looked dark, empty, and silent. Billie

looked at his complicated waterproof, digital clock, which displayed 6:45 PM. Mark had told him that he would be waiting for him at seven, and he mumbled: "OMG! Too early!" He started turning around Mark's house, attempting challenging exercises one after the other with his skateboard. He was not aware that Mark was standing behind the curtains of a window on the first floor and was looking at his evolutions, smiling.

Billie finally resolved to ring the doorbell. Mark welcomed him at the door: "I thought you would never decide to enter! I saw you arriving ten minutes ago. By the way, you're terrific with your skateboard! It was a treat, watching you practice." Billie blushed, but Mark was smiling pleasantly. "Did you have your dinner yet?" Mark asked. "Yessss...that is, no." "Fine. Then, here is our program. Half an hour cooking, one-hour dinner with DVD or TV at your choice, two hours Mathematics, end of the program around eleven. I'll walk you home. Okay?" "Okay."

They entered the large living room. While Billie was putting his backpack down, Mark added: "We have to agree on a system of punishment-reward for the Mathematics course." "Which means?" "Simple: if you solve a problem, you get a prize; if you make a mistake, you get a punishment. Regarding the rewards, I was thinking of paying you with M&Ms. For the penalties, I'm at a loss. Caning is sadly out of the question. How about forcing you to eat nutritious vegetables, such as broccoli? I could start defrosting them right away." "Yuck. That would be torture. You wouldn't do that to me." "Then what?"

After pondering a bit, Billie blushed and proposed: "How about strip-Math?" "Which means?" "Simple, it's like strip-poker, you know: at my first mistake, I give you one shoe; second mistake, the other shoe; third, one sock; fourth, the other sock; fifth, the T-shirt..." Mark smiled: "Sounds reasonable, provided we stop at the T-shirt. I prefer if you keep the essentials. Only I suggest that

for 'mistake,' we intend a block of three mistakes. Otherwise, the game might be over in five minutes. Okay? That gives you the possibility of making fifteen mistakes. Then, at the end of the two hours, you will take a final exam with one complex problem. If you miss, I will consider that you are tired, and there will be no penalty. If you solve the problem correctly, you'll get a prize." Billie was immediately curious: "What sort of a prize would I get?" "Oh, I don't know yet. I'll think of something. But don't you worry, we have plenty of time and, besides, I will assign a problem that you won't be able to solve." Billie laughed: "Gee, thanks, Mark. Really." "Anytime, my dear."

Cooking turned out to be surprisingly fun. Billie was a messy young boy with limited cooking experience, while Mark was efficient and tidy, probably because of his many years spent living alone. They worked as a perfect team: Billie, now wholly relaxed, was a lively, clownish kid, doing silly things on purpose, and almost succeeded many times in making a real mess, which Mark patiently always seemed to correct just in time. Mark feigned anger, but in such a good-natured way, that he only led Billie to increase his pranks. They spent the whole cooking time laughing and joking. Neither of them regretted at all that the dinner was ready in thirty minutes, while Mark, working alone, could have readily prepared it in fifteen minutes.

8. Still the Math Lesson: Dinner Time

In no time, Mark prepared a classical dining and TV watching setup: central table in front of the TV, set with drinks, nuts, sauces, fruits, tea and coffee; two small additional foldable tables on the sides, each carrying a big hamburger on a paper plate, a paper cup filled with coleslaw, potato chips, paper napkins, and drinking mugs. Mark, contemplating the setup, commented: "All this isn't that bad, but next time we should plan it better if we're going to have dinner together. We could agree in advance on a better menu. Let me apologize for tonight's poor spread."

The two boys took their seats close to each other on the couch in front of the TV, which was showing some series. Billie was on Mark's left. Once he had finished eating, he accurately cleaned his fingers with the napkin and then reclined his head on Mark's shoulder. Mark ruffled his hair on the back of his head. Then he told him quietly: "Please don't fall asleep. You came to do Math exercises, not to doze on my sofa, to say nothing of my shoulder. Should we start doing Math now, before you're gone altogether?" Billie (yawning drowsily): "No, I usually doze a bit during the first phase of my digestion (he rubbed his tummy), but... then I wake up. Promise." "Okay, if that's so, just relax and do as you please." Billie, with a satisfied expression, made his head comfortable, adjusting Mark's shoulder as if it were a pillow. He kept his promise, though, and after less than twenty minutes, he had recharged his batteries.

After exactly one hour, sixty minutes, to the total disappointment of Billie, Mark announced that it was time to do Math. Billie muttered that he would have willingly watched something else on TV, but Mark, albeit smiling, was adamant. "If one makes a formal agreement, then he must keep it." Billie tried to object that

there was no formal agreement with anybody, but Mark said: "We both made a deal with Billie and Mark. I value both of them immensely. I would never break an agreement I made with them." Thus, Billie had to comply. He didn't mind, though. He appreciated more and more Mark's unbending character, so different from that of all his other friends.

9. The Math Lesson: Mark's Room

The two boys eventually left the living room and climbed the stairway to the second floor. Billie, looking down at the room where they had had their dinner, almost couldn't believe how, under Mark's guidance, they had re-ordered it so perfectly.

Mark's room was another surprise to Billie. It appeared very large to him, with a large bed, a large desk. Everything seemed to be more than twice the standard size. The desk, where one would expect to see a computer, was perfectly polished and clean. There was a blue wall-to-wall carpet and the walls were covered with wooden panels of a dark reddish color, with some beautiful landscape paintings., with proper lighting. The room had a severe, plush appearance, in quasi-maniacal order. One would not have guessed that it was the room of a boy of sixteen.

Billie's eyes were wide open: "It's incredible, Mark! My house...my room is spacious, but yours is...enormous." "In the public school, I felt a bit cramped in my narrow room, and my parents and aunt gave me this ample room for a change."

Billie took a run-up, jumped, and let himself fall spread-eagled on the center of the bed, almost disappearing in it: "This bed is...huge! I would get lost in it during the night." "Same story: at the public school, either one of my arms or one leg was always hanging out of my bed."

Billie looked around: "But you have no posters, no souvenirs, no trophies..." "I have changed both house and school so many times, that I decided to carry with me as little of my past as possible. As for posters, I have only one."

He pressed a spot on a panel, which glided noiselessly, revealing an expensive version of a life-size, full-length portrait of Queen Elizabeth II. "Ho!" said Billie, amazed. "I didn't expect that!"

"Well, it's cheaper than having the pictures of your American Presidents. This one has been good for sixty years. And I also have one trophy."

He pressed another spot, and a small vertical closet opened, showing a cricket bat with colors and signatures. "Is this a cricket bat?" Billie asked. "I never saw one for real."

He brandished the bat and tried a few mock shots, wielding it as if it were a baseball bat. "Is it a special bat? One would say that nobody ever used it."

Mark's eyes suddenly clouded with regret: "You're right. It would have been my bat in the First Eleven, I mean the best team in my school, had my parents not decided to send me here in California." "Oh...but, but that was really mean of them!" Mark nodded thoughtfully in agreement. Then he sighed: "Probably they didn't even have the notion of what they were doing to me. Ever since I joined that school, at twelve, I had dreamed of being in the First Eleven. It was quite exceptional to be invited to join the team at sixteen when the majority of the members are seventeen or eighteen. Can you imagine? Instead, I had to content myself with a big party and the bat with all the signatures."

Billie was saddened: "I don't understand...How sad!" "Your sadness is my consolation, Billie," said Mark thoughtfully.

Trying to dispel the gloom of the moment, Billie was running around the room like a squirrel: "But you have no PC, no DVD, no CD player?" "I have. My parents gave me this plush room hoping to help me get over my disappointment, and since my father is one of the owners of an electronics company, look what he gave me. Come with me!"

Mark went to the desk and sat on a large and comfortable soft armchair. Billie rushed there, all happy because he could sit very close to Mark, there being only one armchair.

Mark touched a spot on the desk; a menu appeared on the

desktop. Billie saw something that he had seen only in movies: the desktop was an enormous touchscreen. Mark touched a spot and a hypermodern PC popped up. He reached another spot, and silently some panels glided on a wall, revealing a gigantic screen. "You see, this was to compensate me for that useless bat...but...but..." (he stopped short, frowning as if struck by a sudden thought) "...but it was not enough, huh?" Asked Billie. Mark regained control, melancholy having magically disappeared from his voice: "It was not, but tonight I bless their decision to force me to come here...and tomorrow I will write them a letter of thanks. I want you to know that it will be my first letter to them about this subject. In fact, it will be my first letter since I landed in New Ansedonia two months ago. So far, I only asked my aunt to inform them of my safe delivery to California." Billie looked at him with a quizzical expression, waiting for explanations: "How come?" "Can't you understand, you silly boy? Hadn't I come here, I wouldn't have met the sweetest friend I could find on this Earth, a silly, shrimp-like kid, known as Billie Farrar."

Billie blushed with pleasure, and stretched with extreme satisfaction: "Silly shrimp-like yourself. But show me. Do you have movies, music, photos?" "By the thousands. You ask whatever you want to see or hear, and we will search to see if I have it. Would you like to see any work of art?"

Billie found the proposal absurd, but he played the game. He concentrated for about twenty seconds, while Mark was looking at him with a vaguely amused expression: "You know what?" Said Billie. "I know that there are zillions of works of art all over the world, but at this moment...I can only think of the pyramids...and you, please stop having that amused expression." "How about Monna Lisa?" "Of Mona Lisa, I have heard, of course. I don't think I ever saw it, though. Okay, let's see Mona Lisa. And

why do you say 'Mon-na' instead of 'Mona' like everybody?" "Because that's the way the Italians call her." "And who cares how the Italians call her?" "Oh, I don't know...They just painted it..." He pressed a few spots on the desktop, and Mona Lisa appeared on the screen. It was a small portrait, and Mark felt the need to clarify: "That's the original size." "Small, greenish, and ugly. Fat and no eyebrows. I don't like it." "Concise, yet complete statement. However, this raises a question: why so many people are saying that this is one of the most important paintings in existence? Don't you think that it would be worthwhile finding out? We might look together for what is in it, which makes it so famous."

At this proposal, Billie looked horrified, and Mark realized that he had thrown his friend into deep water too soon. So he quickly added: "I didn't mean tonight. We will work on this project when you will ask me. I trust you will, sooner or later." Billie gulped with relief. Then, he said: "Do you have any favorite pictures to show me?" "You know, I have many favorite paintings, in different styles, and it is difficult for me to choose the favorite of the favorites. Okay, though, I invite you now to enter one room of my virtual museum, where one of my favorite paintings is. Be my guest."

Billie adjusted himself comfortably against Mark. The screen displayed a perfect reproduction of the "Pala di Brera," by Piero della Francesca. Billie was awestruck at the sight of the unusual painting: "Strange...never seen anything like that. The hanging egg...the baby, who is falling on the floor...the red thing around his neck...You know, Mark, I never saw anything like that." Mark, eagerly: "Do you like it?" "Just to please you I would like to say 'yes,' but..." "Never mind. It will grow on you. All great art does." Billie was politely interested: "What does it represent?" "Nothing in particular. Almost every important altar in Catholic churches

used to have a painting of this kind. It's a Catholic painting, with the Madonna, the baby Jesus, assorted Saints. The guy who paid for the artwork is the one kneeling on the right."

Billie noticed something: "What a strange nose!" Mark promptly zoomed in on the nose of Duke Federico da Montefeltro. "He had lost his right eye in a battle and asked his surgeon to remove part of his nose to be able to look right with the left eye." "But how can you know so many things?"

Mark answered: "I had access to computers since I was a baby...and, besides," (he added with just a tinge of melancholy) "I spent many long days alone." "There will be no more such days, Mark. Never," Billie said warmly. Mark ruffled his hair, a gesture that Billie was beginning to recognize as Mark's unique, all-purpose sign of affection.

"Looking again at that painting," said Billie, "I would say that it seems like something...otherworldly. Most of those people standing there are not interested in us. Their eyes see something else." Mark was surprised and answered, with a voice full of admiration: "Do you know, Billie? 'Otherworldly' is the right word. I have been looking at this painting one hundred times, but...I couldn't find a better word to describe it." Billie flushed with pleasure. But, again, he was looking around. Like most kids, he couldn't keep his attention fixed on a subject for a long time. Mark sensed it and asked: "How about music? What kind of music do you like?"

"I'm not very fond of music. My fam forced my brother to take piano lessons, and he hated every single one of them. When he went to Berkeley two years ago, he told me: 'Billie, don't let them force you to take those beastly piano lessons. They call it "classical music"... For me, it's not music at all.'" "But what kind of music do you like?" "Sorry to disappoint you, but even in Europe, my friends say that I have the musical taste of an old man," admitted

Mark. "Please. Let me hear a piece of 'old men music' you really like." "Okay, let's try this one. Then, don't complain, though. In any case, there will be no beastly piano, and, besides, at your first yawn, I will stop the music." Again, Billie made himself comfortable next to Mark.

10. The Math Lesson: "Casta Diva"

After a few seconds, the "Casta Diva" aria from Bellini's "Norma," interpreted by Maria Callas, emerged from the silence.

First, the orchestra played a not particularly exciting tune. Billie stole a glance at Mark in disbelief. How could he like such a boring piece? Luckily, this part was soon over. A woman's voice came in. Billie couldn't refrain from commenting aloud: "It's the kind of *opra...operatic* voice I don't like. Her voice is...old...and...worthless. No power." "And yet this singer is supposed to have had one of the best soprano voices ever, about sixty years ago..."

There was more that puzzled Billie: "What sort of language is she speaking? It sounds like Spanish..." "It's Italian. Both the words and the music were composed by Italians. That explains it".

"Fine, let the French sing in Italian, if that's what they like. But what are they doing?" "She is the high priestess of a ceremony, which takes place in France some two thousand years ago. She sings in a sacred oak-tree grove. She and the choir, which will join her in a moment, are singing to their goddess, the Moon, asking for inspiration as they plan an insurrection against the Roman invaders. The words themselves don't really carry an important message. By the way, the title of the aria is 'Casta Diva,' which means 'Pure Goddess' – the Moon."

Billie said: "How can you like a song if you can't understand the words?" "Well...if you don't understand the words, you can appreciate the music alone for its beauty. Think of the human voice just like any other instrument." "Are you telling me that lyrics are irrelevant?" "Definitely not, but if you need the words to appreciate the music, it means that the music isn't good enough." Billie was unconvinced and puzzled: "Still, I don't understand

why Frenchmen should sing meaningless Italian words to the moon among oak trees. Two thousand years ago, people must have been idiots." Mark just smiled at him.

The voice began to gather power, and two powerful top notes followed. They weren't enough for Billie: "Come on, more power, woman! You can make it!" The choir now started singing something with the rhythm of a lullaby. Billie (squirming): "That is for children, Mark. It makes me sleep." "Hold your yawns one more minute, then we quit." Billie, snuggling against Mark, said with a cheerful voice: "Just 'cause you ask me."

After some more singing from the choir and some more warbling from the singer, she started another stanza. Choir again. Then she finished with a powerful top note, which shook Billie up. A second top note followed, more powerful. Then the song dwindled away, there was one last top note, and Mark cut the music, saying: "You didn't like it, did you?"

Billie blinked, and then he murmured, with a hesitating voice: "Not really, but I must say...I had a strange feeling: for a moment, just one moment, at the very end...I thought I was in the oak grove with real people standing there, in the moonlight... And the whole scene started making sense."

Mark was astonished and looked at Billie open-mouthed, as if he wanted to say something, but kept quiet. Then, after a long pause, he sighed and said: "And now, Mathematics!"

11. The Math Lesson: The End of the Lesson

At the end of the lesson, lined up on the table in front of Billie, there were both of his shoes and one of his socks. To his credit, we must add that there were also five M&Ms. Mark summarized: "That makes it nine mistakes and five credits." Billie sounded almost resentful: "I beg your pardon, but I already ate at least five of my credits." "Even better. Why did you tell me that you are 'not so good' at Math? I think that if you just thought one moment longer about each problem instead of shooting straight from the hip, you would solve any of them at the first attempt. Besides, you'd still wear both your socks and shoes." "I don't mind that," said Billie, twirling the toes of his naked foot. "Actually..." (he was blushing) "Hush," said Mark. "I know what you would say." "If so, please, stop your mind-reading exercise," Billie said, blushing even more.

Then, putting his sock and shoes back on, he said: "I made an effort to do well just because I like you, Mark, and I didn't want to disappoint you." "In that case, in the Math class, when your instructor asks you a question, or you must solve a problem, think of me." "I already do, Mark, all the time, and not only at Math," said Billie naively.

Mark was pleased by this spontaneous remark, but he didn't want to show it. He just went on: "Besides, you also solved without any difficulty the final problem." (Showing the book) "Look here. It is the last problem in the chapter we studied, which means that I didn't make things easy for you." Billie's eyes brightened: "Talking about the final problem, did you think of my prize?" "I must admit that I wasn't expecting you to solve the problem. No, I didn't. Any idea?" "You are a hopelessly complicated boy, Mark. How about something simple, like 'Billie Farrar gets the final prize. The prize is that he has the right to

spend the night here?" "Here, in this house, you mean?" Mark looked incredulous. "To tell you the truth, I was thinking of your big bed. I am small enough. You will still be comfortable." "And what would your parents think of such a prize?" "They are not at home. They would be happy to know that I am not sleeping alone. Still, they would be twice as happy if they knew that I am with you. Maybe you don't know, but you have quite a reputation in town. Everybody thinks that you are the best, the most generous, and the kindest of all students." "Aren't you exaggerating a bit?" "And, besides, my parents know that you took up my defense, and fought the biggest guy in the school for me, even before we knew each other." "Okay, then. Here is the official announcement of the prize." (Solemnly) "Billie Farrar gets the final prize. The prize is that he has the right to spend the night here..." Billie answered quickly: "Thanks, I accept." "Let me finish," "...tonight and whenever he pleases." How about that?" "Oh, Mark! Really? I was hoping that, but I didn't dare to propose it."

Again, Mark ruffled his hair. Then, frowning, he said: "But...how about your PJs?" "I happen to have one with me in my backpack." "You little imp! Do you usually bring your PJs to your Math classes? Are they PJ parties or what?" Billie blushed. Then he gave a vague answer: "You know, one never knows..." "I bet. Okay, then. We are all set to go to bed."

However, at this point, Billie blushed and began to speak, his voice trembling: "Mark..." "What else, Billie? Any problem? Have you changed your mind?" "No..but Mother said that if I sleep here, I should tell you." "Tell me what?" Billie was very embarrassed: "I suffer from a... disorder. Not a real disease. Something that should be gone by age fifteen. So says the doctor." "Then it can't be that bad." "...The doctor called it...'Night terror.'" "I never heard of it. What is it?" "In the first part of the night...it

happened to me many times, so they told me. I bolted upright, eyes wide open, without seeing anything, screaming, thrashing about arms and legs...It could last up to ten minutes...half an hour at most." "Is it scary?" "For you, not for me: I feel nothing, and the next day I remember nothing." "Now that you told me, I would not be scared. But if it happens, what should I do?" "You should do nothing at all. Don't touch me and don't try to wake me up. Just please put pillows around me, so that I don't hurt myself. If you want, you can talk to me, though." "Saying what?" "It doesn't matter. Count sheep, if you want. Just do it with an even and pleasant voice." "Hmm. Interesting. Let's have a look. Come." They moved to the computer. Mark sat again in the big armchair and Billie, once more, in the same armchair, almost in his lap. Mark started operating the PC with one arm around Billie. Now and then, Billie tried to quickly press some key of the keyboard, interfering with Mark, and sometimes Mark rapped him on the hand. When this happened, they both laughed. Mark found the page he wanted: "Hmm. I see. Here it says that it probably happens when the child is under stress. Do you feel stressed out, Billie?" "I never had a more relaxing evening. Honest. Cooking was relaxing; eating was relaxing; watching TV with you was relaxing; even Math was relaxing. And you..." "Okay, okay. Relax." Billie just laughed. Then he pointed at the screen and added: "Look here: It says that heat seems to make crises more likely." "We are in winter, albeit a California winter. I think we are safe on that account. However, here it says that it might happen when one sleeps in a new bed. Which is the case tonight." Billie turned serious, with a small grimace: "Yes, this is the case." "Now, don't you worry. I will not be scared, I will put all pillows around you, I will not touch you, and I will count all sheep of this world. Twice, if necessary. You know, the way you started

talking, I was afraid you would tell me that occasionally you might turn into a vampire or something. But, at least, tonight it is not full moon night."

While he was talking, it appeared that Billie was not following him. He was not through with his confession, and added, with a trembling voice: "It's no joke, Mark...Once..." "Once what?" Billie was more and more embarrassed: "Once...during one crisis...I...wet my bed." Mark scowled: "Did you? Ah, that's bad. Do you know what I would do if that happened here? Do you know?" Billie looked terrified: "No. Would you send me back home? In the middle of the night? Now?"

Mark laughed: "No, silly boy. Listen: you don't worry. I will prepare our countermeasures, just in case, while you take your shower. If it happens, I will manage, either with your help or not. It's a long chance anyway. Just don't worry." Billie was still anxious: "Then you are not sending me home now?" "Are you crazy? Am I your friend or not? Now that you have told me your problems, and I saw how much it cost you to say to me, I like you – if possible – even more than before. I almost hope that you'll have a crisis tonight, just to show you what friendship is."

Billie was finally relaxed and hugged Mark, hiding his face against Mark's chest. Mark did not embrace, just patted his back. Billie sighed: "It's so sweet being with you, Mark."

Mark was thoughtful. Suddenly, after a few seconds, with an expression of surprise, he detached Billie from his chest. His shirt was wet: "But..." He looked at Billie: tears of joy were running down his smiling face. "You wet my shirt!" Mark was smiling: "What is this, a general rehearsal? I could hardly call it a 'dry run.'" Billie smiled, reclining his head again on Mark's chest. He would not mind if the time should stop and he could stay like that forever. But Mark, tapping him on his shoulder: "You are so dear to me, Billie. Now go and prepare for the night. Take your

shower, if you feel like it. You will find all sorts of soap, shampoo, talc. There is also a red beach towel, hanging next to the shower. I chose it because it goes well with the color of your hair." "But then...you too...you were thinking...You cheat!" "Okay, okay. One never knows. When you are through, come to bed. I will take my shower after you. When I am back, you must be already asleep. Oh, by the way, since we were talking about it, please have a good long pee."

Billie laughed and ran happily to the bathroom. Before he reached the door, Mark called him: "Billie, do you prefer to sleep with a night lamp on, or in total darkness?" Billie turned around: "Maybe a small night lamp. But since I am with you, it is not necessary. What would you prefer?" "I asked first, and a small lamp it will be."

12. After the Math Lesson: The Night

During the night, a few times, in the dim light of the night lamp, Billie turned in his sleep saying incoherent words and putting one arm around Mark's chest, as if to hold him there, next to himself. Mark would ruffle Billie's hair, at which Billie started purring. Then Mark would cautiously take Billie's arm and put it back from where it came. Billie went on sleeping peacefully with a faint smile on his face and breathing regularly.

Mark, instead, was awake for a long while, looking at the ceiling and thinking, with his arms folded under his head. He was serene but serious. His friendship with Billie was no simple matter. To begin with, he knew that it was essential to both. That was out of the question.

However, he knew that the golden friendship could not last. Billie at that time was living in those unforgettable four or five years, which only boys can have, starting at about the age of ten. Those are the years in which, if he is lucky, a boy lives in a boys' world, where neither adults nor girls can enter; the years of intense sports, high hopes, plans for travels and adventures, commitments for life, and an iron sense of justice. And yet, strange to say, those years have weak links with the past and almost none with the future. Mark felt lucky to have still an opportunity to enjoy a little of those happy times, partly thanks to Billie, and partly because of the kind of life he had lived until then.

Nevertheless, it was inevitable that their ways would part in a couple of years. They would both physically change, and, although Mark had once seen Billie's father, he thought he couldn't even imagine what Billie would look like as a man. Girls or other friends or interests would enter the picture. The Romans

knew all this, and a quotation by Cicero occurred to him: *Summi puerorum amores saepe una cum praetexta toga (ponuntur)* (1). "Even the closest attachments of boys are often laid aside with their *toga praetexta* (i.e., at age sixteen)." He almost laughed when he thought of how the English instructor would have taken this quotation. However, possibly, this was precisely the point. He was about to lay aside his "praetexta." Then what would happen? Now, his brain, half asleep, started wandering in the labyrinth of scattered thoughts, half dreams and half fragments of his extensive readings, looking for appropriate images, appropriate comparisons, perhaps some guidance. It struck him that friendship between young girls could last longer because the change of girls into women was more continuous and not as drastic as the change of boys into men.

He felt that close friendships between boys had the fragrance of the honey the bees extract from certain flowers, which impart some bitter flavor to its sweetness. That sweet bitterness was the poignant feeling of...of inevitable impermanence...yes, that was the word...impermanence...like...like what?...Like the sound of the bell of a faraway temple, whose echo quickly vanishes in the nearby hills (he had read something to this effect right at the beginning of a classic novel, but could not even remember where that temple was) (2).

Yes, impermanence was in the nature of all things in this world. In some cases, they were short-lasting by accident, but sometimes things existed to be short-lasting. It came to his mind that perhaps boy friendships were designed to be the most intense but also the most impermanent and short-lasting of all feelings. Why was it so? Was it because the short duration was at the root of the intensity of the feeling? Was it because impermanence added that unique bitter flavor to sweetness? He had the revelation that probably all kids involved in an innocent childish love

unconsciously experienced the overpowering feeling of universal impermanence.

If such was the case, all attempts to force boy friendships to last unchanged beyond their time could only bring about miserable failures. Bitterness alone remained.

Unchanged: that must be the mistake. The golden boyish friendship had to mature into a manly friendship, with a higher mandate, as the Romans taught, the Romans, who created a lasting empire, not the Greeks, who did not.

He decided that he must enjoy this flower of friendship as it was, without resisting its evolution in time, keeping in mind that future, higher mandate. However, above all, he must make its enjoyment a marvelous experience for Billie, at all cost, and for good, whether their ways would eventually part or not. This task also meant that Billie's attachment to him, no matter how sweet and intense, had to be regulated, to leave only perfect, untainted recollections for the rest of their lives. Their friendship was to produce a pure white light, like an arc lamp, that would brighten their whole existences, quite unlike a petrol lamp, which still provides light, but accompanied by a dark, bad-smelling smoke – the only thing which is visible at a distance, the only thing which can outlast the light.

He felt that the principles in which he believed would be a safe guidance to create the bright lamp, together with Billie. Having taken this resolution, finally, he fell asleep.

13. After the Math Lesson: The Morning

That particular Saturday morning started with fog on the hills overlooking the Ocean. But that was in the past. Now, around 7 AM, the town of New Ansedonia slowly emerged from the mist into the sun. The sky was bright pink, quickly turning to orange in the East, while it still kept a dark blue-gray color over the Pacific in the West.

In Mark's room, the very faint acoustic signal of an alarm clock resonated. The screen displayed "7:45 AM." Mark was already awake. He pulled himself up on one elbow and looked at Billie, who was sleeping in a fetal position, still wearing a faint smile. Mark breathed on his face. Billie's face puckered almost automatically, eyes still closed. Then he opened his eyes, saw Mark, and a radiant smile immediately appeared on his face. He stretched, extending both arms toward Mark. They hugged tight. Billie kissed Mark's cheek—his first kiss to Mark, a sweet, small one. But Mark didn't kiss him back. Instead, he tenderly detached Billie from himself, holding his shoulders. They were sitting on the ample bed.

Then Mark, still holding Billie, smiled. "Good morning, Billie."

"Good morning, Mark."

After some silence, Billie added, "You hug well."

"A matter of practice."

"But you don't kiss."

"No, I don't kiss. Especially, I don't kiss boys."

"Lack of practice?"

"Perhaps."

Billie said eagerly, "Want to practice with me? I'd love to be kissed by you."

"I'm not fond of kissing boys. Gentlemen don't kiss each other."

Billie looked taken aback, a sight Mark simply couldn't stand.

Thus, he went on: "...but I decided that I would do whatever you ask me, because you are my friend, and I love you. You just have to ask me once more, and I will kiss you. I'll do my best to learn. Promise."

At this offer, coming, so to speak, from the very crucible of friendship, Billie didn't reply immediately. He fell back, lying on the bed, and became thoughtful, while Mark was attentively looking at him. In Billie's eyes, one could almost see his thoughts. Then, finally, Billie took his resolve, one of those final resolves which one can make only at his age, and spoke solemnly, with a grave expression in his eyes: "I love you too, Mark. Therefore, I will never ask you again to kiss me."

Then he asked, timidly: "But, at least, do you allow me to dream of your kisses?" Mark smiled and nodded: "You may." Then he added, with mock severity: "But not too often!"

They hugged again. Both had bright eyes. Probably there was in those eyes just one tear of happiness, which came from discovering how quickly their friendship was becoming close. That would be their program forever: just to guess each other's pleasure and do their best to bring it about. But what if, like in this case, the pleasure of one demanded a sacrifice of the other? The answer was simple: the one who would make the bigger sacrifice would be the happier to do it for his friend.

Billie quickly dispelled the sweet solemnity of the moment: "But it is way too early. Eight in the morning, on a Saturday! Unheard of. Please, let me sleep a bit longer." "Okay, Your Highness. Just remember that we have lots of things to do. Never mind, I will cook some breakfast, and when you feel like it, you come

downstairs to the kitchen." "Couldn't we make it a brunch?" "You forget that at eleven sharp at the latest I must start training with my soccer team. Besides, there's no advantage to staying in bed. In my old public school..." "Fuck your old public school!" Mark, severely: "Hush, child. Your language is not becoming a gentleman."

Billie blushed, and seeing his embarrassment, Mark hugged him. Billie, while still in Mark's arms, looked up at him: "If every time I say, 'Fuck,' you hug me, then...fuck fuck fuck!" Mark pressed Billie's head with one hand to his chest, thus muffling his voice. He looked up at the sky and said: "Oh Lord, why did you give me such a silly kid as a friend?" He let Billie drop on the bed and went to the bathroom, while Billie adjusted himself to sleep longer.

In a short while, Mark came out of the dressing room, properly dressed as usual: shirt, tie, navy-blue jacket, long light-brown trousers, and polished brown shoes. Billie pulled himself up on an elbow and studied him lovingly. He said: "Why do you always have to dress up as if you were going to a party? It's Saturday morning, and there's nobody around to see you." Mark got closer and ruffled his hair. "First of all, well, you silly, you are my party, and, second, I don't dress for others; I dress for my self-respect." "Do you know what they call you in town? 'The-crazy-English-boy-always-wearing-a-tie,' or, shorter: 'The crazy tie-limey.'" "Don't care. I cannot listen to what everybody says, and act accordingly, unless..." "Unless?" "...unless you are ashamed of me." Billie sounded almost angry as he yelled: "Me? Ashamed of you? Are you really out of your mind? I like when I hear people talking about you. And nobody in town seriously thinks that you are crazy." "Okay then. I'll keep this outfit. Now I must go, lest our bacon gets burned through." "Bacon? You didn't put any bacon on the stove!" Mark smiled: "Not yet." And off he went.

14. The Math Lesson: Breakfast on the Next Morning

In the vast, well-equipped kitchen, Mark was busy preparing breakfast. He was wearing an immaculate apron over his trousers, and his jacket rested neatly on a chair. A large table was already arranged with two placemats, napkins, glasses, dishes, cutlery, a jug of orange juice, a can of tomato juice, a jar of milk, toasted bread, butter, marmalade, peanut butter, and a large tray full of neatly arranged assorted fresh fruits. Mark was at the stove, controlling the frying eggs and bacon. He heard the pitter-patter of naked feet on the floor.

Billie had appeared in the back of the kitchen, with no shoes or socks on. He was wearing his light-blue PJs, with short trousers, smiling childishly. Happy.

Mark was a bit astonished: "Already here?" "After all, I thought it was silly not to stay with you, now that I am in your house.

Finally." "Okay, then. Breakfast's ready."

They sat at the table and started eating. Billie was perched in his chair; Mark was sitting straight, very tidy. He had even put his jacket back on. Apparently, it was true that Billie was "his party." Billie buttered his toast carefully. Then, abruptly: "I meant to ask you... What do you think about sex?"

Mark pretended to choke on his food, a forkful of egg and bacon:

"What a light subject for a breakfast conversation! What would we ever discuss at dinner?" "No jokes, please. I am interested."

"Ask a more specific question." "Girls." "What about them?" "Are you interested in girls?" "Yes, I am." "But you don't date any. You could have whomever you want, but you don't date any." "Not yet. In due course, I will." "But here in California, we start dating at eleven. You are sixteen. When is the 'due course' going to come? How far is it?"

Here Mark muttered to himself: *Quam longe, cras istud? Ubi est? Aut unde petendum?* (1). Billie inquired: "What are you mumbling?" "Nothing, just a Latin verse I had to study in England." "Which says?" "How far is this tomorrow of yours? Where is it? Where from should one get it?" You could translate 'Tomorrow' equally well as 'Due course.'"

Billie was surprised: "That is exactly what I was just asking! Do you mean to say that the ancient Romans, with gladiators, legions, chariot races, orgies...actually wrote what I just said?" "Yes. After all, like us, they had their lives; they had families and friends. Their friends occasionally visited them and had breakfasts together in the morning, two thousand years ago, like we two today."

Billie's eyes brightened: "Oh, Mark, it is as if a whole new world had opened for a moment in front of me!"

He reflected for a moment while pouring tomato juice into his glass. However, he did not intend to leave his subject: "Going back to girls, tell me, are you feeling any attraction for them?" "Of course." "No 'of course.' I do not. They are messy, obnoxious, mischievous, gossipy, bossy. They always giggle in the silliest way. They are worthless at any sport..." "Maybe some years from now all the defects you mentioned will pale in front of the qualities you will find in them." "Unlikely. They have none."

"Still, the way you speak about girls makes me believe that you will be quite popular among them...and you won't even mind." "I just said that I couldn't stand them." "It might surprise you, but you do not sound convincing at all." "Bullshit! You know what? I think that I am gay." "Maybe you are, but if I were you, I would wait before 'coming out.'" "Why should I wait? Could we not be friends anymore?"

Mark looked intently at Billie, straight into his eyes: "Billie, listen to me very carefully: I will always be your friend. Even when we

will have to part, which is inevitable."

Billie frowned, and was almost trembling while asking: "Why do you say so?" "Well. No matter how much we would like to, we can't do anything about it. Just think. At the very least, in two years my parents will send me to the University somewhere, where you will not be able to follow me..." "I will follow you anywhere." "Come on. You have your life to live. But I will still be your friend. Always. We will find other ways of being friends. And you must know by now that what I say I mean – and I do." "I know, I know...but..." "...but before taking steps to commit yourself, please wait until your true nature declares itself." "It has already declared itself. I cannot stand one single girl in the school, but I fell in love with you the first moment I saw you." "It doesn't mean anything. It's quite natural to feel attracted to an older boy who, without even knowing you, protects you."

Billie, after seriously considering the matter: "That certainly happened. Still...my dislike of girls?" "Perhaps you are just a slow starter. I had some gay friends in England, but, frankly, you are quite different." "In what way?" "For one thing, gay boys did not speak about girls the way you just did." "No?" "Of course not! And, by the way, when I was ten or so, I felt attracted by older boys in the school. One, I found out later, was gay." "And?" "And nothing. We are still good friends. We chat on the web. In England, I used to visit him now and then, as well as other friends, and, I can tell you, enjoyable meetings we had." Here, Billie just grunted, making Mark laugh.

"But," said Mark, "it might surprise you; I am not the only person in the school who thinks that you will be quite a success with girls." "Really? Who else? Just don't mention any girl, please."

"May I ask you one question?" "Shoot." "Did you ever ask yourself why Buck attacked you when I had to intervene?" "Just because he is a disgusting, despicable, dirty asshole of a bully."

"Not so fast, child. I've made some discreet inquiries. He wanted to humiliate you in front of the girls, suggesting that you are gay because he is afraid of you as a competitor in a couple of years." Billie was agape: "Are you kidding? Buck, of all people? Afraid of me?" "So, you see, competent judges merely suggest that you do not take any rash decision." "I'll think it over." "Please do, and take your time. Give your hormones time to reflect and discuss the matter between them. Occasionally they are quite slow. Wait just two more years. Do it for me. Okay?" "Okay."

Billie reflected for a while, toying with his bacon. Then: "Mark, you think that sex is not necessary for a friendship between males?" "...Or females. Definitely not. Otherwise, only gays or at least bisexuals could be real friends, if they belong to the same sex. And this is nonsense." "I see your point, but we had a debate about that, last year in the school. And we came to the opposite conclusion. Unanimously." "A debate? But you were only twelve." "So what? Some among the participants were even younger, eleven or so." "Good grief! What can you know at that age about sex?"

Billie assumed an air of self-importance: "For your information, our courses in sex education start early enough to allow for a serious discussion on the subject to take place at the age of eleven." "At a theoretical level, I hope." Here Billie gave a mysterious smile: "Don't be silly," he said.

Mark preferred not to investigate the matter further. Billie continued: "We also read extracts of the...Kansas report, on children sexuality. Fairly interesting." "It's Kinsey, not Kansas." "Does it matter?" "Not really, but I would bet that the Performing Arts instructor moderated the discussion." "You would win the bet." "No wonder, she is a sex maniac." "Maybe. But she says that it is just our nature, and we should act according to our nature. Nothing bad in doing so. All problems come from going against

our nature." "Did she say so? Here is another quotation for you, from an old movie: 'Nature, Mr. Allnut, is what we are put in this world to rise above' (2). There it is, my little 'all nut.' Rise above, not go against. And that is precisely our task. I should even say, our only task as human beings."

"Enough with the quotes! Do you know that all the teachers think that you would be perfect, if you were not such a big bore with all your quotations, especially because they never know what to answer?" "Their problem. But, coming back to friendship and sex, I tell you what I believe: true friendship must be disinterested, a fully gratuitous gift. No exchange, no quid pro quo, no commerce. It must be something pure, bright, ideal, which sex could only deviate from its real purpose." "And what would the real purpose be?" "Do you care for another quotation?" "No, thank you." "In fact, I should thank you, because the original is in Italian and I cannot speak Italian." "Thanks to God for that." "Not so fast! I tell you in plain English: people are friends to help each other 'not to live like brutes, but to follow virtue and knowledge' (3). And please observe 'like brutes' is what our Performing Arts instructor means when she says 'according to our nature.'"

Billie reflected on these unusual words, which, as Mark could deduce from his expression, were slowly finding their way into his brain. Then, abruptly: "May I ask why you wanted to be my friend?" "I was expecting that question. Because the first time we met — in the parking lot, just a few days ago, do you still remember? — you told me that you had much to share in here (Mark pressed his pointing finger to Billie's heart), and this is where virtue is, and in here (he pressed his finger on Billie's forehead), and this is where knowledge resides or will reside. It was more than enough for me. What you have below the belt I don't know, because I stopped Buck before I could see, and I am not interested anyway. Save what you have in there for your

future, many girlfriends – or boyfriends."

Billie fell silent, and then he thoughtfully nodded. He looked at Mark with a strange expression. Then, blushing violently, he said in a tender voice: "You could have been my first...and only...love." This unexpected declaration struck Mark. Then he said: "Billie, nobody, ever in my life, talked to me so sweetly...." He was deeply moved, and choked, not knowing what to say.

Billie realized it, and said, with a gentle smile: "Now, don't be sad, Mark. We have made up our minds, and I am happy with the way we have taken. You know, I think I should feel sad, very sad, for all you just said, but instead, I am strangely happy...Again... (shyly) My friend...it is a whole new world opening up."

After that exchange, the two friends never approached the subject of sex again.

The friendship of Mark and Billie was soon known and much talked about, also because neither of the two friends ever did anything to hide it. However, if one could easily explain Billie's worship for Mark, nobody could understand Mark's affection for Billie. We know that the meeting in the parking lot was the explanation. Mark had discovered in a split second, in a world which he had quickly come to believe to be corrupt beyond repair, an innocent soul full of promise, and he was charmed by his discovery. Too many people would have thought that it should be a real treat to corrupt an innocent, but that was not Mark's idea of friendship.

Of course, the boys of the school tried to spread the rumor that Mark was after all gay, and the girls started expressing to each other their regret about this notion because all of them were in love with Mark.

15. The Party: Mark Is Invited

A few weeks after these events, a forty-person adult party was going on in the garden surrounding the swimming pool at Billie Farrar's home.

One of the guests was a Mr. Knecht (rhyming with "neck," as he invariably pointed out), a man closer to sixty than fifty, fat, almost bald, and wearing glasses. He was single, and unsavory stories circulated in town about him, though they were only rumors. He was talking to Bill Farrar Sr., Billie's father and president of Farrar Hardware Ltd. Bill Sr. was an athletic man, with blond hair and blue eyes like his son, and a tired expression. He seemed to have exhausted himself in his dedicated efforts to please his guests at all costs.

"So, Bill," Mr. Knecht said to Mr. Farrar, "when are we going to see the new star of New Ansedonia, your son's famous friend?"

"Certainly not tonight, and not here. He is just a boy. This party was not intended for boys." "Still, I've heard that he comes to this house every other day. Why don't you want to show him to us?"

"Tonight he is at his home, I suppose, and nobody in the UK would dream of inviting anybody to a party long after it started."

Mr. Knecht started laughing in a grating way: "But this is California! He must have learned that by now. We are more direct, less convol...convoluted. Come on, tell Junior to invite him."

Two women were sitting nearby, with their bare feet dangling in the swimming pool. One said: "Yes, Bill, please, invite the boy wonder!"

No doubt, Bill Farrar Sr. was unhappy with the idea. He liked Mark and didn't want to embarrass him by showing him around like a talking parrot. Besides, he was afraid of what the talking

parrot might say, because he knew that Mark had somewhat old-fashioned principles and, upon provocation, would fight for them. However, above all, he wanted to please his guests.

Looking at a second-floor window, which corresponded to Billie's room, he yelled: "Junior! Come here, please."

At that moment, Billie was in front of his PC. He was dressed for the party, which he clearly was not attending, nor wanted to attend. He made a gesture of extreme annoyance.

However, he couldn't help hearing his father calling again from downstairs: "Junior, could you please answer me, or move your legs just a bit faster?" "Coming, Father." And down he went, but not very fast.

When he reached the hall at the bottom of the stairway, he saw that his father was genuinely annoyed. "Junior, I would be grateful if, when I call you, you would respond with some more enthusiasm." "But I am here, Father." "Do me one favor, actually, two. First, we are the hosts of this party, and you should stay here with us. Second: many of my guests would like to meet your friend Mark. Could you please tell him to come as soon as he can?"

"Mark, Father?" Bill Junior seemed to like the idea as much as Bill Senior did. "I think I said Mark." "I don't think he would like this sort of party." "I don't think that anybody asked for your opinion. Are you suggesting that I give shitty parties?" "No, Father. But I see around only old people. Mark is sixteen, and here the youngest guest is at least forty...and with characters like Mr. Knecht around..." "Hush, Junior. I do not want you to make any comments on my guests. As for Mr. Knecht, my biggest shareholder, I have to invite him."

Mr. Knecht had overheard his name and moved closer. He knew that Billie loathed him, and knew equally well that in Billie's school one could hear, especially from girls, many not-quite-

flattering stories about himself. He approached with a sarcastic smile: "Talking about me, Billie? Are you telling your father how much you love me?" Billie turned purple and looked like a small lion ready to jump on Knecht and devour him in three mouthfuls. He said nothing. "Do you think that in this party we are too old for your friend?" "Yes, indeed. In my school, we would not call this gathering a party." "Possibly, but everybody says that your friend is so mature. His Performing Arts Instructor..." "That old bitch? She just dreams to have him in her bed."

His father thought it necessary to intervene: "Billie, I do not allow you to talk this way about a respected teacher..." Billie sneered: "Respected? By whom?"

His father didn't want to enter a discussion on that subject: "Well. That's enough. P L E A S E call your friend and invite him."

Billie, wanting to protect his friend because he instinctively smelled trouble, retreated to the second line of defense: "What if he cannot come? Attending our party was not in his plans, and he certainly has other things to do." "Sure, he might, but I happen to know that if you ask him, he will immediately leave all those other things and rush here, just to please you. At least, this is what everybody says."

At this, Billie couldn't but blush and smile to himself, while looking down not to show his satisfaction. Thus, everybody knew how much Mark valued their friendship. He didn't mind.

However, he had to retreat to the third line of defense. "Okay, I'll ask him. What if I don't find him?" "Don't try that on me, Junior. I can quickly check that one, and don't let me find you at fault."

Billie blushed and went to his room to call Mark. He called his friend on his PC. Mark's face appeared immediately, serene.

Billie, darkly: "Hi, Mark." "Hullo, my friend. Brighten up, please. I prefer to talk to a smiling Billie, if possible."

Billie, seriously: "Maybe not this time, Mark." Mark was suddenly

worried: "I know of no exceptions, Billie." Then he added, slightly anxious: "Is there anything really wrong?" "My parents are giving a party, and they asked me to invite you to attend. (He gulped) Immediately. (He exploded) But please tell me that you can't come. Don't come, Mark."

Mark thought a few seconds, frowning. Then he almost laughed: "Billie, nobody would believe us if you should say that I cannot come. I will be there in ten minutes. Don't worry."

Billie brightened: he had said what he felt he had to, and Mark was prepared to do what a real friend would do: "I love you, Mark." Mark's voice sounded particularly sweet to Billie: "I know. You don't expect me to tell you that I love you too, I hope."

Billie, blushing: "Don't bother, I know it, too."

He went downstairs: in the hall, there was his father, somewhat apprehensive, waiting. He looked questioningly at Billie. Billie answered the unasked question: "He is coming alright." "He's got more sense than you."

Billie had now a pretext not to attend the party, at least for the moment. He went to wait for Mark in front of the garage. Mark soon appeared on his bicycle. He was a bit red in his face, because of his effort to ride as fast as possible. As usual, he was wearing his natural elegance, plus a white shirt, tie and blazer of his old English public school; grey trousers with an impeccable crease; and polished dark brown shoes.

Billie brightened as soon as he saw him. Mark was still on his bicycle when Billie grabbed his arms. "How could you be so fast?" "Come on, Billie. At least let me dismount from my palfrey."

"Please stop speaking English; we speak Californian tonight," Billie said, laughing. "Okay. Californian. But, above all, don't you worry."

They put the bicycle into the garage and moved to the garden, Billie leading the way.

16. The Party: A Latin Lesson

In the garden, the surface of the swimming pool was as flat as a mirror, reflecting the party lights. Moths and other insects tirelessly flew around the bright lights. A rich buffet table had been set on the opposite side of the pool, across the garden. The guests were mostly sitting at various tables, and it was clear that the party had been going on for quite some time. There had also been some dancing to the sound of a small orchestra, whose members were now apparently packing up their instruments. Some of the ladies were quite tired, and their dresses were showing more than their designers intended.

At the arrival of Billie, followed by Mark, all conversations seemed to stop. Billie's father moved somewhat hurriedly toward Mark, who was about as tall as he was. He greeted Mark in a vaguely mocking tone: "Thank you, Your Highness, for coming to my modest party." "Thank you, Mr. President..." (pause) "...of the Farrar Ltd, for condescending to invite me," answered Mark with his customary amused twinkle in his eyes. "So, Mr. Evson, you are the new star in New Ansedonia. How do you like it here?" "It is a charming place; people are wonderful. I love it very much."

At this point, Mr. Knecht appeared, with an unpleasant, aggressive attitude, looking intently at Billie: "You like the people, you say? Ladies? Gentlemen? Boys? Girls? Or...kids?" Billie blushed violently, while Mark answered quietly: "All of them — provided they are polite." He looked around and concluded: "Now, Mr. Knecht, if you'll excuse me, I will go and thank Mrs. Farrar for the invitation."

He left Mr. Knecht on the spot and moved without hurrying to Mrs. Farrar, who was sitting at a table with a few other ladies. Billie walked at his side.

Mrs. Farrar knew him, liked him, and besides, felt sorry for the way her husband had invited, or rather summoned him, most probably against his will. "Hi, Mark, thanks for coming. Everybody here has heard so much about you. All my guests wanted to have at least one look at the boy wonder of New Ansedonia." "Nothing much to see, I am afraid." He was not right: he looked almost too perfect.

Mr. Knecht had recovered from the first round and had managed to reach Mark, on whose shoulder he laid a heavy hand. He had drunk more than enough and looked furious. "What did you mean, sir, if I may ask? Did you imply that I am impolite?" "Not as long as you keep your hands off my shoulder," was Mark's calm answer. Mr. Knecht withdrew his hand as if Mark's shoulder were burning. By now, he had lost his self-control: "So you came to California to teach us manners, English...and 'Latin,' perhaps?" (He said "Latin" as if it were a dirty word). "I am awfully sorry if I gave that impression. I came to attend high school and learn, not to teach. I have only found nice people, and I do not think there is anything I could teach anyone I know, on the subject of politeness. As for English, it is my language, and I speak it the way I know it." "It is also our language, just in case you did not notice, yet." "Well, we are speaking, if you want, two different dialects. Neither is better, nor worse, I think. At present, I am making an effort to learn a workable Californian English," he added with a smile, hoping to defuse all arguments of contention. "Bullshit," said Mr. Knecht aloud, a statement which did not require an answer.

Mark understood that rough sailing was ahead, and pretended not to hear him: "Latin...I learned some at the old public school. I liked it, and I am sorry that they do not offer a course here." Mr. Knecht firmly believed that Latin was utterly useless: "Oh, really? And what would be the use of your precious Latin?" "I admit that

Latin serves no practical purpose..." "Good to hear that you accept it!" "...in the American sense." "What do you mean?" "Latin is like a toolbox, which allows you to learn whatever you want...a bit like Mathematics, perhaps less abstract." "I have learned lots of really useful things without having the least inkling of what your precious Latin is." "It is what most people do. However, how can you be sure that Latin could not have improved your learning ability?"

Here Mr. Knecht did not know what to answer, a situation which did not help him to appreciate Mark's argument. "How would this miracle happen?" Mr. Knecht asked somewhat angrily.

"Difficult to explain. Frankly, I did not expect this discussion. One thing I can say, it helps me to organize my thoughts." "So, we poor Americans, not knowing Latin, we do not know how to think?" "To be precise, I was just speaking about myself, Mr. Knecht," said Mark meekly.

The conversation had attracted the attention of other people. Most agreed with Knecht in all he said, but all disliked the rudeness of his attacks. On the other hand, Mark did not appear to them as the young, arrogant wiseass, but just as an intelligent youngster, politely defending his ideas.

Mrs. Emmett was sitting next to Mrs. Farrar and, to deviate a bit the focus of the conversation, said: "Would there be any other advantages of Latin?" Mark looked at her with a grateful expression in his eyes. "It gives me access to great literary works, full of inspiring lines."

Mr. Everton was an attorney, a cultivated man, standing next to Mrs. Farrar's table, and thought it necessary to comment: "The Romans did not have the monopoly of excellent maxims and quotations, you know." "No indeed, Mr. Everton." Mr. Everton jumped, evidently not expecting that Mark knew his name; he exclaimed: "You know my name?" In this case, the explanation

was straightforward: while accompanying Mark to his mother, Billie had been telling a few names to Mark.

Mark went on: "Still, how come the legal jargon is full of Latin maxims? *Ne bis in idem*? *In dubio pro reo*, not to say *Actori incumbit probatio*?" (1) "Tradition, I expect." "Could it not be because it is difficult to express the same concepts more clearly and with fewer words?" "I don't think so," answered Mr. Everton, who did not want to yield to a mere boy. "Still, you might have a point: we should start thinking how to get rid once and for all of those moldy Latin brocards, which are increasingly more inadequate. I say, enough with your Old World culture, which has no use, neither to you nor to us. We Americans are now the most influential nation in the world, and we have the task of teaching our values of freedom. Not only, though. We also have the duty and right to give the world a new culture, an American-made, non-nonsense culture. There are things to do which are more important than studying Latin. Give me one single Latin quotation which would add anything to this party tonight, and you will have me on your side."

He looked around proudly as if expecting applause. Mark fell silent, his eyes turning fiery, then to an unspeakable sadness that astonished those who noticed.

He said: "Indeed, I have a suitable, rather long quotation... lines of a poem by Rutilius Namatianus, an obscure fifth-century Frenchman."

"Never heard of him!" a chorus responded.

"He was leaving Rome to return home and saluted the Eternal City, knowing he lived at the end of the empire. Visigoths had just sacked Rome for the first time in eight hundred years, and, you know, the legend of the vultures..."

"What vultures?" Many asked.

"The myth was that Romulus earned the right to found Rome by seeing twelve vultures, while his twin brother Remus saw only six. Each vulture was believed to represent a century of the city's life. Rutilius tells us he wrote in the year 1169 of the City. The last vulture was already completing its flight."

"Wonder how many vultures Pierre L'Enfant saw when he designed Washington DC...," whispered a lady.

"In any case, Rutilius believed the concept of what an empire *should be* would remain."

"Please enlighten us," Mr. Everton said, half ironically. "We all know of gladiators, orgies, perverted Emperors, wars to exact tribute from subdued nations. Is that the ideal empire the Romans wanted?"

Mark was ready: "From what I understand, the Roman ideal was a universal commonwealth of nations under Roman legions' protection, founded on peace and justice, the '*Ius Romanum*'. Emperor Caracalla, whom you'd probably call a bloodthirsty monster, extended 'Roman citizen' rights to all free inhabitants. The concept of justice—law equal for every citizen—was Rome's main gift to civilization."

Mr. Everton was surprised to find himself repeating: '*honeste vivere, alterum non laedere, unicuique suum tribuere*' (the precepts of law are these: to live honestly, to do no harm to anyone, and to give to each his own). In a flash, Mr. Everton had a view of himself, twenty years younger, studying law, alone in the library of his School of Law. Now bittersweet recollections gave way to

composure.

"You mention the 'commonwealth.' Is it perchance the British Empire that you have in mind?"

"Yes, but only in a sense. Two hundred years ago Great Britain started a colonial empire, brutally exploiting nations. However, its ideal basis was increasingly inspired by universalistic Roman ideals. Still, there was no doubt about the 'white man's' superiority and his colonizing mission (the *White Man's Burden*). No idea of integration existed while the Empire lasted; its function was to support Britain's primacy. This poem moves me because my country also lost its empire."

"Ha," Mr. Knecht said brutally, "I can see that you regret that you cannot exploit weaker nations anymore!"

"Yes, but above all, I regret the British Empire didn't have time to reach the Roman ideal: a program whose purpose wasn't to make rich and powerful a single nation, but to make the whole empire equally rich and powerful. When Rutilius wrote, Rome hadn't been the capital of the Roman Empire for over a century, but its sacred role as founder of the empire ideals was recognized — forever, it was hoped. America, now, is the only nation that could build an empire, but it lacks the very concept of empire. It's too late for a new 'colonial empire.' I love America, and I fear it will lose its empire before making one."

"But there were bloody rebellions against Roman and British rule. Also in America, just to mention one," said a lady.

"True, but that's typical of empires' beginnings, especially if the ideal isn't yet clear. Yet, both had a built-in promise to create a

world civilization. What matters is the ideal Rome wanted to establish, even if imperfectly realized, before barbaric invasions and other calamities made it impossible. I'm confident the British Empire would have moved toward full integration, if given time."

"There were other empires, like the Chinese," Mr. Everton offered.

"I don't know much about the Chinese Empire. But I'm sure Roman and Chinese empires, at their best, were very similar in attempting to build universal civilization based on peace and justice."

Mr. Everton bit his lip. "Okay, let's proceed with the quotation."

Mark began without emphasis. No "All the world's a stage..." declamation. The words quietly resonated in the garden. The silence of the audience, even Latin haters, lent solemnity. Nature's sounds—birds, insects, rustling leaves—were magically silent:

"Fecisti patriam diversis gentibus unam, / Profuit iniustis te dominante capi." He paused, translating: "Thou hast made of alien realms one fatherland, / The lawless found their gain beneath your sway."

"...Urbem fecisti quod prius orbis erat." "Of what was the world, you made one city."

"...Mitigat armatas victrix clementia vires." "Mercy in victory tempers strength in arms."

"...Quod regnas minus est quam quod regnare mereris..." "It is a smaller thing that thou dost reign, / than that thou dost deserve

to reign."

Silence followed. Most guests wondered what the US had done if it intended to deserve such praise in the future. The UK had made an honest, if ruthless, effort, but America? The lawless had gained under US sway in a different way: too many corrupt people and governments profited by subjugation to the US. And now too many innocent dead, from the noble American Indians onward, were coming uninvited to the party. It was almost unbearable to list them.

These thoughts flashed through Mr. Everton's mind. He said, in a subdued tone, "I suppose you think America cannot be the new empire, as I was suggesting. Are you saying we should wait for teachings from the Old World?"

"By no means. Unfortunately, my old world has little left to say. The task is on your shoulders. But what culture can America teach if it has nothing to say? What is the world's spiritual, or at least intellectual, future?"

"In the last century, America produced its share of philosophers, writers, intellectuals, such as Peirce, James, Dewey, Santayana...", Mr. Everton countered.

"True. But who reads them today? How many ever read them? Films, not books, presented American culture and values to the world, and rightly so—a thousand movie-goers for each book-reader. But recent American 'best film' lists show few new entries, mostly with low rankings. Many are remakes or 'escape movies'—cartoons, fantasy, sci-fi, ESP, horror. It seems you have no more messages, no values to offer, and you yourselves want to

escape intellectually from your own 'empire'."

"You can't base conclusions on a few lists, made with Heaven knows what objectives, you know, " a pensive gentleman argued.

"Anyhow, the point is the values you presented vanished in the Seventies-Eighties, with no replacements."

"Come on! We still have values!" many protested.

"Which values? That an incisive speech needs just half a dozen vulgar four-letter words?"

"Oh, come on! Four-letter words are natural, even if they clash with your taboos."

"Yes, they are perfectly natural, in their appropriate context. But they are vulgar and demeaning outside of it, and they degrade the speaker. Besides, they are so few, and the language is impoverished! Could you translate Hamlet's monologue with only four-letter words? 'To fuck or not to fuck? That is the fucking question!' Would it be more incisive?"

Some bystanders smiled, experimenting with the translation. Others even thought such a version might be more to the point, at least shorter than the original. Mark was not joking: "Still, those are only words. But the absence of values reflects a plan for a world in which there is a place only for the wealthy Americans and those who are of use to them."

"Hey, what is this? A sermon?" a few asked.

"But we have our Constitution, the Bill of Rights, a basis to civilize many countries still on the verge of barbarity," others

said, outraged.

"Yes, you do. You can propose and impose valid laws, as the Romans did, but you're also teaching an overarching value: 'think politically correct.' In the US, it erodes constitutional rights; abroad, it ridicules and demolishes other cultures' values and traditions."

"We are not yet there!" a few said.

"Not yet, but you are getting there. The world may never learn justice and freedom from you, but it's quickly learning that one principle. You cannot offer values if you simultaneously provide the mechanism to make them obsolete."

"Why not, if that is what the majority wants?"

"With due respect, moral values shouldn't be the result of a popular vote."

"Perhaps, then, Man can do without moral values, at least as we used to intend them," said a tall, stern gentleman. "Americans are unifying the world through technology. We've made the whole world one city, interconnected through the Web, sharing the same technology: Cell-Phones, PCs, PlayStations, Video Games, Socials; speaking the same way, dressing, eating, drinking the same."

"True. But you are creating a new racism, not based on skin color but on bank account size. You divide the world into two: the poor, who must produce for you, and the rich, who must buy your products. Both the poor who cannot work and the rich disinterested in your products are useless and undesirable. A

similar problem arises within the States: those thirty million or so poor are undesirable and useless, if not harmful. There's no reason the undesirable and useless should encumber your happy world. They must be convinced to go, and they must go."

The thousands of dead having withdrawn, an even larger crowd of poor from all countries and the United States themselves were coming to crash the party.

Mark added: "Saying that the Web replaces the ideals of the US 'empire', is like saying Roman roads 'were' the Roman Empire. There was much more to it, and that 'much more' is missing here. The American Empire unifies machines, not human beings. It has no soul."

"What is a soul?" asked a lady, half naively, half mockingly. Her question fell unanswered. There was silence. Only the faint hum of the insects around the lamps transformed a Flemish-like still life into something alive. A lamp was illuminating from behind Mark's auburn hair and formed a sort of thin golden halo around his head. He was looking at the guests of the party with a straight look and pure heart.

There were the most diverse reactions. Billie, of course, was watching him full of admiration; Mr. Farrar was biting his lips, wishing to strangle Mr. Knecht, who had forced him to invite this sort of killjoy wiseass to his party. Mrs. Farrar was whispering apologies to her neighbors: "Mark is only a young boy, you know. But he is a nice boy, indeed."

Mr. Everton was politely, but profoundly irritated, and was explaining to some friends that the boy did not know what he was talking about, and added that it was so because the English

do not have a written Constitution. Indeed, that was a two-edged argument, but he did not seem to appreciate it.

All these comments were quietly voiced. Only Mr. Knecht was furious and intervened almost screaming: "I know where you get the rotten ideas you are serving us tonight. You are a Roman Catholic. I know for sure. Every Sunday you go to Mass at the Mission. What you just said sounded like a dusty Catholic sermon, only good for your congregation: a decrepit priest, ten old Hispanic ladies, and a conceited boy — you."

Mark bowed: "I have never publicized my religious beliefs, but I am certainly not going to disavow them, especially tonight, as little fashionable as they may sound. Indeed, all you just said is correct."

Mr. Knecht was looking around triumphantly: "He is right not to publicize his beliefs: he should be ashamed of them."

"I don't see why," Mark replied imperturbably.

Mr. Knecht (almost screaming): "I'll tell you why, with all your hypocrisy and pedophilia!" He spat at Mark, but, as he was thoroughly drunk, his spittle fell on his own tie.

Again, most of the audience shared Knecht's ideas, not his ways.

A gentleman was telling his companion, another gentleman:

"Knecht is right. The Catholic notion of virtue, which was not even invented by the Catholics, has oppressed us for too long. But Knecht is not the champion I would have chosen for my ideas."

In a group of four people, a lady was speaking: "I can understand the boy. Now and then I feel the regret for those 'truths' I don't believe anymore. They did not solve any problem, but...they made the problem look less significant. And Knecht should have the decency to shut up."

In a group of three, a man said: "Say what you want, but I admire the courage of that young boy. Mind you, he is just sixteen, but he

is not the wiseass sort. He was forced to come to this party, and I have seen Knecht attacking him from the outset, without any apparent reason. But just look how fearlessly he defends his ideas, which, after all, for two thousand years have been the ideas of the world. 'Politically correct,' so to speak. Doing a lot of evil, I agree, but also some good....God, it just came to me that maybe also some of the politically correct ideas we are teaching, in the end, might do incalculable evil to the world. Still, to me, that boy is something."

Mark had paled for an instant but had recovered and now was glacially answering to Knecht: "Mr. Knecht, had you drunk less, you would spit more accurately. Also, you would be more careful with your words. I beg you, leave hypocrisy and pedophilia alone."

He said the last words deliberately and slowly, although not particularly loud. Everybody around seemed to understand the implications.

Mr. Knecht was now scarlet and beside himself: "I have not come here to be insulted by a young pedophile, who toys with the son of our host, as everybody knows."

"*Omnia munda mundis*, Mr. Knecht," said Mark quietly. Once more, Knecht stopped short of his onset: "Latin again? Meaning what?"

"All is clean for those who have a clean mind. We may add: '...and all is dirty for those who have a dirty mind... and conscience.'"

Knecht had no resource left but direct insult: "You little, despicable skunk of a pedophile!"

Even in front of such abuse, Mark did not lose his composure.

"Mr. Knecht, Mr. Everton here can inform you about the definition of pedophilia. It is rather complicated. But I think that to be called a pedophile I should be five or more years older than Billie. In other words, I should be eighteen, while I am just barely

sixteen."

Mr. Everton overheard and said to his neighbors: "In that, he is right."

"Ah, occasionally he might be right, then?" asked one of his group, with more than a pinch of irony in his voice.

"Occasionally," said Everton dryly. Then, to the utter surprise of those who were listening to him, he added: "Frankly, I am sorry, very sorry, that I brought about this dispute. It is my entire fault. That boy might not be subtle, but he is sound and did nothing to deserve my attack."

"Right you are!" another of his group said. "Judging from the result, you must admit that he found a quotation, which added something to this party, although perhaps we could have done without this addition, I for one."

"Correct on both accounts," said Mr. Everton. "I think I must make amends."

"Now, don't overdo it, Mitch, and let it be!" someone in his group said.

In the meantime, Mark went on: "I wish to say just one more thing, after which I will shut up. Maybe it would have been better if I had shut up earlier." (Some said in a low voice: "Hear, hear.")

"Anyway, here it is: Billie is a marvelous boy, the dearest friend I have, and my only wish is that he be the happiest boy on Earth. But this does not include any sex, not with me. I believe that in general, sex has nothing to do with friendship because it introduces a commerce of bodies into the divine gift of a fusion of souls. For example, it would be a shame to use friendship as a pretext to have sex, especially with lonely kids who have nobody who cares for them – which, by the way, is definitely not the case of Billie. It is regrettable that one of the modern American teachings is that sex is the consummation of friendship, and friendship without sex is incomplete. Well, for me, this is the

death of friendship. I leave willingly to the Americans this kind of friendship, and I do not wish to learn anything about it."

"And you expect us to believe it?" was the parting sentence of Mr. Knecht.

"I believe the boy," said a rather loud voice. It was Mr. Everton's.

"I could hardly believe Mr. Evson ever told a lie in his life."

Thus ended the conversation. The faces of the guests were mostly astonished, embarrassed, or horrified. Billie, of course, was radiant while leading Mark to the buffet. One could see that the people who were lingering there were quietly shifting away from them.

While they were helping themselves, an elderly gentleman, very correctly dressed, approached them and addressed Mark.

Apparently, he was moved, and spoke with a broken voice: "My boy, you remind me of... myself... when I was a bit older than you are now. I also studied Latin in my days... There was a line of a poem I remembered through my life... but I have now half-forgotten: '*Virtutem videant...*' a sort of a curse: 'Let them see the virtue...' I was hoping that you could help me to complete the verse."

"I'm happy to be able to do so, Sir. It's Persius. Let them see the virtue... '*intabescantque relictæ*,' that is: 'and let them rot inside for having abandoned it,'" Mark said, completing the sentence.

"Exactly," said the old gentleman. "And now *virtutem video* and *intabesco relictæ*. Yes, you, who are just a little more than a child, have shown me a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel of my life. Maybe there is still some time left for me. May God bless you."

Here, for the first time in the evening, Mark blushed, but the old man had already retired, moved, without waiting for an answer. The eyes of Billie were wide open: "But do you know who that gentleman was?! That was old Judge Green, possibly the

wealthiest and most influential person in New Ansedonia, whom father always tried to have at one of his parties and, just by chance, came tonight for the first time. Now, look, he is talking to my father, and I am sure that he is telling wonders about you. Just look at them. No, don't, they are continuously looking at us." This exchange brought about a change of mood in the guests. Now that Judge Green had made the first move, many other guests approached Mark and Billie.

An elderly couple approached them, and the lady spoke: "I like you, Mark. You look and sound like an English Prince if I ever saw one. Are you sure you aren't one?"

Another Lady: "I don't share a single one of the ideas you expressed, Mark. But you expressed them so well, and so calmly. I will not quickly forget this scene."

Her partner: "And the way you knocked down that hateful Mr. Knecht. Oh boy! Against you, he didn't have a chance."

"You know what?" the lady said to Mark. "I don't know whether your concept of friendship is correct, but thinking about it myself, I have concluded that I have not one real friend."

A couple was leaving the party. The Lady commented to her husband: "You know, Irving, that boy has put doubts into my head. Might it be true that America is a bad teacher, a teacher of death without hope? That the dusty ideals of that boy still have some word of hope to give us? Is it possible that America will be on its way to become a real empire only when it will be capable of bringing hope to the whole world, not just to the wealthiest among the Americans?"

Billie escorted Mark to his bicycle. He was jumping happily like a puppy. Mark, as usual, ruffled his hair. The two then faced each other, pressing each other's arms. Their eyes were joyful, and Billie's eyes were sparkling. They were talking to each other, but one couldn't hear their words. In fact, they were probably

common and unimportant words about kids' subjects, but the way they were telling them was impressive. They didn't even realize that from inside the house, behind the windowpanes of the large front windows, many people were observing them. One lady commented: "It is true, look. Not a single kiss. Not even a friendly hug. But look at their faces. It is true that the eyes are the windows to the soul, so they say. Every look they exchange is a caress, a caress of the soul, if such a thing exists. That's what friendship should be. How I envy them!"

After waving at Mark, Billie came back into the house. His father was overjoyed, and, pretending anger, said: "I would almost strangle you for having tried to sabotage the finest party I ever gave. Knecht's humiliation and Judge Green's approval have made this evening a memorable one for everybody."

Thus, Mark left the party, a defeated winner, or a winning loser. The Philistines too must have felt some respect for David, although their champion, strictly speaking, was Goliath.

17. Marvelous Days: Travels in Another World. Memorable Sayings by Billie Farrar.

There began marvelous days for Billie and Mark, the best of their lives. If one were to say that there was no equilibrium in the situation, because Billie received from Mark more than he could offer, it would mean that he never shared his soul with a friend. In one single soul, there are no different parts, and no equilibrium has to be reached. There is no giving and taking, only sharing. The successes in study and sport, which Billie achieved under Mark's gentle coaching and thanks to his eager efforts, were some of his presents to Mark, and it was difficult to understand who enjoyed them more, whether the teacher or the pupil. They were not seen frequently together, but when they walked next to each other in the streets of the quiet town of New Ansedonia, it was as if an electric spark ran through the hearts of those who could see and recognize them. Everybody greeted them. Everybody seemed to smile to himself after seeing them. After the party story was known, nobody doubted anymore that the friendship of Mark and Billie only aimed at the highest ideals: most had heard about them, nobody knew with clarity what they were, but now all were sure that such ideals existed. Their friendship was indeed like a bright lamp, and the NAH had never known better days. Billie was especially radiant. Mark had seen it right: Billie had great potentials, which were finally in full bloom. He was now outstanding, both in his studies and in sports, swimming (individual and water polo) in particular. He had been reasonably popular before, but now he was always surrounded by friends, both boys and girls, and had become a real star. So much so, that many students were wondering: "How

is it possible that an English boy had to come from England to make us discover what a nice and clever boy Billie is?"

What the two enjoyed the most were the evenings in Mark's house. In those evenings, while their bodies rested after days full of intense activity with their classmates and friends of the same age, an intellectual voyage occupied their minds. The tutoring sessions were now much rarer, as Billie could fly with his wings, and before bedtime, they dedicated some time to discussion and appreciation of science (mainly Mathematics), culture, and art, in all their forms, often examined in parallel. Mark loved to hear Billie's comments, always naive, always original if not new, always dictated by love.

Plans for a Voyage

Thus, while they were leading a very active life with their companions, they were also engaged in a journey together through the dimensions of "virtue and knowledge." That was an entirely different activity, but not less exciting than camping on the banks of Lake Tahoe, admiring beautiful landscapes, yachting or swimming in the Ocean, or watching a game of the NAH football team. After all, the solution of a Mathematical problem, a piano concerto, a poem, all resonate in the brain and the heart, precisely in the same places where Lake Tahoe is blue and the excitement for the NAH football team scoring a goal is born. Mark had said once that true friendship, utterly devoid of sexual overtones, has no reason to be jealous, and the two looked for one or two possible friends to add to their pair. They had to give up, but they were not that surprised. After all, Mark had had to go to California to find his twin soul, and the idea that in the same place he would find two defied the laws of probability. Still, they

were almost sad to realize that the description of their imaginary travels, across a whole new universe, sounded unspeakably dull to friends of their age. Also, looking at older generations, they came to the conclusion that whoever looks only for the pleasures of the body, without realizing where their root is, would share the same negative feelings. To such a person, all abstract pleasures of music or Mathematics, of science, art, literature and history, of classic movies are not worth a good barbecue party together with his or her likes, all thriving in the illusion of being the salt of the Earth. Even Billie, one must admit, at the beginning thought more or less along these same lines, but eventually, he too caught the same interior fire, which seemed to burn within Mark.

The problem was that from the travels in their imaginary world, through space and time, they could bring back no pictures, no selfies, no movies, no souvenirs. They had only feelings to report to their friends, and that was difficult. It was like explaining to a non-scientist the excitement, the thrill, the satisfaction a scientist experiences when he discovers or is on the verge of discovering something new.

Preparations

Like explorers of old who made a study to prepare their luggage for a long trip, Mark had invented a sort of game to introduce Billie to art and culture seriously. On each evening they met, before talking about usual matters, such as school, sport, plans – in a word, the lot of things schoolmates have to talk about – they spent up to an hour looking for thirty seconds each at a number of paintings, listening to short sections of famous compositions, reading the original or the translation of a few lines of poetry, watching takes of classical movies or theatrical pieces - either

serially or many at the same time. In the latter case, Billie's brain was flooded, although he felt some growing excitement and unexplainable thrill. In the following evenings, these items would randomly reappear. Mark thought that "great art grows on whoever is constantly exposed to it" and that "brain can work in parallel on many subjects." Habit, he thought, would be followed by recognition and recognition by appreciation.

At first, Billie was overwhelmed, then utterly bored, and only the fact that Mark was close to him, which was all he asked to be happy, restrained him from complaining. However, his yawns were insuppressible. But what Mark expected, eventually happened. At first, Billie would just recognize the piece or the painting or the poetry. But more and more frequently he would suddenly say: "Hey, that's good! Don't stop it!" and even: "Play that again!", "Show that again to me!"

Of course, a full list of such experiences would be impossible in a short account of their friendship, but some of the most significant ones can be reported.

Of "Blicket auf."

In the finale of Mahler's Eighth Symphony, fifteen minutes before the end, Billie, who had been overwhelmed by the sight of the immense choir, heard the solo and choir repeating three syllables, like "blicketà," and asked what it meant. Mark answered:

"'Blicket auf' are the words, in German. And they mean 'Look up' or 'Raise your eyes!' Something worth doing... always, Billie-boy, always. No virtue and no knowledge, if you don't 'blick auf.'"

And Billie fell silent, wondering how many people he knew, besides Mark, were "blicking auf" at least once a day, nay, once a month.

Of an unexpected trip to the Desert

Like many others before him, Billie was surprised to learn that the “Morning” of the *Peer Gynt Suite* by Grieg, which he liked almost instantly, was not supposed to evoke a morning in Norway, with fjords and reindeer and fir forests, but a morning in the Moroccan Desert.

When he learned that the setting was: “*A grove of palms and acacias at dawn. Peer Gynt is up a tree, protecting himself with a broken-off branch from a swarm of apes,*” he just said in shock: “No kidding!?” They listened again to it while watching Hi-Res photos of the desert, and Billie had to admit that the correct attribution, shelving reindeers and fjords (without necessarily introducing too many apes or rather monkeys), was after all acceptable. “Morning,” he concluded as if talking to himself, “is in the heart, not in a place, and possibly not even at a given time. One can have the same feeling anywhere at any time if one’s lucky.” He fell silent. Then he blushed and said: “With you, it is always morning.”

Of a journey by sea

One Saturday night, after a whole day spent sailing with their school, they rested in Mark’s room after dinner, with their reddened faces burning from the saltiness and the sun. Mark proposed a selection of music pieces inspired by the sea, and warned Billie: “When you feel the salt spray of the ocean on your face, it means that the author succeeded to express the feeling of the sea.” They listened and listened: Debussy, Wagner, Vaughan Williams and others. Billie was not very excited, even by the storm at the beginning of the overture of *The Flying Dutchman*. However, at one point, less than two minutes into another piece,

he suddenly said: "That's it! The author must have been at sea when he was a boy like me!" Mark looked at him with surprise: "How do you know? The title of this piece is 'The Sea and Sinbad's Ship,' in *Scheherazade*, by Rimsky-Korsakov, and indeed he joined the Russian Navy as a cadet at the age of twelve. How could you tell?"

"I felt the salt spray on my face, just as you said..."

Of a time travel to the Old West

They devoted one whole evening to Hamlet's monologue. They watched a few performances by at least three different actors, and fragments of famous movies. They ended with the scene of the monologue of Hamlet in "*Oh my darling Clementine*," a unique scene in the western genre, one of those scenes descending straight from Heaven, which moved both, up to the final gunfight in the saloon, which relieved the tension. Billie remained thoughtful. He murmured: "Strange, this scene gives a feeling, which is the opposite of what it says. The old actor says that 'Shakespeare was not meant for taverns,' and yet the scene takes place in a tavern..., and it gave me goosebumps, more than the others I saw just minutes ago, in their 'appropriate' setting. So, it was also meant for taverns, after all."

He thought a little longer. Then he said: "Considering it, I would almost say that the more inappropriate the setting, the more the monologue was written for it."

This statement struck Mark, and he once more ruffled Billie's tousled hair: "Can you imagine broadcasting the monologue before a football game?"

"Football maybe not...", admitted Billie. "Cricket, perhaps?" He suggested with an impish smile.

"It might be worth a try," Mark concluded thoughtfully.

Of the killing of Painting

On some hypermodern artwork Billie said: "If it took thirty seconds to produce such trash, you'd never catch me looking (or listening) to it for more than thirty seconds."

And Mark had to admire him once more, although he thought that he had already heard somewhere the same concept.

Regarding painting, curiously, Billie never liked some famous pictures, mainly modern, but could watch the great masters of past epochs endlessly. Regarding most post-1900 art, even including Magritte, Dali, and a few others, whom he liked, he applied a sentence, which again struck Mark: "It gives me the impression that these artists are conscious of being operating on a corpse."

Where could Billie have found this statement, if not within himself? Mark wanted to investigate further: "Who is the murderer, then?" He asked smiling. "Who killed Painting?" Billie looked at him with a blank expression, and Mark thought that occasionally poets say the right thing without knowing why. However, after reflecting a bit, Billie added: "I was thinking of photography and movies. Visual arts. I mean, perhaps it is true that the painter feels more freedom if he is not bound to represent reality because photography can do it better....but...can painting indeed survive without any connection with reality? Might it not be the reality, what gives the artist the power to soar? Would he not fall flat upon the ground without it?"

Here Mark was open-mouthed and, after recovering, said: "You know, Billie, had you said that to me before the party at your home, I would have had a better argument in favor of the archaic ideals I was fighting for, against Mr. Knecht and company." He grabbed a tuft of hair of Billie and shook it in mock anger.

"Why so?" asked Billie, astonished.

"Can't you see? Take the example of religious or moral principles in general. For centuries, people had to submit to certain restrictions and sacrifices, which appear now intolerable.

Nowadays, the thought is prevailing that without all constraints of morality and religion, the progress of Mankind would be unstoppable and joyful, but I am sure that it is not true. Those limitations are like the air, which offers resistance to the flight of the butterfly. Take away the air, and the butterfly falls flat upon the ground, with the other brutes and creeping creatures, which relish on mud and nothing more."

"I'm afraid I am not so sure that was what I had in mind...", said Billie modestly.

"Rest assured," said Mark. "It does not matter at all why you said it. The fact is...you said it."

18. The Blood Moon

To add happiness to their evenings, Billie knew that they would sleep together in the enormous bed, and the closeness of his friend was enough for Billie. He very seldom woke up during the night, but on those occasions, Mark's calm breathing in his sleep gave him a feeling of quiet joy, very close to bliss. True, Billie perhaps would have liked some cuddling, but was proud of keeping his word and never asked for anything of the sort. A warm "good morning hug" was all he would get. He eagerly waited for it and was perfectly happy with it.

However, Billie was still a bit unconvinced, although he would not even think of giving up the pleasure of the hours spent with Mark. Once he had asked: "What is 'virtue,' Mark? You said that we must follow 'virtue and knowledge,' and you make me follow knowledge, to the limit of my capacity. That, I can see. But what about virtue?"

"You know, I've thought a long time about the meaning of virtue myself."

"You too?"

"Yes, and I've concluded that if you study the meaning of the word 'virtue,' you risk getting lost in philosophical complications. One could say that virtue is having the courage to pursue the 'Good,' but then you'd have to specify what the Good is. So, I gave myself a simple rule of thumb: virtue is acting in such a way as to make the world a better place for everyone to live."

"That sounds too difficult."

"Only if you want to make the whole world a better place for everyone. It's not necessary. A small gesture affecting only one person can be worthwhile, and therefore *is* virtue, provided that, by so doing, you don't harm any innocent. It's not too difficult to

do virtuous acts even in everyday life. For example, when I saw you crying at the hands of that Buck brute who wanted to humiliate you, I immediately knew that 'the good' in that moment was rescuing you from him, and I fought him without thinking twice."

"It's true," Billie said. "That's fairly clear."

"And you're already doing your best to follow virtue all the time without realizing it. Just doing what your conscience tells you to be your duty, even if it costs you, is 'virtue' in the highest degree. I know you do it, without questions and without looking for excuses. For example, do you think I don't know how much it costs you not to ask me to cuddle you? Why do you act this way, even though you know that if you only asked, I would do it?"

"But all this is just because I try to follow your example."

"So do I: you too, you are an example to me, can't you see?"

Billie was not sure he saw.

One night the two boys were sitting on two comfortable armchairs in front of the big window in Mark's room and were watching the full moon in the sky. "Casta Diva" sung by Callas was on full volume. They played it rather frequently, as a souvenir of the first evening they had spent together. Billie was silent, partly because he was beginning to feel the power of the music and its interpretation, partly because he wanted to please Mark, who surveyed his reactions discreetly, ready to stop the music. However, Billie did not appear to be too bored. Just in the middle of a top note by Callas, Billie suddenly said excitedly: "Look, Mark! The moon is changing color!" It was true. In the cloudless, dark-blue sky, the full moon was darkening and assuming a reddish-brown color, like blood. Billie was very disturbed. Mark said: "Before thinking of an Alien invasion, let's see what astronomy has in store for us tonight."

He went to his computer, quickly followed by Billie. Then he said: "Here, this explains it all. Tonight we are going to have a total moon eclipse. The reddish color is just the sunlight coming through the terrestrial atmosphere, complicated by refraction effects, etcetera."

Even with this explanation, when they went back to their armchairs, Billie was still very perturbed. Mark stood up, hid the moon by pulling the curtains, and cut the music. Then he went back to his seat and hugged tight Billie, who was sitting as usual very close to him.

"How come?" Billie asked, looking up at him. "I thought that you would hug me only in the morning."

Mark answered with a gentle voice: "Relax; tonight, hugs are on the house."

Billie calmed down immediately, smiled at Mark, and asked him to put the music back on.

While he was again leaning his head on Mark's chest, listening to his friend's heartbeat because he felt that on that night it was right to do so, Billie twittered shyly: "Say, Mark, you have watched thousands of works of art and have listened to thousands of musical pieces and have read I don't know how many lines of poetry, and seen all classic movies. What is the value of all this? What is the practical purpose? Could you not make better use of your time and intelligence? I don't know, to study the Wall Street Journal and make money on the Stock Exchange? In one word, Mark, why should we make efforts to follow virtue and knowledge?"

Mark answered quietly: "Like to all important questions, the answer depends on whether you believe that you have an immortal soul."

"What is a soul?" Billie asked, with a naive smile. By then, the eclipse was over.

Billie smiled and felt that peace was slowly flooding his soul, his soul, whatever it was.

19. The Blood Moon, Again

The image of the blood moon came suddenly back to Mark the next evening. Mark was in a sort of trance. He believed he saw the moon, before realizing that he was sitting in a car, and the moon he was looking at was much too red – in fact, it was the red light of a traffic light. He was looking across the windscreen of a car, and the wipers were lazily at work on the drops of a light drizzle. But the red light appeared to him as through a wet crystal. He realized that there was no wet crystal. It was just his tears. Oh, Lord! He felt a dull pain: something terrible had happened, so terrible that his mind could not even focus on it; it was just turning around, as a crazed moth flies around the candle that will kill it.

Mark was sitting in a police patrol car, and his friend Officer Fred was driving. They did not say a word to each other. In the lights of passing cars, one could see Fred's frowning face and Mark's quiet tears. Now and then Fred briefly answered service calls from the police station, occasionally glancing at his silent neighbor.

The front lights of the New Ansedonia City Hospital made Mark think that, finally, the crazed moth had reached the flame, and there was no more escape. The police car pulled into the driveway of the hospital. Fred and Mark stepped out of the car. A bright light flooded the hall of the clean little hospital. A nurse, obviously ill at ease, welcomed them. She then called a Doctor Jones.

Doctor Jones immediately appeared. He knew Mark by sight and spoke very fast as if repeating a rehearsed speech: "Mark, I know you were best friends. Before you see him, I want you to know that Billie did not even have time to realize that he was dying. He

broke his neck and died instantly, with no time, neither for pain nor regrets. He died a happy boy: in a sense, the happiest death one can ask. I hope that this thought can help you at this moment."

Mark just nodded.

Led by a nurse and by Fred, Mark went to the room where Billie was lying dead. Other people were standing in the room, but Mark apparently couldn't see anybody and went straight to Billie. He was devastated, and Fred once thought he had to step forward to hold him from falling. But Mark stopped him short by merely lifting his hand.

In those few steps, he had the impression that all went darker and darker around him and nothing could be seen anymore, excepting Billie's peaceful face, in full light. Oh, Lord!

Impermanence was over, but at what cost!

Mark reclined on Billie's head and whispered: "Now we won't part anymore, Billie... you sleep well, my sweet friend. And this... this kiss is for your dreams." He kissed lightly, but intensely, Billie's lips. Mark stood up, looked around without seeing, and went out with Fred, who put an arm around his shoulder and gently led him away.

He didn't even realize that there were many people around; that all conversations stopped when he was getting near, while going through the corridors; that quite a few of his schoolmates, boys, and girls, were present, more for him than for Billie; that unknown people would even stand up silently while he was going by. He saw nothing of this. He just wanted to pay the homage of his fortitude to his friend, and was concentrated on repeating to himself: "No tears, no tears, no tears..." To no avail. Poor boy! He was sixteen.

20. At the Police Station, the Same Night

Later that night, the Sheriff entered the Police Station and asked Fred directly. The subject matter was clear. "Fred, do you have Mark's deposition?"

Fred looked exhausted: "Yes Chief, I have his deposition. I took him here from the Hospital, but now he's gone home."

"I hope you didn't let him go all by himself."

"No, Sir. He did not look too well. June took him home. His uncle and his aunt were there."

"Good. Let me have his deposition."

He took the deposition and went into his office, closing the door after himself.

After a frantic afternoon, the time had slowed down. The sand seemed to have stopped trickling down the hourglass.

June came back and sat down at her desk. She just said: "Hi Fred."

After a while, the Chief's office door opened. The Chief reappeared.

"Fred, would you please step in here for a moment?"

Fred took a seat in the office. The Sheriff pointed to the document he had just read, and said, without any anger: "Fred, this can't be Mark's deposition."

"The key points are his. But yes, I completed it."

"Completed? What do you mean?"

"Well, I had all the depositions of the other people I questioned, which, of course, prove that Mark and Billie parted in the friendliest way at about nine thirty AM..."

"That must be Mrs. Brompton's deposition."

"More or less."

"And then?"

"Very simple. Billie went away with his blue skateboard. He met

some friends at the beach."

"Mark couldn't know that."

"Of course not. No, I just said this for your information. You might have seen that I did not put that into the deposition."

"Nor anything else of your initiative, I hope."

Fred pretended not to hear: "Mark took his bicycle and went to school for his usual Saturday soccer training. At half past, he went with his teammates to a nearby cafeteria, as the school cafeteria closes on Saturdays."

"His friends support this statement?"

"Of course. Then he went back to the gym to practice weightlifting and things."

"Did he say if anybody saw him there?"

"Yes... Well, it was his friend Al, who said that he saw him. Also the Phys Ed Instructor. I just filled in the blanks. In spite of his efforts, Mark looked a bit distraught while making his deposition.... Then, he went home at four thirty PM."

By three PM, the coroner had already identified the body of Billie. Witnesses said that at two fifteen PM he was probably going back home from the beach, moving very fast on his blue skateboard. According to the same witnesses, he had to swerve suddenly to avoid a pickup pulling backward from a driveway, Walnut St. 112. The skateboard sank a wheel into a hole in the pavement; Billie made a somersault, banged his head on the tailgate of the pickup and fell on the sidewalk, lying there motionless, apparently having broken his neck.

According to the doctor, death was instantaneous. The sheriff nodded: "None of this is in Mark's deposition."

"You are right. None of this. Of course not. How could he know? I just wrote that he learned of Billie's death from me when I went to his home at five thirty PM... He asked me to take him to the Hospital before coming here."

"You said that 'you' wrote?"

Fred (a bit confused): "Under dictation, of course."

The Sheriff did not want to press his point: "Okay, Fred. We have your deposition. I mean, Mark's statement. It seems to clear the boy."

"Yes, Chief. Completely. All testimonies agree on that. There is no possibility that Mark had anything to do with Billie's death."

"Putting it in another way, as I thought when I first read the deposition, his name, and date, and place of birth are all that Mark contributed to this two-page document."

Fred did not answer. The Sheriff added, not angry, but tired: "I hope you realize that all this is highly irregular."

Fred was slightly taken aback. After thinking for a moment, he said: "I know, Chief, but I was thinking..."

The Sheriff ushered Fred out of his office. He looked rather stern: "Things like this should not happen. You are not supposed to overthink."

While saying so, he was turning his back to June, and she shook her head. On the threshold of his office, the Sheriff turned around. He looked strangely affected: "Ah, by the way, Fred. Needless to say, in this specific case... I would have acted exactly like you, and therefore I take full responsibility for all you wrote." "Thanks, Chief."

Here Fred was silent for a short while. The Sheriff saw that Fred was very moved, and waited to see if he intended to say anything else. There was still something: "But... Oh, that poor boy, Chief!" "Which one? Billie or Mark?" the Sheriff asked.

"Mark, Chief. I will never forget his silent pain, his grief... I never saw anything like that in parents, children, brothers, sisters, husbands, wives... Perhaps that is what true friendship means. Perhaps it is true that friendship is superior to all such human feelings. Oh, the humanity, Chief!... Oh, the humanity!" (1)

21. A Rainy Evening, Just Before the Storm

Three days later, on an evening of black and white clouds, small patches of blue, wind gusts and scattered drops of rain, the students had been swarming out of New Ansedonia High. After two days spent in shock, the school was going back to normal, and again friends and groups of friends began to exchange the usual cheerful greetings.

Most of the students had already left, but there remained still a good number of them in front of the main entrance, and instructors were mingling with them, coming out in their turn. A black van appeared and silently parked as close as possible to the main entrance. Suddenly, all cheerfulness seemed to fade away. There was silence.

Mark, whom nobody had seen or talked to for two days, came out of the van. All students made way for him, not knowing what to do. A girl grabbed a cheerful boy, who had not realized that he was in Mark's way, and pulled him out of the way. He turned around, saw Mark and became serious and pale.

Mark went to the main entrance of the school, climbed the few steps of the front stairway, opened the door and went inside. His closest classmates, Al and Josh, were following him at the distance of a few paces. Josh entered after Mark.

Al stopped at the entrance door, at the top of the three-step stairway, and turned to the students: "Let's not bother him, please. He has just come to take his things. He is leaving for good tonight and asked me to say farewell to you all. He says that he wants to thank you because he has spent here with you some of his happiest days. And... I...we..." He choked and entered the building, closing the door behind himself.

Everybody was silent, apparently rooted to the spot. Not one

among the students and teachers thought of leaving in the meantime.

Mark came out alone, carrying books and things, always upright and noble in his bearing. Al and Josh followed him at a distance, bringing some more of his belongings. Mark saw his companions and teachers standing quietly, stopped and nodded a greeting without a word, with tears in his eyes. Then he went directly to the van, outside of which his uncle was standing, waiting for him. His aunt was sitting inside. With the help of his two friends, he arranged his things in the van, already fully packed with luggage. He climbed into the back seat, wound down the window, shook hands without a word with Al and Josh. He wound the window up. The van started moving.

Teachers, girls, and boys remained where they were, immobile and speechless. Many were noiselessly crying.

The English instructor, checking some boys and girls who wanted to rush to the van to say goodbye to Mark after all, just said:

"Leave him alone, please. He knows that you are all with him. Don't make it more difficult than it is already."

Suddenly, a paraphrase of the Bard came to his mind:

*So, call the school to rest; and let's away,
To part the sadness of this saddest day. (1)*

While the van was accelerating out of sight, the mind of the English instructor was still thinking of his paraphrase. He felt that it was not enough, and for his peace of mind, he had to add something more. He went back a few lines of the great tragedy, and the Bard extended to him his hand from Heaven:

This was the noblest friendship of them all... (2)

Yes indeed, that was the only way to qualify the friendship of Billie and Mark. All the other friends the English instructor had known or had known about had been expecting something: sex,

primarily, and presents, money, advantages of any sort. It was not so with Billie and Mark. They had joined their young souls to help each other to achieve together the noblest purpose of human existence, not to live like brutes, but to follow virtue and knowledge.

It struck him that to properly characterize the humble story of the friendship of two unfortunate kids he had to resort to the help of the two highest poets known to him (3).

22. Away!

The black van was running away from the town. A storm was brewing, and the Ocean was raging against the bottom of the cliffs. Mark had his nose glued to the window of the van and was looking at the familiar landscape that he was going to see no more.

Painful thoughts and unanswered questions were coming at him like the desperate screams of the storm birds and seagulls. One could hear now and then wailings, which sounded almost human, asking: "Why? Why? Why?"

Then, finally, peace came to Mark's heart. He told himself: "It all depends on whether you believe that you have an immortal soul."

Savigliano, summer 2016.

NOTES

Chapter 3

- (1) “*Chuck it*” is a British colloquialism for ‘stop it!’. Buck probably understood it from the obvious circumstances, from the British accent of the speaker, and from the sharpness of the command. Thus, he didn’t need to turn to deduce that Mark was standing behind him.

Chapter 12

- (1) “*Summi puerorum amores saepe una cum praetexta toga ponerentur.*” **Cicero, Laelius de Amicitia, 33.**
- (2) What comes to Mark’s mind is the paraphrase of the incipit of the **Heike Monogatari**, a XIV century anonymous Japanese novel.

The sound of the Gion Shōja bells echoes the impermanence of all things; the color of the sāla flowers reveals the truth that the prosperous must decline.

Chapter 1.1, Helen Craig McCullough's translation

Chapter 14

- (1) “*Quam longe, cras istud? Ubi est? Aut unde petendum?*”. **Martial, Epigrammata, V. 58.**
- (2) “*Nature, Mr. Allnut, is what we are put in this world to rise above,*” a line from the movie “**The African Queen**,” by John Houston, 1951.

(3) *Fatti non foste a viver come bruti / ma per seguir virture e canoscenza.* (Dante Alighieri, **Divina Commedia, Infiderno XXVI, 119**)

Chapter 16

(1) *Ne bis in idem*: "not twice in the same [thing]" (theory of double jeopardy). *In dubio pro reo*: "[when] in doubt, for the accused" (a defendant may not be convicted by the court when doubts about his or her guilt remain). *Actori incumbit probatio*: "The (burden of) proof weighs on the plaintiff." (he who alleges something must prove that allegation).

Chapter 20

(1) "*Oh, the humanity!*" a famous, unexplained sentence pronounced by the radio announcer Herbert Morrison while describing the disaster of the airship Hindenburg (1937).

Chapter 21

(1) "So, call the school to rest; and let's away, / To part the sadness of this saddest day." This is a paraphrase of the closing lines of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*: "*So, call the field to rest; and let's away, / To part the glories of this happy day.*"

(2) The second paraphrase of the English instructor is the famous line: "*This was the noblest Roman of them all:*" (thirteen lines above the previous quotation).

(3) The second poet the English instructor had in mind is Dante Alighieri, who wrote: "*Fatti non foste a vivere come bruti / ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza. (Infiderno XXVI)*" "Ye were not made to live like unto brutes, / But for pursuit of virtue and of knowledge."

