

SHE'S ALONE, LEANING on the bar, drinking a fruit juice. There's a black leather bag on the floor by her feet, and for some reason that's the thing that really draws my attention.

She's staring so hard at me it's quite embarrassing. When our eyes meet, though, she turns away. A few moments later, she looks at me again. This sequence is repeated several times. I don't know her, and at first I wonder if she's really looking at me. I even have the impulse to check if there's anyone behind me, but I stop myself. There's nothing behind me but the wall – I know that perfectly well because this is where I sit almost every day.

She's finished her drink now. She places the empty glass on the bar, picks up the bag, and comes towards me. She has short dark hair, and the determined but not very spontaneous manner of someone who's spent a lot of time struggling with shyness. Or with something else, something worse than shyness.

She reaches my table. She stands there for a few moments, not saying a word, while I try to assume what I think is a suitable expression. Without much success, I think.

'You don't recognise me.'

It isn't a question, and she's right: I don't recognise her. I don't know her.

Then she says a name, and something else, and then, after a brief pause, asks if she can sit down. I say yes. Or perhaps I nod, or make a gesture with my hand to indicate the chair, I'm not sure which.

For how long I don't know, I say nothing. It's hard to know what to say. Until a few minutes earlier, I'd been having breakfast, as I do every morning, preparing myself for an ordinary day, and now all at once I'd been sucked into a vortex and had come out somewhere else.

In some strange, mysterious place.

A long way away.

THERE WERE FOUR of us around the table. A thin, sad-looking guy, a surveyor by profession, Francesco, myself, and the man whose apartment we were in. His name was Nicola, and he was a fat man of about thirty, who smoked a lot and had difficulty breathing. He kept making a rhythmical, unnerving sound through his blocked nose.

It was his turn to shuffle the cards and deal. He repeated his little trick of shuffling them and dividing them into two smaller decks which he held between his thumb and index finger, but he was tired, and he was nervous. Half an hour earlier he had been up nearly a million, but in three or four hands he had squandered almost all his winnings. Francesco was winning, I was more or less equal with him, and the surveyor was losing a lot. We were beginning the last hand of stud poker.

The fat man cut the cards and said, 'Five card stud.' He said it in the same tone of voice he'd used all evening. What he thought of as a professional tone. A good way to recognise an easy mark at a poker table is to see if they use a professional tone.

He dealt the first card face down and the second one face up. A professional gesture, as if to prove my point.

A ten for the surveyor, a queen for Francesco, a king for me. His own card was an ace.

'A hundred,' he said immediately, throwing an electric blue oval chip into the middle of the table, and moistening his upper lip with

the tip of his tongue. We all played. The surveyor lit a cigarette. The fat man dealt again.

An eight, another queen, an eight, and a seven.

‘Two hundred,’ Francesco said. The fat man flashed him a look of hatred, then also put two hundred in the pot. He had been losing all evening and was waiting for the chance to check. I played.

A ten, a king, a ten. It was my turn and I said two hundred. The others played. We came to the last card. An eight for Francesco, a nine for me, another nine for the fat man.

‘Last bets,’ I said, and the fat man immediately bet the equivalent of what was in the pot. Three eights were already face up. Did he have a straight flush? I looked him in the face and saw that his lips were tense and dry. In the meantime, Francesco put down his cards, said he wasn’t playing, and stood up for a moment as if to stretch his legs.

That meant that if I had more than a pair I could relax. The fat man didn’t have a straight flush after all. There was no way he could have one: the fourth eight was the card Francesco had face down. So I asked for time. To think, I said, but in fact I only wanted to savour that intoxicating feeling you get when you’re cheating at cards and are sure of winning.

‘I have no choice, I have to see you,’ I said after a minute, resignedly, like someone who’s sure he’s going to lose the hand, but has unfortunately been lured into it by a cleverer and luckier player. The fat man had two aces. I had three kings. That meant I won the pot, which was nearly three million lire – more than my father’s monthly salary at the time.

By now the fat man was really pissed off. Obviously, he didn’t like losing. But what made him furious was losing to a moron like me.

The surveyor won the next hand, but there was nothing in the pot except small change. Then it was Francesco’s turn to deal. He

shuffled as he usually did – impersonally – cut the cards and dealt.

First a card face down, and then one face up. A queen for me, a king for the fat man, a seven for the surveyor, an ace for himself.

‘Two hundred. This is the hand where I recoup my losses.’

The fat man looked at him in disgust, as if to say, Bloody amateur. He put down the two hundred. I played. The surveyor didn’t.

The cards were turned over again. I was making an effort not to look at Francesco’s hands, even though I knew I wouldn’t see anything strange. And if I didn’t the others certainly wouldn’t. Another queen for me, another king for the fat man, another ace for himself.

‘If you want to play those aces you have to pay. Three hundred.’

The fat man paid without a word, with the same look on his face as before. I thought about it for a while, touched the chips I had in front of me and then put down the money, looking unconvinced.

The fourth card. A ten for me, a jack for the fat man, a seven for Francesco.

‘Another three hundred.’

‘I’ll see you,’ I said.

‘I’ll raise you five hundred,’ the fat man said in the same professional tone, moistening his upper lip and forcing himself to control his elation. The card he had face up was a jack. This was his hand, he was thinking. Both Francesco and I played. I looked like someone who thinks he’s in over his head and is scared shitless.

The last card. Another ten for me, another jack for the fat man, a queen for Francesco. Angrily, Francesco passed. Obviously he couldn’t play. He had thrown away a cool million. He said something to that effect but the fat man ignored him. He had a full house of jacks and kings, and was already enjoying his triumph. He was playing with amateurs, but he didn’t care. He said he was betting the equivalent of the pot and lit a cigarette. What he was hoping was that my face-down card was another ten. If that was the

case, then I would also have a full house. I would play and he would tear me apart. The idea that I might have the fourth queen in the pack was obviously something he had never even considered.

I saw him. My card was, indeed, the last queen. Which meant that my full house beat his. Abandoning his professional tone, he asked how the fuck something like that was possible.

We wrote it down on the sheet of paper where debts were recorded. According to that sheet, the big man was already bankrupt. Then we played for about another forty minutes, but nothing out of the ordinary happened. The surveyor won back a little, and the professional lost another few hundred thousand.

At the end of the game I was the only winner. Francesco gave me almost four hundred thousand lire, the surveyor wrote me a cheque for just over a million, and the fat man another cheque for eight million two hundred thousand.

The three of us got ready to leave. At the door, I assured them I was available for a return match. I smiled modestly as I said it, like a beginner who's won a lot of money and is trying to act appropriately. The fat man looked at me without saying a word. He owned a hardware store and at that moment, I'm sure, he'd have liked to smash my head in with a monkey wrench.

Once out in the street, we said goodbye and went our separate ways.

A quarter of an hour later, Francesco and I met up again at the railway station, in front of the bookstall, which was closed for the night. I gave him back his four hundred thousand and we went off to a fishermen's bar for a cappuccino.

'Did you hear the noise the fat guy was making?'

'What noise?'

'With his nose. It was unbearable. Fuck, can you imagine sleeping in the same room as him? He must snore like a pig.'

'As a matter of fact, his wife left him when they'd only been

married for six months.'

'If he calls again, what do we do?'

'We go back, we let him win two or three hundred thousand lire and we say goodbye. Debt of honour paid, now fuck off.'

We finished our cappuccinos, went outside where the boats were moored, and lit cigarettes as the sky grew lighter. It was nearly time for bed. In a few hours I would go to the bank and cash the two cheques. Then we would share the winnings.



Giulia and I had quarrelled the day before. She'd told me she couldn't carry on like this and maybe it was better if we split up.

She was trying to provoke a reaction. She wanted me to say no, it wasn't true, we were just having a little bit of a crisis, we'd get through it together, that kind of thing.

Instead, I told her I thought she was probably right. I had a slightly downhearted look on my face as I said it, because I thought that was the appropriate expression. I was sorry that she was sad, I felt slightly guilty, but all I wanted was for the conversation to be over so that I could leave. She looked at me, uncomprehending, and I looked back at her, but I was already miles away.

I'd been miles away for some time.

She started crying silently. I made some trite remark to soften the blow. I knew this must be painful to her.

When she finally got on her bicycle and rode away, the only thing I felt was relief.

I was twenty-two years old, and until a few months earlier nothing had ever happened in my life.