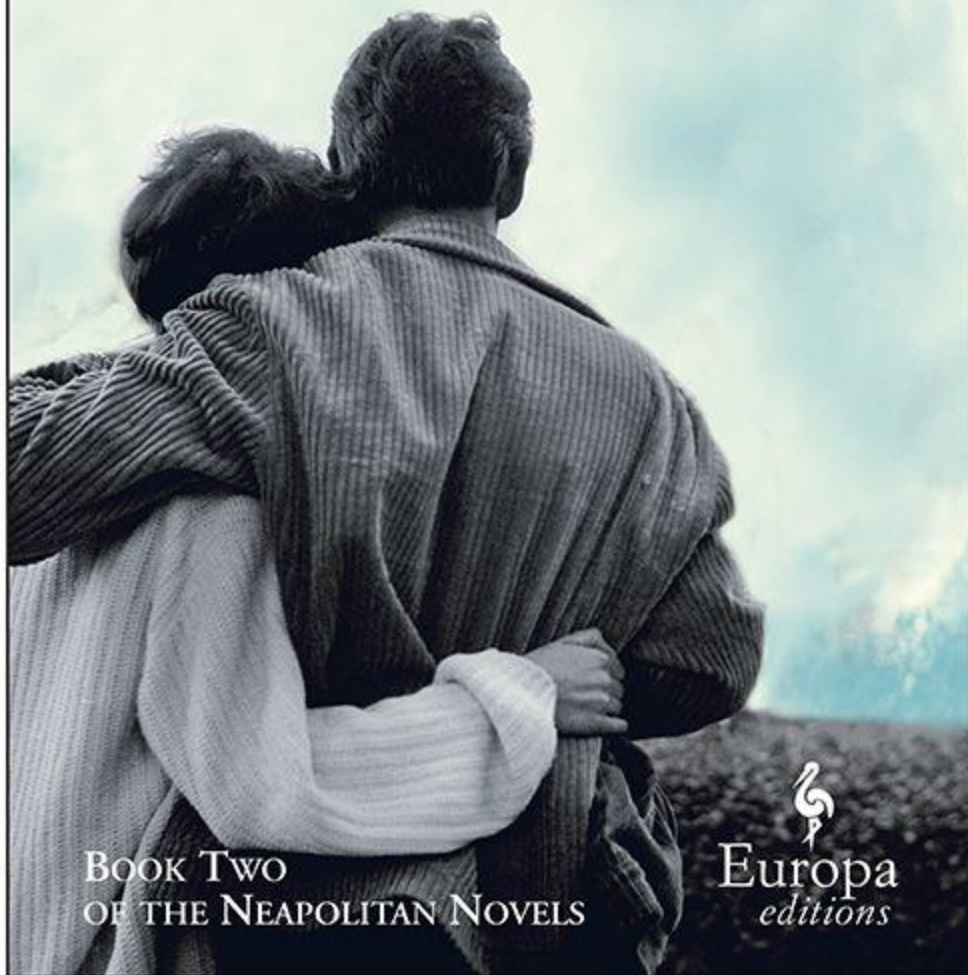


FROM THE AUTHOR OF *My Brilliant Friend*

Elena Ferrante
The Story
of a New Name

"Everyone should read anything with Ferrante's name on it."
—*The Boston Globe*



BOOK TWO
OF THE NEAPOLITAN NOVELS


Europa
editions



Elena Ferrante

STORY OF A NEW NAME

BOOK TWO OF THE NEAPOLITAN NOVELS

Translated from the Italian

by Ann Goldstein

Europa Editions

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This book is a work of fiction.

Any references to historical events, real people, or real locales are used
fictitiously.

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INDEX OF CHARACTERS AND NOTES ON THE EVENTS OF
VOLUME I.

The Cerullo family (the shoemaker's family):

Fernando Cerullo, shoemaker, Lila's father.

Nunzia Cerullo, Lila's mother. She is close to her daughter, but doesn't have the authority to support her against her father.

Raffaella Cerullo, called Lina, or Lila. She was born in August, 1944, and is sixty-six when she disappears from Naples without leaving a trace. A brilliant student, at the age of ten she writes a story titled *The Blue Fairy*. She leaves school after getting her elementary-school diploma and learns to be a shoemaker.

Rino Cerullo, Lila's older brother, also a shoemaker. With his father, Fernando, and thanks to Lila and to Stefano Carracci's money, he sets up the Cerullo shoe factory. He becomes engaged to Stefano's sister, Pinuccia

Carracci. Lila's first son bears his name, Rino.

Other children.

The Greco family (the porter's family):

Elena Greco, called Lenuccia or Lenù. Born in August, 1944, she is the author of the long story we are reading. Elena begins to write it when she learns that her childhood friend Lina Cerullo, called Lila only by her, has disappeared. After elementary school, Elena continues to study, with increasing success. Since childhood she has been secretly in love with Nino Sarratore.

Peppe, Gianni, and Elisa, Elena's younger siblings .

The *father* is a porter at the city hall.

The *mother* is a housewife. Her limping gait haunts Elena.

The Carracci family (Don Achille's family):

Don Achille Carracci, the ogre of fairy tales, dealer in the black market, loan shark. He was murdered.

Maria Carracci, wife of Don Achille, mother of Stefano, Pinuccia, and Alfonso. She works in the family grocery store.

Stefano Carracci, son of the deceased Don Achille, husband of Lila. He manages the property accumulated by his father and is the proprietor, along with his sister Pinuccia, Alfonso, and his mother, Maria, of a profitable

grocery store.

Pinuccia, the daughter of Don Achille. She works in the grocery store.

She is engaged to Rino, Lila's brother.

Alfonso, son of Don Achille. He is the schoolmate of Elena. He is the boyfriend of Marisa Sarratore.

The Peluso family (the carpenter's family):

Alfredo Peluso, carpenter. Communist. Accused of killing Don Achille, he has been convicted and is in prison.

Giuseppina Peluso, wife of Alfredo. A former worker in the tobacco factory, she is devoted to her children and her imprisoned husband.

Pasquale Peluso, older son of Alfredo and Giuseppina, construction worker, militant Communist. He was the first to become aware of Lila's beauty and to declare his love for her. He detests the Solaras. He is engaged to Ada Cappuccio.

Carmela Peluso, also called *Carmen*, sister of Pasquale. She is a sales clerk in a notions store. She is engaged to Enzo Scanno.

Other children.

The Cappuccio family (the mad widow's family):

Melina, a relative of Nunzia Cerullo, a widow. She washes the stairs of the apartment buildings in the old neighborhood. She was the lover of

Donato Sarratore, Nino's father. The Sarratores left the neighborhood precisely because of that relationship, and Melina has nearly lost her reason. Melina's *husband*, who unloaded crates in the fruit and vegetable market, and died in mysterious circumstances.

Ada Cappuccio, Melina's daughter. As a girl she helped her mother wash the stairs. Thanks to Lila, she will be hired as salesclerk in the Carracci's grocery. She is engaged to Pasquale Peluso.

Antonio Cappuccio, her brother, a mechanic. He is Elena's boyfriend and is very jealous of Nino Sarratore.

Other children.

The Sarratore family (the railway-worker poet's family):

Donato Sarratore, conductor, poet, journalist. A great womanizer, he was the lover of Melina Cappuccio. When Elena went on vacation to Ischia, she is compelled to leave in a hurry to escape Donato's sexual molestations.

Lidia Sarratore, wife of Donato.

Nino Sarratore, the oldest of the five children of Donato and Lidia. He hates his father. He is a brilliant student.

Marisa Sarratore, sister of Nino. She is studying, with mediocre success, to be a secretary.

Pino, Clelia, and Ciro Sarratore, younger children of Donato and Lidia.

The Scanno family (the fruit-and-vegetable seller's family):

Nicola Scanno, fruit-and-vegetable seller.

Assunta Scanno, wife of Nicola.

Enzo Scanno, son of Nicola and Assunta, also a fruit-and-vegetable seller. Lila has felt a liking for him since childhood. Their friendship begins when Enzo, during a school competition, shows an unsuspected ability in mathematics. Enzo is engaged to Carmen Peluso.

Other children.

The Solara family (the family of the owner of the Solara bar-pastry shop):

Silvio Solara, owner of the bar-pastry shop, a Camorrist tied to the illegal trafficking of the neighborhood. He was opposed to the Cerullo shoe factory.

Manuela Solara, wife of Silvio, moneylender: her red book is much feared in the neighborhood.

Marcello and Michele Solara, sons of Silvio and Manuela. Braggarts, arrogant, they are nevertheless loved by the neighborhood girls, except Lila, of course. Marcello is in love with Lila but she rejects him. Michele, a little younger than Marcello, is colder, more intelligent, more violent. He is engaged to Gigliola, the daughter of the pastry maker.

The Spagnuolo family (the baker's family):

Signor Spagnuolo, pastry maker at the Solaras' bar-pastry shop.

Rosa Spagnuolo, wife of the pastry maker.

Gigliola Spagnuolo, daughter of the pastry maker, engaged to Michele Solara.

Other children.

The Airola family:

Airola, professor of Greek literature.

Adele, his wife.

Mariarosa Airola, the older daughter, professor of art history in Milan.

Pietro Airola, student.

The teachers:

Maestro Ferraro, teacher and librarian.

Maestra Oliviero, teacher. She is the first to notice the potential of Lila and Elena. When Lila writes *The Blue Fairy*, Elena, who likes the story a lot, and gives it to Maestra Oliviero to read. But the teacher, angry because Lila's parents decided not to send their daughter to middle school, never says anything about the story. In fact, she stops concerning herself with Lila and concentrates only on the success of Elena.

Professor Gerace, high-school teacher.

Professor Galiani, high-school teacher. She is a very cultured woman and a Communist. She is immediately charmed by Elena's intelligence. She lends her books, protects her in the clash with the religion teacher.

Other characters:

Gino, son of the pharmacist.

Nella Incardo, the cousin of Maestra Oliviero. She lives in Barano, on Ischia, and Elena stayed with her for a vacation at the beach.

Armando, medical student, son of Professor Galiani.

Nadia, student, daughter of Professor Galiani.

Bruno Soccavo, friend of Nino Sarratore and son of a rich industrialist in San Giovanni a Teduccio, near Naples.

Franco Mari, student.

Contents

[INDEX OF CHARACTERS AND NOTES ON THE EVENTS OF VOLUME I.](#)

[1.](#)

[2.](#)

[3.](#)

[4.](#)

[5.](#)

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

11.

12.

13.

14.

15.

16.

17.

18.

19.

20.

21.

22.

23.

24.

25.

26.

27.

28.

29.

30.

31.

32.

33.

34.

35.

36.

37.

38.

39.

40.

41.

42.

43.

44.

45.

46.

47.

48.

49.

50.

51.

52.

53.

54.

55.

56.

57.

58.

59.

60.

61.

62.

63.

64.

65.

66.

67.

68.

69.

70.

71.

72.

73.

74.

75.

76.

77.

78.

79.

80.

81.

82.

83.

84.

85.

[86.](#)

[87.](#)

[88.](#)

[89.](#)

[90.](#)

[91.](#)

[92.](#)

[93.](#)

[94.](#)

[95.](#)

[96.](#)

[97.](#)

[98.](#)

[99.](#)

[100.](#)

[101.](#)

[102.](#)

[103.](#)

[104.](#)

[105.](#)

[106.](#)

[107.](#)

[108.](#)

[109.](#)

[110.](#)

[111.](#)

[112.](#)

[113.](#)

[114.](#)

[115.](#)

[116.](#)

[117.](#)

[118.](#)

[119.](#)

[120.](#)

[121.](#)

[122.](#)

[123.](#)

[124.](#)

[125.](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

1.

In the spring of 1966, Lila, in a state of great agitation, entrusted to me a metal box that contained eight notebooks. She said that she could no longer keep them at home, she was afraid her husband might read them. I carried off the box without comment, apart from some ironic allusions to the excessive amount of string she had tied around it. At that time our relationship was terrible, but it seemed that only I considered it that way. The rare times we saw each other, she showed no embarrassment, only affection; a hostile word never slipped out.

When she asked me to swear that I wouldn't open the box for any reason, I swore. But as soon as I was on the train I untied the string, took out the notebooks, began to read. It wasn't a diary, although there were detailed accounts of the events of her life, starting with the end of elementary school. Rather, it seemed evidence of a stubborn self-discipline in writing. The pages were full of descriptions: the branch of a tree, the ponds, a stone, a leaf with its white veinings, the pots in the kitchen, the various parts of a coffeemaker, the brazier, the coal and bits of coal, a highly detailed map of the courtyard, the broad avenue of *stradone*, the rusting iron structure beyond the ponds, the gardens and the church, the cut of the vegetation

alongside the railway, the new buildings, her parents' house, the tools her father and her brother used to repair shoes, their gestures when they worked, and above all colors, the colors of every object at different times of the day. But there were not only pages of description. Isolated words appeared, in dialect and in Italian, sometimes circled, without comment. And Latin and Greek translation exercises. And entire passages in English on the neighborhood shops and their wares, on the cart loaded with fruit and vegetables that Enzo Scanno took through the streets every day, leading the mule by the halter. And many observations on the books she read, the films she saw in the church hall. And many of the ideas that she had asserted in the discussions with Pasquale, in the talks she and I used to have. Of course, the progress was sporadic, but whatever Lila captured in writing assumed importance, so that even in the pages written when she was eleven or twelve there was not a single line that sounded childish.

Usually the sentences were extremely precise, the punctuation meticulous, the handwriting elegant, just as Maestra Oliviero had taught us. But at times, as if a drug had flooded her veins, Lila seemed unable to bear the order she had imposed on herself. Everything then became breathless, the sentences took on an overexcited rhythm, the punctuation disappeared. In general it didn't take long for her to return to a clear, easy pace. But it

might also happen that she broke off abruptly and filled the rest of the page with little drawings of twisted trees, humped, smoking mountains, grim faces. I was entranced by both the order and the disorder, and the more I read, the more deceived I felt. How much practice there was behind the letter she had sent me on Ischia years earlier: that was why it was so well written. I put everything back in the box, promising myself not to become inquisitive again.

But I soon gave in—the notebooks exuded the force of seduction that Lila had given off since she was a child. She had treated the neighborhood, her family, the Solaras, Stefano, every person or thing with ruthless accuracy. And what to say of the liberty she had taken with me, with what I said, with what I thought, with the people I loved, with my very physical appearance. She had fixed moments that were decisive for her without worrying about anything or anyone. Here vividly was the pleasure she had felt when at ten she wrote her story, *The Blue Fairy*. Here just as vivid was what she had suffered when our teacher Maestra Oliviero hadn't deigned to say a single word about that story, in fact had ignored it. Here was the suffering and the fury because I had gone to middle school, neglecting her, abandoning her. Here the excitement with which she had learned to repair shoes, the desire to prove herself that had induced her to design new shoes,

and the pleasure of completing the first pair with her brother Rino. Here the pain when Fernando, her father, had said that the shoes weren't well made. There was everything, in those pages, but especially hatred for the Solara brothers, the fierce determination with which she had rejected the love of the older, Marcello, and the moment when she had decided, instead, to marry the gentle Stefano Carracci, the grocer, who out of love had wanted to buy the first pair of shoes she had made, vowing that he would keep them forever. Ah, the wonderful moment when, at fifteen, she had felt herself a rich and elegant lady, on the arm of her fiancé, who, all because he loved her, had invested a lot of money in her father and brother's shoe business: Cerullo shoes. And how much satisfaction she had felt: the shoes of her imagination in large part realized, a house in the new neighborhood, marriage at sixteen. And what a lavish wedding, how happy she was. Then Marcello Solara, with his brother Michele, had appeared in the middle of the festivities, wearing on his feet the very shoes that her husband had said were so dear to him. Her husband. What sort of man had she married? Now, when it was all over, would the false face be torn off, revealing the horribly true one underneath? Questions, and the facts, without embellishment, of our poverty. I devoted myself to those pages, for days, for weeks. I studied them. I ended up learning by heart the passages I liked, the ones that thrilled

me, the ones that hypnotized me, the ones that humiliated me. Behind their naturalness was surely some artifice, but I couldn't discover what it was. Finally, one evening in November, exasperated, I went out carrying the box. I couldn't stand feeling Lila on me and in me, even now that I was esteemed myself, even now that I had a life outside of Naples. I stopped on the Solferino bridge to look at the lights filtered through a cold mist. I placed the box on the parapet, and pushed it slowly, a little at a time, until it fell into the river, as if it were her, Lila in person, plummeting, with her thoughts, words, the malice with which she struck back at anyone, the way she appropriated me, as she did every person or thing or event or thought that touched her: books and shoes, sweetness and violence, the marriage and the wedding night, the return to the neighborhood in the new role of Signora Raffaella Carracci.

2.

I couldn't believe that Stefano, so kind, so in love, had given Marcello Solara the vestige of the child Lila, the evidence of her work on the shoes she had designed.

I forgot about Alfonso and Marisa, who, sitting at the table, were talking to each other, eyes shining. I paid no more attention to my mother's drunken laughter. The music faded, along with the voice of the singer, the

dancing couples, and Antonio, who had gone out to the terrace and, overwhelmed by jealousy, was standing outside the glass door staring at the violet city, the sea. Even the image of Nino, who had just left the room like an archangel without annunciations, grew faint. Now I saw only Lila, speaking animatedly into Stefano's ear, she very pale in her wedding dress, he unsmiling, a white patch of unease running over his flushed face from his forehead to his eyes like a Carnival mask. What was happening, what would happen? My friend tugged her husband's arm with both hands. She used all her strength, and I who knew her thoroughly felt that if she could she would have wrenched it from his body, crossed the room holding it high above her head, blood dripping in her train, and she would have used it as a club or a donkey's jawbone to crush Marcello's face with a solid blow. Ah yes, she would have done it, and at the idea my heart pounded furiously, my throat became dry. Then she would have dug out the eyes of both men, she would have torn the flesh from the bones of their faces, she would have bitten them. Yes, yes, I felt that I wanted that, I wanted it to happen. An end of love and of that intolerable celebration, no embraces in a bed in Amalfi. Immediately shatter everything and every person in the neighborhood, tear them to pieces, Lila and I, go and live far away, lightheartedly descending together all the steps of humiliation, alone, in unknown cities. It seemed to

me the just conclusion to that day. If nothing could save us, not money, not a male body, and not even studying, we might as well destroy everything immediately. Her rage expanded in my breast, a force that was mine and not mine, filling me with the pleasure of losing myself. I wished that that force would overflow. But I realized that I was also afraid of it. I understood only later that I can be quietly unhappy, because I'm incapable of violent reactions, I fear them, I prefer to be still, cultivating resentment. Not Lila. When she left her seat, she got up so decisively that the table shook, along with the silverware on the dirty plates; a glass was overturned. As Stefano hurried mechanically to cut off the tongue of wine that was heading toward Signora Solara's dress, Lila went out quickly through a side door, jerking her dress away whenever it got caught.

I thought of running after her, grabbing her hand, whispering to her let's get out, out of here. But I didn't move. Stefano moved, after a moment of uncertainty, and, making his way among the dancing couples, joined her.

I looked around. Everyone realized that something had upset the bride.

But Marcello continued to chat in a conspiratorial way with Rino, as if it were normal for him to have those shoes on his feet. The increasingly lewd toasts of the metal merchant continued. Those who felt at the bottom of the hierarchy of tables and guests went on struggling to put a good face on

things. In other words, no one except me seemed to realize that the marriage that had just been celebrated—and that would probably last until the death of the spouses, among the births of many children, many more grandchildren, joys and sorrows, silver and gold wedding anniversaries—that for Lila, no matter what her husband did in his attempt to be forgiven, that marriage was already over.

3.

At first the events disappointed me. I sat with Alfonso and Marisa, paying no attention to their conversation. I waited for signs of revolt, but nothing happened. To be inside Lila's head was, as usual, difficult: I didn't hear her shouting, I didn't hear her threatening. Stefano reappeared half an hour later, very friendly. He had changed his clothes; the white patch on his forehead and around his eyes had vanished. He strolled about among friends and relatives waiting for his wife to arrive, and when she returned to the hall not in her wedding dress but in her traveling outfit, a pastel-blue suit, with very pale buttons, and a blue hat, he joined her immediately. Lila distributed sugared almonds to the children, taking them from a crystal bowl with a silver spoon, then she moved among the tables handing out the wedding favors, first to her relatives, then to Stefano's. She ignored the entire Solara family and even her brother Rino, who asked her with an

anxious half-smile: Don't you love me anymore? She didn't answer, but gave the wedding favor to Pinuccia. She had an absent gaze, her cheekbones appeared more prominent than usual. When she got to me, she distractedly handed me, without even a smile of complicity, the white tulle-wrapped ceramic basket full of sugared almonds.

The Solaras were irritated by that discourtesy, but Stefano made up for it, embracing them one by one, with a pleasant, soothing expression, and murmuring, "She's tired, be patient."

He kissed Rino, too, on the cheeks, but his brother-in-law gave a sign of displeasure, and I heard him say, "It's not tiredness, Ste', she was born twisted and I'm sorry for you."

Stefano answered seriously, "Twisted things get straightened out."

Afterward I saw him hurry after his wife, who was already at the door, while the orchestra spewed drunken sounds and people crowded around for the final goodbyes.

No rupture, then, we would not run away together through the streets of the world. I imagined the newlyweds, handsome, elegant, getting into the convertible. Soon they would be on the Amalfi coast, in a luxurious hotel, and every bloodcurdling insult would have changed into a bad mood that was easily erased. No second thoughts. Lila had detached herself from me

definitively and—it suddenly seemed to me—the distance was in fact greater than I had imagined. She wasn't *only* married, her submission to conjugal rites would not be limited merely to sleeping with a man every night. There was something I hadn't understood, which at that moment seemed to me obvious. Lila—bowing to the fact that some business arrangement or other between her husband and Marcello had been sealed by her girlish labors—had admitted that she cared about him more than any other person or thing. If she had *already* yielded, if she had *already* swallowed that insult, her bond with Stefano must truly be strong. She loved him, she loved him like the girls in the photonovels. For her whole life she would sacrifice to him every quality of her own, and he wouldn't even be aware of the sacrifice, he would be surrounded by the wealth of feeling, intelligence, imagination that were hers, without knowing what to do with them, he would ruin them. I, I thought, am not capable of loving anyone like that, not even Nino, all I know is how to get along with books. And for a fraction of a second I saw myself identical to a dented bowl in which my sister Elisa used to feed a stray cat, until he disappeared, and the bowl stood empty, gathering dust on the landing. At that point, with a sharp sense of anguish, I felt sure that I had ventured too far. I must go back, I said to myself, I should be like Carmela, Ada, Gigliola, Lila herself. Accept

the neighborhood, expel pride, punish presumption, stop humiliating the people who love me. When Alfonso and Marisa went off to meet Nino, I, making a large detour to avoid my mother, joined my boyfriend on the terrace.

My dress was too light: the sun had gone, it was beginning to get cold.

As soon as he saw me, Antonio lit a cigarette and pretended to look at the sea again.

“Let’s go,” I said.

“Go yourself, with Sarratore’s son.”

“I want to go with you.”

“You’re a liar.”

“Why?”

“Because if he wanted you, you would leave me here without so much as a goodbye.”

It was true, but it enraged me that he said it so openly, heedless of the words. I hissed, “If you don’t understand that I’m here running the risk that at any moment my mother might show up and start hitting me because of you, then it means that you’re thinking only of yourself, that I don’t matter to you at all.”

He heard scarcely any dialect in my voice, he noted the long sentence,

the subjunctives, and he lost his temper. He threw away the cigarette, grabbed me by the wrist with a barely controlled force and cried—a cry locked in his throat—that he was there for me, only for me, that it was I who had told him to stay near me in the church and at the celebration, yes, I, and you made me swear, he gasped, swear, you said, that you won't ever leave me alone, and so I had a suit made, and I'm deep in debt to Signora Solara, and to please you, to do as you asked, I didn't spend even a minute with my mother or my sisters and brothers: and what is my reward, my reward is that you treat me like shit, you talk the whole time to the poet's son and humiliate me in front of my friends, you make me look ridiculous, because to you I'm no one, because you're so educated and I'm not, because I don't understand the things you say, and it's true, it's very true that I don't understand you, but God damn it, Lenù, look at me, look me in the face: you think you can order me around, you think I'm not capable of saying That's enough, and yet you're wrong, you know everything, but you don't know that if you go out of that door with me now, if now I tell you O.K. and we go out, but then I discover that you see that jerk Nino Sarratore at school, and who knows where else, I'll kill you, Lenù, so think about it, leave me here this minute, he said in despair, leave me, because it's better for you, and meanwhile he looked at me, his eyes red and very large,

and uttered the words with his mouth wide open, shouting at me without shouting, his nostrils flaring, black, and in his face such suffering that I thought Maybe he's hurting himself inside, because the words, shouted in his throat like that, in his chest, but without exploding in the air, are like bits of sharp iron piercing his lungs and his pharynx.

I had a confused need for that aggression. The vise on my wrist, the fear that he would hit me, that river of painful words ended by consoling me: it seemed to me that at least he valued me.

"You're hurting me," I muttered.

He slowly relaxed his grip, but remained staring at me with his mouth open. The skin of my wrist was turning purple, giving him weight and authority, anchoring me to him.

"What do you choose?" he asked.

"I want to stay with you," I said, but sullenly.

He closed his mouth, his eyes filled with tears, he looked at the sea to give himself time to suppress them.

Soon afterward we were in the street. We didn't wait for Pasquale, Enzo, the girls, we didn't say goodbye to anyone. The most important thing was not to be seen by my mother, so we slipped away on foot; by now it was dark. For a while we walked beside each other without touching, then

Antonio hesitantly put an arm around my shoulders. He wanted me to understand that he expected to be forgiven, as if he were the guilty one. Because he loved me, he had decided to consider the hours that, right before his eyes, I had spent with Nino, seducing and seduced, a time of hallucinations.

“Did I leave a bruise?” he asked, trying to take my wrist.

I didn't answer. He grasped my shoulder with his broad hand, I made a movement of annoyance that immediately caused him to relax his grip. He waited, I waited. When he tried again to send out that signal of surrender, I put an arm around his waist.

4.

We kissed without stopping, behind a tree, in the doorway of a building, along dark alleys. We took a bus, then another, and reached the station. We went toward the ponds on foot, still kissing each other on the nearly deserted street that skirted the railroad tracks.

I was hot, even though my dress was light and the cold of the evening pierced the heat of my skin with sudden shivers. Every so often Antonio clung to me in the shadows, embracing me with such ardor that it hurt. His lips were burning, and the heat of his mouth kindled my thoughts and my imagination. Maybe Lila and Stefano, I said to myself, are already in the

hotel. Maybe they're having dinner. Maybe they're getting ready for the night. Ah, to sleep next to a man, not to be cold. I felt Antonio's tongue moving around my mouth and while he pressed my breasts through the material of my dress, I touched his sex through the pocket of his pants. The black sky was stained with pale clouds of stars. The ponds' odor of moss and putrid earth was yielding to the sweeter scents of spring. The grass was wet, the water abruptly hiccupped, as if an acorn had fallen in it, a rock, a frog. We took a path we knew well, which led to a stand of dead trees, with slender trunks and broken branches. A little farther on was the old canning factory, with its caved-in roof, all iron beams and fragments of metal. I felt an urgency of pleasure, something that drew me from inside like a smooth strip of velvet. I wanted desire to find a violent satisfaction, capable of shattering that whole day. I felt it rubbing, caressing and pricking at the base of my stomach, stronger than it had ever been. Antonio spoke words of love in dialect, he spoke them in my mouth, on my neck, insisting. I was silent, I was always silent during those encounters, I only sighed.

"Tell me you love me," he begged.

"Yes."

"Tell me."

"Yes."

I said nothing else. I embraced him, I clasped him to me with all my strength. I would have liked to be caressed and kissed over every inch of my body, I felt the need to be rubbed, bitten, I wanted my breath to fail. He pushed me a little away from him and slid a hand into my bra as he continued to kiss me. But it wasn't enough for me, that night it was too little. All the contact that we had had up to that minute, that he had imposed on me with caution and that I had accepted with equal caution, now seemed to me inadequate, uncomfortable, too quick. Yet I didn't know how to tell him that I wanted more, I didn't have the words. In each of our secret meetings we celebrated a silent rite, stage by stage. He caressed my breasts, he lifted my skirt, he touched me between the legs, and meanwhile he pushed against me, like a signal, the convulsion of tender flesh and cartilage and veins and blood that vibrated in his pants. But that night I delayed pulling out his sex; I knew that as soon as I did he would forget about me, he would stop touching me. Breasts, hips, bottom, pubis would no longer occupy him, he would be concentrated only on my hand, in fact he would tighten his around it to encourage me to move it with the right rhythm. Then he would get out his handkerchief and keep it ready for the moment when a light rattling sound would come from his mouth and from his penis his dangerous liquid. Finally he would draw back, slightly dazed, perhaps

embarrassed, and we would go home. A habitual conclusion, which I now felt a confused need to change: I didn't care about being pregnant without being married, I didn't care about the sin, the divine overseers nesting in the cosmos above us, the Holy Spirit or any of his stand-ins, and Antonio felt this and was disoriented. While he kissed me, with growing agitation, he tried repeatedly to bring my hand down, but I pulled it away, I pushed my pubis against his fingers, I pushed hard and repeatedly, with drawn-out sighs. Then he withdrew his hand, he tried to unbutton his pants.

“Wait,” I said.

I drew him toward the skeleton of the canning factory. It was darker there, more sheltered, but I could hear the wary rustling of scampering mice. My heart began to beat hard, I was afraid of the place, of myself, of the craving that possessed me to obliterate from my manners and from my voice the sense of alienation that I had discovered a few hours earlier. I wanted to return, and sink into that neighborhood, to be as I had been. I wanted to throw away studying, the notebooks full of exercises. Exercising for what, after all. What I could become outside of Lila's shadow counted for nothing. What was I compared with her in her wedding dress, with her in the convertible, the blue hat and the pastel suit? What was I, here with Antonio, secretly, in this rusting ruin, with the scurrying rats, my skirt

raised over my hips, my underpants lowered, yearning and anguished and guilty, while she lay naked, with languid detachment, on linen sheets, in a hotel that looked out on the sea, and let Stefano violate her, enter her completely, give her his seed, impregnate her legitimately and without fear? What was I as Antonio fumbled with his pants and placed his gross male flesh between my legs, against my naked sex, and clutching my buttocks rubbed against me, moving back and forth, panting? I didn't know. I knew only that I was not what I wanted at that moment. It wasn't enough for him to rub against me. I wanted to be penetrated, I wanted to tell Lila when she returned: I'm not a virgin, either, what you do I do, you can't leave me behind. So I held Antonio tight around his neck and kissed him, I stood on tiptoe, I sought his sex with mine, I sought it wordlessly, by trial and error. He realized it and helped me with his hand, I felt him entering just a little, I trembled with curiosity and fear. But I also felt the effort he was making to stop, to keep from pushing with all the violence that had been smoldering for an entire afternoon and surely was still. He was about to stop, I realized, and I pressed against him to persuade him to continue.

But with a deep breath Antonio pushed me away and said in dialect, "No, Lenù, I want to do it the way it's done with a wife, not like this."

He grabbed my right hand, brought it to his sex with a kind of repressed

sob, and I resigned myself to masturbating him.

Afterward, as we were leaving the ponds, he said uneasily that he respected me and didn't want to make me do something that I would later regret, not in that place, not in that dirty and careless way. He spoke as if it were he who had gone too far, and maybe he believed that. I didn't utter a single word the whole way, and said goodbye with relief. When I knocked on the door, my mother opened it and, in vain restrained by my brothers and sister, without yelling, without a word of reproach, began hitting me. My glasses flew to the floor and immediately I shouted with bitter joy, and not a hint of dialect, "See what you've done? You've broken my glasses and now because of you I can't study, I'm not going to school anymore."

My mother froze, even the hand she had struck me with remained still in the air, like the blade of an axe.

Elisa, my little sister, picked up the glasses and said softly, "Here, Lenù, they're not broken."

5.

I was overcome by an exhaustion that, no matter how much I rested, wouldn't go away. For the first time, I skipped school. I was absent, I think, for some two weeks, and not even to Antonio did I say that I couldn't stand it anymore, I wanted to stop. I left home at the usual time, and wandered all

morning through the city. I learned a lot about Naples in that period. I rummaged among the used books in the stalls of Port'Alba, unwillingly absorbing titles and authors' names, and continued toward Toledo and the sea. Or I climbed the Vomero on Via Salvator Rosa, went up to San Martino, came back down by the Petraio. Or I explored the Doganella, went to the cemetery, wandered on the silent paths, read the names of the dead. Sometimes idle young men, stupid old men, even respectable middle-aged men pursued me with obscene offers. I quickened my pace, eyes lowered, I escaped, sensing danger, but didn't stop. In fact the more I skipped school the bigger the hole that those long mornings of wandering made in the net of scholastic obligations that had imprisoned me since I was six years old. At the proper time I went home and no one suspected that I, *I*, had not gone to school. I spent the afternoon reading novels, then I hurried to the ponds, to Antonio, who was very happy that I was so available. He would have liked to ask if I had seen Sarratore's son. I read the question in his eyes, but he didn't dare ask, he was afraid of a quarrel, he was afraid that I would get angry and deny him those few minutes of pleasure. He embraced me, to feel me compliant against his body, to chase away any doubt. At those moments he dismissed the possibility that I could insult him by also seeing that other. He was wrong: in reality, although I felt guilty, I thought only of Nino. I

wanted to see him, talk to him, and on the other hand I was afraid to. I was afraid that he would humiliate me with his superiority. I was afraid that one way or another he would return to the reasons that the article about my quarrel with the religion teacher hadn't been published. I was afraid that he would report to me the cruel judgments of the editors. I couldn't have borne it. While I drifted through the city, and at night, in bed, when I couldn't sleep and felt my inadequacy with utter clarity, I preferred to believe that my text had been rejected for pure and simple lack of space. Let it diminish, fade. But it was hard. I hadn't been equal to Nino's brilliance, and so I couldn't stay with him, be listened to, tell him my thoughts. What thoughts, after all? I didn't have any. Better to eliminate myself—no more books, grades, praise. I hoped to forget everything, slowly: the notions that crowded my head, the languages living and dead, Italian itself that rose now to my lips even with my sister and brothers. It's Lila's fault, I thought, if I started down this path, I have to forget her, too: Lila always knew what she wanted and got it; I don't want anything, I'm made of nothing. I hoped to wake in the morning without desires. Once I was emptied—I imagined—the affection of Antonio, my affection for him will be enough.

Then one day, on the way home, I met Pinuccia, Stefano's sister. I

learned from her that Lila had returned from her honeymoon and had had a

big lunch to celebrate the engagement of her sister-in-law and her brother.

“You and Rino are engaged?” I asked, feigning surprise.

“Yes,” she said, radiant, and showed me the ring he had given her.

I remember that while Pinuccia was talking I had a single, twisted thought: Lila had a party at her new house and didn't invite me, but it's better that way, I'm glad, stop comparing myself to her, I don't want to see her anymore. Only when every detail of the engagement had been examined did I ask, hesitantly, about my friend. With a treacherous half smile, Pinuccia offered a formula in dialect: *she's learning*. I didn't ask what.

When I got home I slept for the whole afternoon.

The next morning I went out at seven as usual to go to school, or, rather, to pretend to go to school. I had just crossed the *stradone*, when I saw Lila get out of the convertible and enter our courtyard without even turning to say goodbye to Stefano, who was at the wheel. She had dressed with care, and wore large dark glasses, even though there was no sun. I was struck by a scarf of blue voile that she had knotted in such a way that it covered her lips, too. I thought resentfully that this was her new style—not Jackie Kennedy but, rather, the mysterious lady we had imagined we would become ever since we were children. I kept going without calling to her. After a few steps, however, I turned back, not with a clear intention but

because I couldn't help it. My heart was pounding, my feelings were confused. Maybe I wanted to ask her to tell me to my face that our friendship was over. Maybe I wanted to cry out that I, too, had decided to stop studying and get married—to go and live at Antonio's house with his mother and his brothers and sisters, wash the stairs like Melina the madwoman. I crossed the courtyard quickly, I saw her go in the entranceway that led to her mother-in-law's apartment. I started up the stairs, the same ones we had climbed together as children when we went to ask Don Achille to give us our dolls. I called her, she turned.

“You're back,” I said.

“Yes.”

“Why didn't you tell me?”

“I didn't want you to see me.”

“Others can see you and not me?”

“I don't care about others, I do care about you.”

I looked at her uncertainly. What was I not supposed to see? I climbed the stairs that separated us and delicately pulled aside the scarf, raised the sunglasses.

6.

I do it again now, in my imagination, as I begin to tell the story of her

honeymoon, not only as she told it to me there on the landing but as I read it later, in her notebooks. I had been unjust to her, I had wished to believe in an easy surrender on her part to be able to humiliate her as I felt humiliated when Nino left the reception; I had wished to diminish her in order not to feel her loss. There she is, instead, the reception now over, shut up in the convertible, the blue hat, the pastel suit. Her eyes were burning with rage and as soon as the car started she blasted Stefano with the most intolerable words and phrases of our neighborhood.

He swallowed the insults in his usual way, with a faint smile, not saying a word, and finally she was silent. But the silence didn't last. Lila started again calmly, but panting slightly. She told him that she wouldn't stay in that car a minute longer, that it disgusted her to breathe the air that he breathed, that she wanted to get out, immediately. Stefano saw the disgust in her face, yet he continued to drive, without saying anything, so she raised her voice again to make him stop. Then he pulled over, but when Lila tried to open the door he grabbed her firmly by the wrist.

“Now listen to me,” he said softly. “There are serious reasons for what happened.”

He explained to her in placid tones how it went. To keep the shoe factory from closing down before it even opened its doors, he had found it

necessary to enter into a partnership with Silvio Solara and his sons, who alone could insure not only that the shoes were placed in the best shops in the city but that in the fall a shop selling Cerullo shoes exclusively would open in Piazza dei Martiri.

“What do I care about your necessities,” Lila interrupted him, struggling to get free.

“My necessities are yours, you’re my wife.”

“I? I’m nothing to you, nor are you to me. Let go of my arm.”

Stefano let go of her arm.

“Your father and brother are nothing, either?”

“Wash your mouth out when you talk about them, you’re not fit to even mention their names.”

But Stefano did mention their names. He said that it was Francesco himself who had wanted to make the agreement with Silvio Solara. He said that the biggest obstacle had been Marcello, who was extremely angry at Lila, at the whole Cerullo family, and, especially, at Pasquale, Antonio, and Enzo, who had smashed his car and beaten him up. He said that Rino had calmed him down, that it had taken a lot of patience, and so when Marcello had said, then I want the shoes that Lina made, Rino had said O.K., take the shoes.

It was a bad moment, Lila felt as if she'd been stabbed in the chest. But just the same she cried, "And you, what did you do?"

Stefano had a moment of embarrassment.

"What was I supposed to do? Fight with your brother, ruin your family, start a war against your friends, lose all the money I invested?"

To Lila, every word, in both tone and content, seemed a hypocritical admission of guilt. She didn't even let him finish, but began hitting him on the shoulder with her fists, yelling, "So even you, you said O.K., you went and got the shoes, you gave them to him?"

Stefano let her go on, but when she tried again to open the door and escape he said to her coldly, Calm down. Lila turned suddenly: calm down after he had thrown the blame on her father and brother, calm down when all three had treated her like an old rag, a rag for wiping up the floor. I don't want to calm down, she shouted, you piece of shit, take me home right now, repeat what you just said in front of those two other shit men. And only when she uttered that expression in dialect, shit men, *uommen'e mmerd*, did she notice that she had broken the barrier of her husband's measured tones. A second afterward Stefano struck her in the face with his strong hand, a violent slap that seemed to her an explosion of truth. She winced, startled by the painful burning of her cheek. She looked at him, incredulous, while

he started the car and said, in a voice that for the first time since he had begun to court her was not calm, that in fact trembled, “See what you’ve made me do? See how you go too far?”

“We’ve been wrong about everything,” she murmured.

But Stefano denied it decisively, as if he refused even to consider that possibility, and he made a long speech, part threatening, part didactic, part pathetic.

He said, more or less, “We haven’t been wrong about anything, Lina, we just have to get a few things straight. Your name is no longer Cerullo. You are Signora Carracci and you must do as I say. I know, you’re not practical, you don’t know what business is, you think I find money lying on the ground. But it’s not like that. I have to make money every day, I have to put it where it can grow. You designed the shoes, your father and brother are good workers, but the three of you together aren’t capable of making money grow. The Solaras are, and so—please listen to me—I don’t give a damn if you don’t like those people. Marcello is repulsive to me, too, and when he looks at you, even so much as out of the corner of his eye, when I think of the things he said about you, I feel like sticking a knife in his stomach. But if he is useful for making money, then he becomes my best friend. And you know why? Because if we don’t make money we don’t have this car, I can’t

buy you that dress, we lose the house with everything in it, in the end you can't act the lady, and our children grow up like the children of beggars. So just try saying again what you said tonight and I will ruin that beautiful face of yours so that you can't go out of the house. You understand? Answer me."

Lila's eyes narrowed to cracks. Her cheek had turned purple, but otherwise she was very pale. She didn't answer him.

7.

They reached Amalfi in the evening. Neither had ever been to a hotel, and they were embarrassed and ill at ease. Stefano was especially intimidated by the vaguely mocking tones of the receptionist and, without meaning to, assumed a subservient attitude. When he realized it, he covered his discomfort with brusque manners, and his ears flushed merely at the request to show his documents. Meanwhile the porter appeared, a man in his fifties with a thin mustache, but Stefano refused his help, as if he were a thief, then, thinking better of it, disdainfully gave him a large tip, even though he didn't take advantage of his services. Lila followed her husband as he carried the suitcases up the stairs and—she told me—for the first time had the impression that somewhere along the way she had lost the youth she had married that morning, and was in the company of a stranger. Was

Stefano really so broad, his legs short and fat, his arms long, his knuckles white? To whom had she bound herself forever? The rage that had overwhelmed her during the journey gave way to anxiety.

Once they were in the room he made an effort to be affectionate again, but he was tired and still unnerved by the slap he had had to give her. He assumed an artificial tone. He praised the room, it was very spacious, opened the French window, went out on the balcony, said to her, Come and smell the fragrant air, look how the sea sparkles. But she was seeking a way out of that trap, and, distracted, shook her head no, she was cold. Stefano immediately closed the window, and remarked that if they wanted to take a walk and eat outside they'd better put on something warmer, saying, Just in case get me a vest, as if they had already been living together for many years and she knew how to dig expertly in the suitcases, to pull out a vest for him exactly as she would have found a sweater for herself. Lila seemed to agree, but in fact she didn't open the suitcases, she took out neither sweater nor vest. She immediately went out into the corridor, she didn't want to stay in the room a minute longer. He followed her muttering: I'm also fine like this, but I'm worried about you, you'll catch cold.

They wandered around Amalfi, to the cathedral, up the steps and back down again, to the fountain. Stefano now tried to amuse her, but being

amusing had never been his strong point, sentimental tones suited him better, or the sententious phrases of the mature man who knows what he wants. Lila barely responded, and in the end her husband confined himself to pointing out this and that, exclaiming, Look. But she, who in other times would have appreciated every stone, wasn't interested in the beauty of the narrow streets or the scents of the gardens or the art and history of Amalfi, or, especially, the voice of her husband, who kept saying, tiresomely, Beautiful, isn't it?

Soon Lila began to tremble, but not because she was particularly cold; it was nerves. He realized it and proposed that they return to the hotel, even venturing a remark like: Then we can hug each other and get warm. But she wanted to keep walking, on and on, until, overcome by weariness, and though she wasn't at all hungry, she entered a restaurant, without consulting him. Stefano followed her patiently.

They ordered all kinds of things, ate almost nothing, drank a lot of wine.

At a certain point he could no longer hold back, and asked if she was still angry. Lila shook her head no, and it was true. At that question, she herself was amazed not to feel the least rancor toward the Solaras, or her father and brother, or Stefano. Everything had rapidly changed in her mind. Suddenly, she didn't care at all about the shoes; in fact she couldn't understand why

she had been so enraged at seeing them on Marcello's feet. Now, instead, the broad wedding band that gleamed on her ring finger frightened and distressed her. In disbelief, she retraced the day: the church, the ceremony, the celebration. What have I done, she thought, dazed by wine, and what is this gold circle, this glittering zero I've stuck my finger in. Stefano had one, too, and it shone amid the black hairs, hairy fingers, as the books said. She remembered him in his bathing suit, as she had seen him at the beach. The broad chest, the large kneecaps, like overturned pots. There was not the smallest detail that, once recalled, revealed to her any charm. He was a being, now, with whom she felt she could share nothing and yet there he was, in his jacket and tie, he moved his fat lips and scratched the fleshy lobe of an ear and kept sticking his fork in something on her plate to taste it. He had little or nothing to do with the seller of cured meats who had attracted her, with the ambitious, self-confident, but well-mannered youth, with the bridegroom of that morning in church. He revealed white jaws, a red tongue in the dark hole of his mouth: something in and around him had broken. At that table, amid the coming and going of the waiters, everything that had brought her here to Amalfi seemed without any logical coherence and yet unbearably real. Thus, while the face of that unrecognizable being lighted up at the idea that the storm had passed, that she had understood his

reasons, that she had accepted them, that he could finally talk to her about his big plans, she suddenly had the idea of stealing a knife from the table to stick in his throat when, in the room, he tried to deflower her.

In the end she didn't do it. Since in that restaurant, at that table, to her wine-fogged mind, her entire marriage, from the wedding dress to the ring, had turned out to make no sense, it also seemed to her that any possible sexual demand on Stefano's part would make no sense, above all to him. So at first she contemplated how to get the knife (she took the napkin off her lap, covered the knife with it, placed both back on her lap, prepared to drop the knife in her purse, and put the napkin back on the table), then she gave it up. The screws holding together her new condition of wife, the restaurant, Amalfi, seemed to her so loose that at the end of dinner Stefano's voice no longer reached her, in her ears there was only a clamor of objects, living beings, and thoughts, without definition.

On the street, he started talking again about the good side of the Solaras. They knew, he told her, important people in the city government, they had ties to the parties, the monarchists, the Fascists. He liked to speak as if he really understood something about the Solaras' dealings, he took a knowing tone, he said emphatically: Politics is ugly but it's important for making money. Lila remembered the discussions she had had with Pasquale in

earlier times, and even the ones she'd had with Stefano during their engagement, the plan to separate themselves completely from their parents, from the abuses and hypocrisies and cruelties of the past. He said yes, she thought, he said he agreed, but he wasn't listening to me. Who did I talk to. I don't know this person, I don't know who he is.

And yet when he took her hand and whispered that he loved her, she didn't pull away. Maybe she planned to make him think that everything was in order, that they really were bride and groom on their honeymoon, in order to wound him more profoundly when she told him, with all the disgust she felt in her stomach: to get into bed with the hotel porter or with you—you both have smoke-yellowed fingers—it's the same revolting thing to me. Or maybe—and this I think is more likely—she was too frightened and by now was striving to delay every reaction.

As soon as they were in the room, he tried to kiss her, and she recoiled. Gravely, she opened the suitcase, took out her nightgown, gave her husband his pajamas. That attention made him smile happily at her, and he tried again to grab her. But she shut herself in the bathroom.

Alone, she washed her face for a long time to get rid of the stupor from the wine, the impression of a world that had lost its contours. She didn't succeed; rather, the feeling that her very gestures lacked coordination

intensified. What can I do, she thought. Stay locked in here all night. And then.

She was sorry that she hadn't taken the knife: for a moment, in fact, she believed that she had, then was forced to admit she hadn't. Sitting on the edge of the bathtub, she compared it appreciatively with the one in the new house, thinking that hers was nicer. Her towels, too, were of a higher quality. Hers? To whom, in fact, did the towels, the tub—everything—belong? She was bothered by the idea that the ownership of the nice new things was guaranteed by the last name of that particular individual who was waiting for her out there. Carracci's possessions, she, too, was Carracci's possession. Stefano knocked on the door.

“What are you doing, do you feel all right?”

She didn't answer.

Her husband waited a little and knocked again. When nothing happened, he twisted the handle nervously and said in a tone of feigned amusement, “Do I have to break down the door?”

Lila didn't doubt that he would have been capable of it—the stranger who waited for her outside was capable of anything. I, too, she thought, am capable of anything. She undressed, she washed, she put on the nightgown, despising herself for the care with which she had chosen it months earlier.

Stefano—purely a name that no longer coincided with the habits and affections of a few hours earlier—was sitting on the edge of the bed in his pajamas and he jumped to his feet as soon as she appeared.

“You took your time.”

“The time needed.”

“You look beautiful.”

“I’m very tired, I want to sleep.”

“We’ll sleep later.”

“Now. You on your side, I on mine.”

“O.K., come here.”

“I’m serious.”

“I am, too.”

Stefano uttered a little laugh, tried to take her by the hand. She drew back, he darkened.

“What’s wrong with you?”

Lila hesitated. She sought the right expression, said softly, “I don’t want you.”

Stefano shook his head uncertainly, as if the three words were in a foreign language. He murmured that he had been waiting so long for that moment, day and night. Please, he said, in a pleading tone, and, with an