

Brescia, late June 1944

In the silent dawn which envelops Porta Trento, a distant rumble of motors arrives. The thundering on the street gets nearer and nearer, stopping in front of the gate. It switches off.

Silvio jumps out of bed.

A dull shuffling of multiple pairs of feet can be heard running down the path leading to the front door.

Silvio searches the cupboard, gathers the papers and runs to the bathroom.

There's a knocking, thudding on wood and imperious shouts in German and Italian. Down at the entrance, the ground-floor tenant opens the door. The heavy, quick steps go up the stairs to the first floor.

Silvio has already ripped up the papers, he pulls on the flush and they, with the roar of the water, disappear down the drainpipe.

The door of the flat is being broken down when Lorenzo opens it.

“Schnell, raus!”: the German soldiers aim their machine-guns, shout and push. They run to every room. The three brothers, Silvio, Lorenzo, Alvaro and their two parents are in the sitting room in their nightshirts, the submachine gun of a young soldier pointed at them as the others rummage through the flat. They turn mattresses upside down, empty drawers, wardrobes and the sideboard, they destroy the shutters, they thump on the walls. The young soldier shouts, staring at the five astonished inhabitants in front of him and gesticulates: there's a small birdcage in the room with two finches and he cannot stand the sight of the two little birds in the cage.

Silvio knows they have come for him: he was overheard in the factory, they know what he thinks, they know he's anti-authoritarian, an impulsive rebel, a communist sympathiser. Perhaps they saw him distributing Resistance leaflets like those he managed to flush down the drain before the soldiers got in.

Lorenzo is also worried. The young German in front of them has the same face of those who, in the morning of 14 November in Rovetta square, stared at him disdainfully while he was walking along the street of San Faustino to the town centre. Through the fog behind them, he'd made out three lifeless bodies. He felt a deep revulsion, indignation, anger.

After that, he would go out at night, crossing the street to the building opposite. The old woman who lived there had a wireless, and they would listen to Radio Londra together. One night, a young male stranger watched Lorenzo go in and took umbrage, but the old woman

had reassured him: “He’s one of ours”. The young man had spoken openly and with great strength, confirming his allegiance to the Resistance. “His name is Curiel”, the woman had explained to Lorenzo the day after. When he came to Brescia from Trieste, she had sheltered him.

On other nights, Lorenzo would go into the neighbouring house on the left with a saucepan of polenta and cheese to give to the allied prisoners hiding there. After having escaped from the German prison camps, they’d been picked-up by the partisans while wandering through the countryside and were brought to a hiding place, similar to this, before being led through the Camonica Valley and Valtellina to Switzerland. Here in Brescia, Signora Rosetta used to shelter them, almost as a gesture of love for her husband, who was similarly a prisoner in India. They were young soldiers: Americans, Australians, Kiwis, South Africans, and Lorenzo would practise his English with them. He’d always enjoyed speaking English, but this enjoyment had increased since the Regime had banned the language of “Perfidious Albion”. After this, he’d decided to meet an ex-classmate every now and then for coffee, to practise English. The other customers had been curious and mistrusting of this meeting. One of the following nights, a few seconds before opening the gate of his building, the street was flooded with beams of light. Hand grenades blasted open a door and scores of German soldiers hurried into Signora Rosetta’s house. They returned down the stairs, dragging the allied soldiers and the signora with them, hands bound. The German soldiers loaded them into a van and disappeared into the night.

Someone had perhaps seen him, suspected him and informed on him.

There is something else all five are thinking about: the weapon, for which the Germans are searching, is here, in the drawer under the ottoman upon which the parents are currently sitting. A hunting rifle, almost never used, bought by Lorenzo and Silvio some years before with their first pay checks. Silvio was too restless and impatient to be a hunter, while Lorenzo couldn’t bear to kill for fun. The new rifle had been abandoned and left in the ottoman underneath them.

The soldiers finish. The flat has been turned upside down, but neither the documents nor the weapon were found, hidden in front of their very eyes. They take Silvio with them and leave. A week later it happens again, exactly the same, except this time the soldiers aren’t German but the fascists of the Republican National Guard. They want Silvio, they tell Lorenzo who opens the door before it’s broken down. “The Germans took him last week”, he answers. The fascists look at each other, irritated. They are angry that they are too late. The Germans had got there a week earlier, but they’d not been informed of this. So as not to return empty-

handed, they take the father, Emilio. He's old, sixty-eight, and there is nothing about him that seems rebellious, but it doesn't matter. They take him away anyway.

So, in the prison of Canton Mombello, father and son meet again.

After a week Emilio is sent again home. Silvio will spend long months in the lager of Bolzano.