

I DIDN'T HAVE TIME.

My dear,

I received so many letters from you that year so long ago, that I was not able to save them and I never answered you. I would have liked to, believe me; but you wrote so well, I felt intimidated.

You would never have said so, I know, I seemed so sure of myself at that time. I always had an opinion and a judgment on everything and you were fascinated by my beliefs. In reality I often was overwhelmed by my admiration for you, especially for your natural esthetic sense: every banal piece of fact, as written down by you, became beautiful in my eyes. So I never wrote you, out of shame I think. But today, at a distance of so many years, I think I owe you some words, since you have given me so many. I discovered that words are even more important than I thought at the time, when I was young and thought I would find the meaning of life as I went along. So, my dear, -- in part because I owe you and in part because I learned (sadly only now, too late!) that the meaning of life is given by us through the story we make of it, - - today I have found the courage to respond.

That year, so many years ago, I imagined writing a story about you, imagined the description of you in great detail, as though I had really written it; and still today, after so long, I remember it very well. Here it is:

"Angelo looked like all the men that Maria had ever loved".

Sorry if I changed your name in the story; but I changed my own too. "...not because these men had similar qualities -- she did not have a 'special type' of man, and her various great loves bore no resemblance to each other. It was rather as though Angelo had something of each of them, just as certain personalities in dreams are a mix of parts of different people. He had the brilliant intelligence and irony that reminded her of her first love; the passionate enthusiasm and love of beauty of another; and finally, the obstinacy and childlike tenderness, sometimes a bit awkward, of yet another. Even physically, his face, his body and his scent were familiar to her, as though she had always known him. She wasn't amazed, for example, at the fine, baby-like texture of his hair, nor at the inquietude that she caught in his long, satirical, near-sighted eyes. His body was a bit rough and coarse. It reminded her of an antique statue just pulled out of the ocean, somewhat encrusted and covered with algae and moss, so that it was difficult at first glance to realize its beauty. But Maria had faith, she knew that beneath was hidden the beautiful body of a Greek kouros, perhaps a god. She didn't let herself get discouraged by his obstinate negligence, -- that of a person who does not want or know how to love himself, and is not used to having someone take care of him. Her work had accustomed her to discovering beauty in old forgotten things, so she fantasized about how time sometimes hides, behind a dark coat of dust, the vividness of colors and the perfection of line of a painting, preserving for years and years the secret of its splendor. Thus

destiny had wanted to save for her its "prince", disguising him as a poor vagrant, so that only Maria could recognize him.

Often she felt for Angelo, sometimes even when she was near him, a distressing mix of desire, inquietude and tenderness, that washed over her heart like all the times she had been in love. Perhaps it was nostalgia. Perhaps she felt nostalgia for all past loves, never definitively lost. Maria was amazed in recognizing in her own self, in certain gestures, ways of speaking, and even certain of her character traits, traces left by her past loves.

Perhaps what she was feeling for Angelo was nothing more than nostalgia for love itself; and the fact that he was able to rekindle in her this feeling, that felt so good to her, seemed to her a confirmation of the fact that this was a true great love.

"Perhaps it is nostalgia itself that lets us meet and recognize ourselves" - continued Maria in her thoughts while Fabrizio at her side drove in silence, probably also following thoughts of his own."

At this point the description of you would have moved aside to make room for the story that in reality I only *wanted* to write, but never built in imagined details and therefore can't tell you because there is nothing to tell. I could write you, instead, of my true story, of what occurred in these years; but I have never paused to tell it to anyone, so I am not sure that there is anything to say. Certainly there are facts, but facts in themselves are like old photos without date or caption, thrown pell mell inside an old can. What would you do

with an old can full of photos of birthdays and christmases with no 'where' or 'when'?

So you see, the facts of my life at the moment are thus: there is nothing that can be told. Maybe I was too distracted and disordered, maybe I didn't have enough imagination, or maybe I could say (what a horror!) as that stupid woman I knew said: "I didn't have time".

Lidia drew near the door and turned off the light switch. A bulb, now annoyingly bare, hung from the ceiling of the half-empty room, transforming the merciful semi-darkness into the raw and inclement light of a hospital hallway. She stayed for a bit looking at what remained in the studio: that space, illuminated by the cold artificial light source, seemed to her more squalid than before, when the glow of the sunset had given it, for a moment, an intimate atmosphere that had allowed her memories to re-surface in a familiar place. She felt uneasy not only with the display that her room offered her, but also with the feelings aroused in her by the letter she had just read.

She remembered the day she had re-written that letter. At that time, intentionally, she changed almost nothing in its content, except, naturally, the sendee, but that was part of the rules of the game that she herself had imposed and because of those rules, on that occasion, she had not given any space to her reflections. But she realized that after this long time she still remembered, and it was the accuracy of her memories that disturbed her. What was it that had been able to strike her to the point of branding it on her memory?

She remembered having formed a complex judgment on that letter, an almost indescribable game of words - a narration that in appearing, remains absent, and in absenting itself remains unforgotten - but today the meaning of those words appeared to her with clarity. It was like a flow of meaning that takes life from an immobile object and, fossilized, acquires meaning beyond hopes, beyond dreams or expectations, beyond anyone's plans, like alleged photos without name or date.

After a few minutes Lidia moved, and turned to sit on the box near the window. It seemed to her that she'd recalled everything and yet she realized that she did not remember the content of other letters; but in any case she had already decided to go all the way . And so once again, and with a resolute gesture, she put on her eyeglasses and set about reading another letter.