

“What do we have today, Pasquale?” I asked as I walked into the office, thinking as I did so, for the umpteenth time, that this was a ritual I was tired of.

“Let’s see... The Colella woman should finally be coming to pay. Then there’s the expert witness in the Moretti trial, the public contracts case – he’s coming to pick up the papers, but says he wants to talk to you for five minutes. And at seven there’s a new client, a woman.”

“Who is she?”

With his usual slight aloofness, Pasquale leafed through the spiral notepad he always carries with him. Each one of us has something that identifies us and with which, assuming we’re aware of it, we identify. For Pasquale it’s his notepad. He buys them himself, without putting them on the practice’s stationery expenses, and he always gets the same ones, an old-fashioned kind to be found only in a dusty and rather heart-warming old stationer’s in the Libertà district. They have rough black covers with slightly red edges, like the ones my grandfather used.

“Her name’s Delle Foglie. She phoned yesterday afternoon and asked for an appointment as soon as possible. She said it’s about something serious concerning her son.”

“Just Delle Foglie?”

“How do you mean, Avvocato?” “Did she only give her surname?”

“Just the surname, yes.”

For a few months, so many years earlier that I preferred not to count them, I’d known a girl named Delle Foglie. It was a period very distant in time and extremely distant in my memory. A period I hadn’t thought about since it had happened and then melted away. While Pasquale spoke, vague, unreal memories came back into my mind, almost as if they concerned someone else, events I thought I knew about because somebody had told me about them, not because they’d really happened to me.

“She’ll be here at seven. But if you have other commitments,” Pasquale added, maybe noticing something strange in my expression, “I can call her back.”

“No, no. Seven’s fine.”

Pasquale went back to his post in the waiting room. I thought for a few minutes about this new client and decided she wasn’t the Delle Foglie I’d known before. There was no reason it should be her, I told myself, somewhat irrationally, and dismissed the matter from my mind.

At this point I should have devoted myself to studying the case files for the following day’s hearings. I didn’t feel like it. Nothing new about that: for some years now legal papers had been filling me with a sense of nausea, and the syndrome was getting slowly but inexorably worse.

Somebody once wrote that we should be capable of dying young. Not in the sense of really dying, but in the sense of stopping what we’re doing when we realize we’ve exhausted our desire to do it, or our strength, or when we realize we’ve reached the limit of our talent, if we have any. Everything that comes after that limit is repetition. We should be capable of dying young in order to stay alive, but that almost never happens. I’d often thought that thanks to what I’d earned in my profession, of which I’d only spent a small part, I could quit, sell the practice and devote myself to something else. Travel, studying, reading. Maybe trying to write. Anything just to escape the grip of time. Time that kept passing, never changing. Nearly motionless in its daily repetition, yet fading fast.

Time accelerates with age, they say. The thought wasn’t a new one, but that day it had been bouncing around unpleasantly in my head.