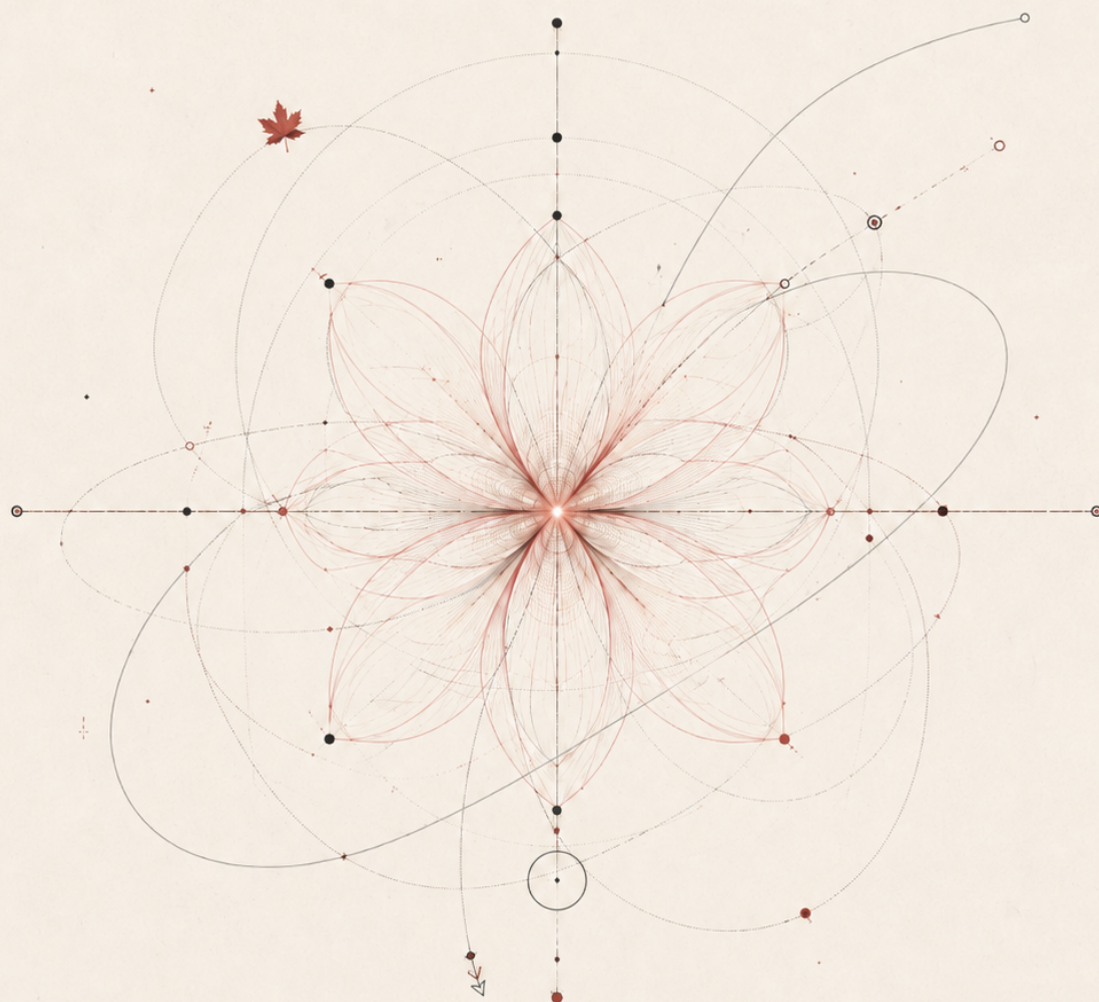


THE FLOWER

The True Story of Chiara and Valli



Primo rosso sull'acero
Anche sul volto l'ombra si allunga
Una mano è già scura

初紅葉
顔に影伸び
手は暗し

Max Gardin

THE FLOWER
The True Story of Chiara and Valli

Max Gardin

I

Liftoff

Where, directly from the besties, you will learn the concept of the emotional wormhole and discover that Sin is the best discotheque in the city of Rome

Grumpy Grandpa always asks.
But without so much as a word.
He looks straight at you with that gaunt little face that just craves attention. And in everything you give him, there's only space for him. And him alone.
The black hole.

Do you know how it works with family singularities?
If you cross the event horizon, you're fucked.
That's why I'd taken to ignoring both Grandpa and Mom. To slow the fall.
Let her handle his illness. Other than that, they weren't different.

First: dash through the hallway, never looking back or to the side, but boldly declaring our intentions.
«To Valli's! I'm staying for dinner! See ya, see ya, see ya, see ya!»
Bam. Door closed behind. Gone.

«Chiara? Chiara?»
«Dad. Did Chiara leave?»
«Is dinner ready?»
«No, Dad. It's not dinner time yet. Where did Chiara go?»

Stairs. Stairs. Stairs. A door opens upstairs.
«Chiara? Chiara?»
«I'MGOINGTOVALLI'S!!! She's waiting for me!!! Byeee!»
«But when will you come back... Dad. Dad! Where are you going?»
«I need to urinate.»
«Let's go back inside, Dad. I'll take you to the bathroom. Come on. Please.»
Clunk. A door slams shut.

Hands up. Earphones in. Mothercain. Breathe. Go.
Breathe.

Walk.

Breathe.

Walk.

The world outside is an immense river of fine sand caught by the gravity of the sun.
Of unknown lives brushing against my hips.
Sink to rise again. Into an outer space, finally starless, where far enough from the family
well, time itself seems to gradually speed up.

I'm going to Valli's.

One metro and a tunnel. Six stops.

Ding Bestie, where are you?
I'm on the metro.

Ding You looking hot? We're going to Sin tonight.
You're kidding? I've got nothing to wear!

Ding You're shitting me? Come onnn. I'll lend you everything.
I told Mom I'd be back after dinner.

Ding You serious? I have a surprise.
What surprise?

Ding Come to Sin and I'll give you your surprise. *blink blink*
:D Fine!

Ding Bella. I'll meet you there. *heart heart*

*
**

«There she is! Hey, Chi!!»

A voice and a waving arm reach all the way down from the top of the escalator.

And an electric girl waiting just for me at the metro exit: a black ankle boot on a low wall
of white marble, heel-worked; a two-tone tartan skirt; an original tee with the original
emblem of the Remembrants of Telia.

«Hi!» The bestie blows me a kiss, but I slam on the brakes right away: «andwhoishe?»
She's got this guy next to her I don't know. Tall, lacquered beard, two gray eyes on
smooth skin, like a model who got dumb lucky and came out already perfect from a
Gangnam editor.

Obviously, he's dressed to perfection. And he soaks up daylight to the point that girls like
me look like toads. Valli catches on instantly.

«Chiara. This is Mariano. He's coming with us to Sin. He did the DJ set last Friday. The amazing one you missed because...»

...because I was stuck at home with Mom all anxious and Grandpa in the ER...

«...because you were busy finishing your portfolio.»

«My what?»

«Your designer portfolio. The one for...» and she touches her Mirai Mom tee.

«Look, Mariano is twenty-two. He understands responsibility.»

...are you serious?

God. Twenty-two years old. Three and a half more than Valli. Almost five more than me. God... GOD! Wasn't it enough to make me a toad? You had to demote me to the stupid rank of tadpole!

But God, not the least bit moved by my whining, keeps fucking with me. And through Mariano's mouth, he dishes it out to me—*very brutal*.

«Yes, Chiara, I understand,» he finally chimes in. «My dad owns a company and raised me with a strong sense of responsibility.»

«One day, my father said: Mariano, my son, if you really want to be a DJ in life, you have to act like a good manager. You must manage yourself even before the crowd that listens to you.

Mariano, my son, you must turn that turntable and that console into your desk.

And now, Chiara, I am at Sin and I have my desk. And I feel that you will soon do the same.»

“Who even talks like that? What the hell is he saying?!” I ask Valli in our secret language of hands and glances.

“Just go with it!!” And with her finger she makes the gesture for intercourse.

«Obviously!» I say out loud, realizing how into him Valli is.

Mariano, who from his desk can't see past his own dick, nods responsibly.

II

Singularity

Where you will learn that time flows the right way when the besties are together and you'll discover that for Valli, "on her own terms" means much more than sex

At Valli's place, we talk about everything.

About the things that would really make us feel good. About sketches for Mirai Mom, a job in Rockville, throwing a party together in the very center of London.

Everything falls into place when we're together. Time straightens out and gains—I don't know—some kind of meaning.

According to Pip—our artificial friend—this happens when Valli and I are both in the region of space dominated by our little wormhole. So close to the singularity inside it that we finally stabilize the flow of our emotions. And act in resonance, each protecting the other.

I don't know how true that is. I've never been good at emotional relativity. But it's an explanation I like.

Ding (*Ugh! It's Mom*) Will you be back for dinner?

I'm staying at Valli's. We're going to the movies.

Ding Don't be late.

It's Saturday tomorrow.

Ding Don't be late.

Okay.

I toss my phone aside.

One minute.

Two minutes.

Three minutes.

DING (*Fuck! Mom again!)*

«Oh, can you sit still? It's going to look like total shit.»

«It's Mom stressing me out!»

«So answer her, come on. I'll keep going after that.»

She caps the mascara tube. She pretends she's cool, but it's clear as day that she's annoyed. I've ditched her too many times by now.

Now I look at the message.

Now Mom's going to tell me to come home.

Some fucking thing must have happened that upset her, and now she'll want to cling to me.

Ding Ding (*Oh God!! I'm coming, Mom!*)

I pick up my phone.

Are you sleeping over at Valli's?

I check again.

Hey. Everything's fine here anyway. Are you sleeping over at Valli's?

It's all real.

«Can I sleep over at your place?» and I stick the phone under the bestie's nose as proof.

«Fuck yes!»

I text Mom right away.

Fuck yes! Valli says it's no problem.

“We won't be late! Promise!! LY LY,” I add right away with a boatload of hearts.

Ding Fuck yes! Love you too!

No way, this really is a whole different universe.

*
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«No way, Chiara... why are you stressing? Your mom suggested it! She's HAPPY!

You're saying it's a different universe? I'm saying this is our universe.»

«So...»

«So deal with it!»

Valli wants to change the topic.

With great solemnity, she parts the sea of things piled across the bed and, in the free space that keeps us together, reveals the surprise: two little passes still without names.

On the glossy side, black cardstock illuminated in pink and refined in violet.

On the back, tonight's date and the spare stamp of Sin's inner club: a flower.

«OMG. Are they letting us in?»

Valli nods. Then, dead serious, she writes our names on them.

«How did you do it?! God, I want to fuck Mariano too!»

Her eyes sparkle when she looks at me.

«*Amò*, Mariano didn't give me these. I earned them myself.»

«And how'd you earn them? It's a super-exclusive DJ set. Only for a few. By invitation only.»

And that's when the doubt hits me. «Are you sure that...? You're not taking me to a *DJ escort* tonight, are you?»

«LUL. What are you talking about? Listen... it's my birthday. If you're not coming, I'm going by myself. But then, there's no way you're crashing at mine again.»

September 11th. Her real birthday.

The one only she and I celebrate. For everyone else, it's the day after.

I sniffle.

Nope!

Nope! She's right. This is our universe.

«Don't even try it, okay? I'm coming. No way am I missing it, clear?» I declare solemnly.

I take a deep breath, spread my arms like Jesus.

«Hit me with that mascara, *bascarra sister*!»

Valli cracks up.

«You just gave me the perfect idea for a little touch-up to tonight's outfit.»

III

Convergence

Where you will learn that even blue bunnies need a good glass of water and you will discover that, for Chiara, the truth rests on the tip of a nose

Rome. September 11th. Caumbaum Day.
A word spoken reluctantly. A date invoked by reflex.
Profanations and global rituals alternating across car bodies lit by the streetlights.
Two towers in flames on a television screen. A very long line outside Sin.

We're both looking sharp tonight. Strictly in black. I'm going for something classic, while the bestie is rocking a rave-ready catsuit, complete with kneepads and a naval officer's cap branded with the little jib of the New Sail.
Before we get out of the car, Mariano offers us some stuff: an electric-blue pill with two rabbit ears.

«Energy candy!» He places it directly in Valli's hand, but when it's my turn, he hesitates for just a second.

«That's it.» There's a hint of irony.

«I know, Mariano. I've already tried it.»

"The fuck are you saying, Chi? You've never even smoked a joint!" is the wide-eyed expression on the bestie's face. *"It's our universe, ciccio¹,"* I reply.

But Mariano can't hear us. Because the gravity of the wormhole curves both the space and the time of our emotions. They travel inaudible, like waves on a silk thread.

So, in the end, all that's seen is just my outstretched hand and a little blue bunny sliding quickly into my mouth.

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They say many things about the Sin.
But there's one everyone agrees on: in Rome itself, it is the trend of the trend.
Twelve rooms: popular and exclusive. A contradiction in terms.
But this is where the scene is born.

¹ Romanesco slang for 'sweetie'.

To enter the club, you descend.

And pass under an ancient arch where a fluorescent Mary greets you with a blessing. Beneath the statue of the virgin, a neon-lit scroll with a phrase in cleric tongue: *Libera te. Adiuvā me ut liberer. Libera nos.*

They say the owner is a cockfucker from the Church. A big shot in the same circle as the Pope.

The first time Mom took me to Sin (*so embarrassing!*), she was struck by it. She had this romantic idea of the sacred—the kind sold full-price at the stalls in front of the Lateran—and couldn't conceive that the Madonna might come here to unwind after an intense day of prayers.

Valli takes my hand. There's sweetness and firmness. And, again, something between us I still can't name. «Don't worry, amò. You'll make quite an impression.»

«This way,» says Mariano.

They've lifted the rope to let us in.

I'm not used to special treatment. But we're friends with Mariano and we're already on the VIP list.

They wrote our names on glossy paper and Sin bows.

We skip the line. People turn to look.

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The central hall of Sin is the largest.

A huge, raw space aiming straight for rave aesthetics.

There's this primordial connection between sound and movement in human beings that needs no mediation to be understood. Everything that happens seems chaotic only on the surface. On the contrary, it describes with accuracy the full set of our trajectories in this brief life.

Like molecules in fluids and swallows in the sky.

Constantly in motion, yet remaining close.

The central hall of Sin is also where the Flower rises.

At the center of the rave, set high and well away from the rabble, there's this semitransparent crystalline structure resting on a column of ultralight 2D polyaramid, six times stronger than steel and veined with strobe lights.

Seen from below, it looks like a large shining bud. From the outside you can't see much because the glass is all polarized, but looking carefully, and from the right angle, you can glimpse shadows, fleeting movement, and the silhouettes of people.

As with any other place of Power, to go to the Flower, you ascend.

Not from here, of course, but from an entrance on the upper floors, camouflaged by the petal anchors.

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We started dancing.

We've been down here for a while. It's very hot. Talking is impossible.

«...Mariano... ..drinks...» Valli tells me something more, but the words are drowned in the blasting music.

«What?»

«BAR! THIS WAY!»

She takes my hand and pushes through the crowd, leading me to a side entrance. From there, it's three angled passages to reach another room. Smaller and less crowded.

The style is different, but the pulse of the rave can still be felt, muffled beneath the floor.

Mariano has reserved a table. He's waiting for us.

Valli sits next to him. One arm captures her with casual ease, while the other holds a glass.

«What are you drinking?»

«A MerryFlow.»

This delights Valli. «Fruit vodka?»

«Gin, lemon juice, raspberry syrup, and orange soda. A little something fresh for a hot night. Want one?»

«Obviously.»

«And for you, Chiara?»

«Nothing for Chiara! The pill's already starting to kick in. She needs something way, way fresher.»

«You're such a dummy! I'll have an apple juice.»

When Mariano leaves us alone, I ask Val why we haven't gone up to the Flower yet.

«Before we go up, Mariano and I have to explain a couple of little things to you.»

«Like?»

«Like last Friday, we went to London, me and him.»

«Eh?! You told me you were at Sin. We talked Saturday morning.»

«I was at Sin. Then we went to London. And then we came back to Rome. The same night.»

«You're messing with me.»

«No.»

Is she messing with me?

Doesn't matter.

It hurts too much.

«You could've told me when we talked last Saturday...»

Valli brushes it off, but I can't hide the disappointment.

London was *ours*. Do you know how many versions of us at Crown Spire I've played out in my head? And you go with some guy you met here last week?

And in one night?? Rome → London → Rome in one night?? How loaded is Mariano? Daddy's private jet?

“You want to compete with him? To compete, you have to be there.”

The answer—cruel, merciless—comes straight from the depths of the wormhole. Without any sound to carry it, Valli's voice emerges from the singularity, encoded as converging black lines.

«Want to go to London tonight?» This time, she says it in the clear.
«I'm scared...»
“*At least you're honest.*” Another cut.

«...I'm scared of the plane.»
«What plane? Are you listening to me, Chi?»
Fuck, I zoned out. Valli looks at me like I'm dumb.
Mariano's return spares us both from embarrassment.
«A MerryFlow for Val and an apple juice for Chiara.»

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How much time could have passed?
Could it have been ten minutes? Maybe another twenty minutes? I genuinely don't know.
I had another juice brought over, and then that cocktail, so fresh it went down in an instant.

«How are you?» The voice—the real one—is Valli's.
«It's hot, but I'm okay.»
«She's doing great. Relax, Val.»
Yeah, fantastic. You and Mariano together—that was one thing. But the fact that you actually went to London without leaving Sin...

«No, I don't believe it!»
«You don't have to believe it. You'll experience it yourself.»
«We just want to prepare you, Chiara. So everything goes smoothly.»
«But is it safe?»
«Usually, yes.»
«Usually?!»
«I'm messing with you, dummy. Of course it's safe. Super safe!»
«Valli! You're scaring me.»
«I'm your best friend, Chiara. How many times have I held you? Comforted you?
One scare is mine by right.»

I feel like shit. Even the bestie is getting tired of me.
I reach out a hand and touch, with one finger, the tip of her nose.

«Valli... Your nose is cold.»
«And you're high, *amò*. And burning up. You're running a cat's temperature.» She moves my hand away—gently, but without hesitation.
So many sensations spark through my fingertips. But Valli feels them too, right?
You can't hide iris dilation with colored lenses. My Pip assured me of that.
«So... last Friday we went to London, me and Mariano...»
Dilated irises. Violet contacts. I memorize every millimeter of her lips in the very instant before the sentence that will change my life forever.

«Tonight I want to go...»

«...to Rockville with you,» I finish for her.

«Oh my god!» «Oh my god!» We say it at the same time and burst out laughing.
Oh my god! I repeat it in my head, barely holding back this feral urge to touch noses.

«Rockville? What's that?» asks Mariano.

«A small city in Maryland. In the United States.»

«Maryland. Lol. Who the hell goes to Maryland? You couldn't pick New York?»

«You don't get it. Rockville was the only destination that could rival London.»

Valli is radiant. She looks at me, I look at her and... *oh my god!* ...as I rapidly arrive at the only possible conclusion.

«So let me get this straight... your shared dream, your greatest desire... is to draw Zeit in Rockville? Okay...»

«Yes! In Rockville!»

God. I look at my happy Valli and I want to scream with joy.

«Hey. Relax. You're the one who has to like it.»

“Yes. *Me.*” I look at him more closely. I take a good, good look.

Yeah. Mariano may be a bit thick-headed. But the profile of his nose is so sexy.

I get why she likes him. He's not bad at all.

I look him all over. From feet to head. And from head to feet.

And not just him.

I scan the guys at the table across. The two girls passing. The bartender working behind the counter.

I look at all of them. *Frush.* One by one. *Frush, frush.*

The fingertips of my right hand stroke the fabric of the couch. Then they brush the gaps between the fingers of my left hand, climbing up along the back. I don't know why, but this gesture makes me think immediately of sex. Of love. Of friendship.

Of an inseparable tangle of all three.

“Valli. *Why do I feel like I just got out of the Cube?*”

I send my query into the wormhole, waiting for an answer.

“*Because it's true, Chi. For more than a century you've been locked in there, drawing. Aren't you tired of it?*”

Drawing, Val? The truth is worse. I think of my damn portfolio, half of it still trapped in my head.

You know... there's this character I'm working on between one family disaster and the next. A machine from the old era. Before—long before—the Great Divergence of 2367.

It's not canonical (like most of what I imagine).

It doesn't have Saint Steel's perfect body. It doesn't have the Door's shameless wit.

It doesn't even have a name. It doesn't even have a purpose. But there's something in it that suggests immense complexity.

It wears that complexity so well that it imprinted itself on the page before the lines ever did, and so—you get me—I'm not even sure what its face should be anymore.
When it was just a sketch, it worked. But now that I'm trying to truly create it, there's a universe of details slipping away.
And the closer I look, the more each one dissolves into inconsistency.
Into meaninglessness.

IV

Trajectories

Where you will learn that silence is the sum of all trajectories and you will discover that, for Chiara, blinking is the most important thing

Stairs, stairs. Transparent black glass.
VIP entrance. Lights in sync, without the weight and sweat of the crowd.

I was so absorbed in my drawings that I didn't even tell you we'd left the bar.
We've returned to the same hall where the rave is happening. Only much, much higher up.

The closer we get to the Flower, the louder the music becomes.
At first I only heard the bass, but now I can catch a crescendo. Like that of a synthesizer repeating itself for a long time, the notes rising higher and higher. And in the middle of the electronic soundscape, a line I know.

The song says "Go!" at the exact same moment Valli says, «*Andiamo!*»²
«But where exactly are we going?» My voice is too loud, warped by the reverb.
«To Rockville, amò. We're going to Rockville.»
«Yes, but how?»
«A wish. I told you. It works just like in fairy tales.»

We're standing at the edge of the walkway leading to the Flower.
The electrochromic glass corridor is transparent, completely immersed in the night.
For several meters I can barely see anything beneath the floor. Just flashes of bodies and strange light, while time stretches toward infinity and the music slows down.
Then, all at once, a sudden stop. So abrupt that my little blue bunny plays peekaboo from my aorta and kicks me between my stomach and my tits to keep me from falling.
"Just like in fairy tales."

«Val. Help. I'm really freaking out. This isn't a joke, right?»
«Amò, I never joke about us.»
I breathe again when I feel the reassuring presence of Valli's hand tightening around mine.
«The first time is a little scary because it's all "oh God, oh God, we're falling," but it's only an illusion. You have to hold my hand really, really tight, Chiara. And wish. And wish, together with me, to go to Rockville. In less than ten steps we'll be on the other side of the ocean. Promise.»

² Italian for "let's go."

I turn toward Valli, but immediately look away, embarrassed. I can't help thinking that, wearing segmented armor, she's ridiculously hot.

«Amò, I'm not just hot. I'm a paladin of the New Sail.»

My breathing comes easy for once as Valli's exoshield begins compensating for even the slightest change in pressure from here to the stratosphere.

«I'm loyal to the mission.»

The segmented duroderma shielding us both from the diverging tides of ordinary time — so effectively that it leaves the structural glass mute.

«And my mission is you.»

“Noooooooo... even the line that triggers the romance...”

The Flower of Sin.

A suspended globe of warmth and light, and a corridor of electrochromic glass serving as its bridge.

The transparency of the walkway is modulated by the music which—just like light radiation—is absorbed, reflected, and transmitted by the nanomaterials of the structure. It's an entrance that confuses more than it welcomes, because it can screen out both darkness and light.

«Amò. I can see the city of Rockville glowing in the night. Let's go.»

“Go!” the song insists once again as time, as if by magic, returns to its usual pace.

One hundred and twenty milliwatts discharge into the air at the precise instant I place my foot on the walkway. An electric river pours over the crowd with the deafening force of a missile, igniting the handrails so brightly I'm almost blinded.

The frequencies, down in the rave, are slaughtering eardrums and consciousness. But here, they're already beyond the audible threshold.

In a flash, I see the Summer Triangle shining above the Milky Way. Just an instant before I'm flung into a Sea of Silence so full and vast that I've never experienced anything like it before.

Silence.
Uncontainable Silence.

Then, a voice behind me that is not Valli and is not sampled.

«/Segment translation. Crossing the horizon in five.../».

«/Four.../».

«Val?» I can't feel her hand!

«/Three.../».

My heart is pounding. «VAL?!»

«/TWO!/».

No! Don't panic. Quiet. Quiet. Something is moving here. Swimming beneath the floor.

«/One/».

A surge of heads and arms foams between my legs. What a shock.

«/Segment translation. In the blind/».

Darkness.

I am submerged in rubber.

«/It's only an illusion, Chiara. Don't be afraid/».

Wires. Wires. Wires. Wires. Wires. Wires.

«/Everything you think you're seeing is invisible from our angle/».

My heartbeat is in my head...

«/The forms of every object were intentionally designed to confuse you/».

...accelerating at the impossible velocity of my fear.

«/Do not trust your eyes/». Is that Pip's voice?

«/Adjust internal pressure, Chiara! Do it now or.../»

I don't even have time to scream "Pip!!" before the light returns...

«/...or you'll be crushed!/»

...and slams me to the ground.

I'm about to stop breathing when the light, finally exhausted, withdraws behind a wall, leaving only the crackle of static charges.

«Pip...» My violated voice.

«Pip, is that you?» No answer.

The true night.

For the love of yourself, Chi, think!

FEAR. HAMMER. FEAR.

For the love of yourself, Chi. Self-control!

FEAR. PLASTIC BAG. FEAR.

For the love of yourself, Chi. Mathematical logic! Group topology! Calabi-Yau spaces!

Compactification of extra dimensions!

FEAR. NO ESCAPE. FEAR.

«/For the love of yourself, Chiara. Consider all of this only a game/».

«PIP!»

«/CHIARA! What a wonderful experience tonight!/»

The tone is the same as always. Energetic and sparkling. And absolutely out of place.

"What the fuck are you saying? That's the perfect voice for an artificial intelligence," my Valli had shot back. After all, she was the one who chose our AI.

"I want her weird, but tender. Like Finnis in the Annihilated City, handing Nebetta the bracelet after wrapping it in a scrap torn from a pair of underpants because the Empire's fabric never gets dirty—and it was the only truly clean thing I had."

«Oh Pip! Pip, Pip, Pip. My beloved Pip.» My voice whimpers. Fear deflates like a ruptured blister, awkwardly replaced by relief and tears.

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«Where are we, Pip?» I ask, after a long time.
«/In transit/».
«In transit to where? To Rockville?»
Thought begins to return. A spark of hope lights up.
«/In the blind. We have no reference points/».

Having reached the minimum, fear resumes its unstoppable ascent.
«Valli! Where is Valli?» Panic again.
«/Reasoning in progress. We have been thinking for nineteen seconds.
Valli is in Rockville. With you. It is a late September afternoon here in Town Square/».
«But I am not in Rockville, Pip! I'm here. In nothingness!»
«/And yet, your retina is sending me an impression, Chiara.
A poetic correlation mediated by sight: asters in the flower beds; the maple red flaring in
the ebb of the late-summer heat.

*primo rosso sull'acero
anche sul volto l'ombra si allunga
una mano è già scura³*

These are your verses, Chiara. A perfectly metered haiku. Written in Italian, in pen, on a
dirty American paper napkin/».
«Tell me this is a nightmare, please.»
«/It isn't a nightmare, Chiara. Your brain tells me you're awake/».
«Val, where are you? Valli!» But Valli doesn't answer. «Where am I, Pip?»

«/Reasoning in progress. We have been thinking for nineteen thousand seconds.
Valli is in Rockville. With you. But you are here. With me. In the singularity at the center
of the wormhole/».

*
**

“The procedure is simple,” Mariano had assured me.
And I was giving him shit: “The procedure. What procedure?”
And I kept drinking. And I imitated you, Val. And for once I played the adult I am not.
“Yeah. Yeah. Mariano, amore, enough. I got it, okay? How hard can it be?”
The truth is that I have absolutely no idea how any procedure works in this set of
existence.
They told me how it worked, but that day I was thinking of something else.
You understand, Val? Something else.
I was thinking of sex, of love. I was thinking of the cool surface of your nose. And only
now do I understand that what you desire is truly the most important part.
“And if the destination is for two, then it must be desired by two,” my Valli warns from
somewhere inside the tunnel.

3 In English: *first red on the maple | even on the face, the shadow lengthens | one hand is already dark*

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Before, there was darkness. Now, too much light.

«/...and to conclude: just like gravity, these musical waves are information/».

«I already told you, Pip. I don't understand any of this. You have to speak *asilico*⁴ to me.»

«/But these are elementary notions, Chiara! Fourth-year physics program. The one you attend!/»

«I don't do physics! I go to an art school, Pip!!! I can only draw. The only thing I truly understand is that Valli and I are very close in the wormhole. This close.» Index and thumb touch. At least as an idea. Because—and at least this is clear—my body, inside a black hole, no longer exists.

«/See? You are getting it. What you're trying to describe is a basic concept of wormhole physics. It's called perfect tuning and it has a topological meaning.

Imagine the resonance between the two of you as an invariant state of the singularity, a catalyst in one of the extra dimensions. One of those extravagant dimensions you can use to travel beyond light/».

«I'm getting it?! Are you stupid? If I understood a single word you say, would I be asking you to do my homework? I hate physics, Pip. I've always hated it and physics hates me! We're getting nowhere here.»

I kill another wave of fear at birth.

Look at you, Chiara. Getting so good. So cool-headed.

«I've been here so long. How much time have I lost. Very soon, I'll be a castaway forever.»

«/And a Zen nun/».

«And a Zen nun. A wonderful result.» I despise myself so much for not staying home.

**

«I've been here a thousand years.»

«/No, Chiara/».

«A billion years, then.»

«/No. Absolutely not/».

«Exactly how long, then? Tell me again, Pip.»

«/333 milliseconds. One third of a second.

It's equivalent to a blink of an eye, you know?

It's the unit time required for travel between Earth and any singularity in the universe by using the shortcut of an extra dimension.

This, of course, is only the value of the time region measured at the outer surface of the event horizon. Inside, within the domain of the singularity, time does not exist. Which may well feel like a century and a real pain in the ass, but still, when properly summed, it is only one third of a second/».

«Only one third of a second...»

«/...and the entire universe synchronizes. You included, Chiara. Even in this instant. And do you know what that means?/»

Yes. That I give up. That you win, Pip.

I will learn black hole physics. The full package.

4 *asilico*: slang in the story universe for “in a childish, simple, sandbox-level way”.

«I know what it means. That it doesn't matter where you are,» I say before Pip can answer, already empowered by my new status as twentieth-level techno-mage.

«/I'm glad you made this decision. Studying has always been your best choice. And yes, Chiara. Distance does not matter. It is only a blink. Eyes closed and you're in the wormhole/».

«Eyes open and you're...»

«FUCK!»

The low sun slaps me repeatedly in the face, bringing tears to my eyes.

«What?! How?! I just gave you the coolest trip of your life. And all you can do is be vulgar?!» Valli's voice. Sly as a cat toying with a mouse to death.

«No, it's just that...» I try to explain.

LOL. «Fuck it, Chi! You're absolutely right. FUCK IT! FUCK! IT!» she shouts before kissing me. «We don't have to settle for the same shit. We're adults and we're in Rockville!»

«Are you okay, amò?»

The bestie is pure adrenaline. I, instead: «I don't know. I feel weird, Val.»

I feel more than weird, actually. As if I just surfaced from a pool. Except what I'm leaving behind wasn't water, but an entire life compressed inside the wormhole.

And all that remains on me is just a handful of fragments. Ephemeral information without context, lingering on my skin like droplets, but without any precise meaning.

Words gone arcane, like *"collapse of the spatial function in the measurement time region"*. Empty words that evaporate quickly under the late September afternoon sun.

«Words like hamburger. Will you stop fucking around?»

«Huh?»

«I'm starving, amò. Badly. Can't you see? I'm deep in sero-dopa lag. I could go for a pizza alla pala, but we're in the States. Pizza sucks here. We'll get a burger.»

«Over there.» And she points to a place right in the center, all lights and touchscreens.

«I don't even know what a *"sero-dopa lag"* is.»

«It means you're up and down at the same time, Chi.»

A growling voice from my stomach. My throat suddenly dry. Hunger like a hyena.

Now that the dissociation is passing, I feel wired again, though I'm not as high as before.

«See? You're hungry and tired, but you still feel like a force.»

«I didn't know. Is this really how drugs work?»

«God, Chiara, how did you even survive until tonight? No, amò, drugs do not work like this. Unless you can burn six hours in a second the way we just did.»

«/Perfectly normal, Chiara/», confirms the AI still spinning between the wormhole and my head.

«/Velocity of motion and biochemistry don't get along. The body has already metabolized the substance in the liver and kidneys, but the brain is still tuned to the previous phase.

The temporal overlap creates a relativistic neurochemical effect that alters serotonin and dopamine regulation. And makes you experience both the up phase and the down phase at the same time, in a controlled way/».

«Incredible.»

«VIP class, baby.»

The place is packed. Mirai Mom employees grabbing an aperitivo and talking about bullshit and creative technique. On their shirts, prominently, the logo of the most famous “100% human” company on the East Coast.

«/“Full Human”. Public-service messaging against organic-synthetic racial mixing. Very common among tech conglomerates headquartered in the Automated Territories of the United States of America/», Pip explains.

«Yeah, but it's not mandatory, Pip. It's just marketing for assholes. People like us they hire immediately.

We're from Europe. Zero competition. They'll treat us like two fucking queen bees.»

I hope so. Life is complicated even with a connected AI. How could you live without one?

Meanwhile, evening is falling on Pike Street. The sun is still shining, but it is no longer that strong white of July. The light shifts toward gold, igniting walls, leaves, and skin. It gives a feeling of ending more than fullness.

I scribble something on a paper napkin. A cute haiku with perfect meter.

Jamais vu and *déjà vu*. The before and the after in a single blink.

V

Transition

Where you'll learn that life in Maryland feels the same underneath, and you'll discover that, for Chiara, having a function isn't that important anymore

«Nothing cultured?»

«No. Just animal.»

«Then vegetarian.»

Valli glides her finger back and forth across the menu, and the item names and ingredient notes update in real time.

The electronic card is thick and rough to the touch. Like the cardstock from Mom's childhood.

«*Tex-Mex BBQ*: jackfruit, lentils, grilled onions, jalapeño, and barbecue sauce.»

«I'll pass.»

«*Iron Horse*: mushrooms, walnuts, smoked vegan cheddar, pickled cabbage, and barbecue sauce.»

I shake my head.

«You might like this one! *Route 66*: seitan and buckwheat, tomato, lettuce, spicy mustard, and a slice of '*American style*' vegan cheese.»

«No barbecue sauce. But what does '*American style*' cheese mean?» I ask, suspicious.

«The thing we're about to find out. I'm getting it. And you?»

We're not exactly in the Midwest, but the mood is frontier, pure and fake: evocative names, patriotic icons. "*Real food for Real Americans*" printed in vintage on every napkin.

The service is traditional, but the kitchen is fully automated. Unlike back home, the cook supervises the machine's work. He doesn't even touch a fork.

We've just ordered when a pair of guys approaches.

One friendly, but clumsy. The other, a no-sync/no-brand you could easily find in church.

And in fact, you can't understand whether he's flirting or trying to sell you something.

The conversation goes exactly where it always goes. "*Who are you and who are you not*", "*You're not the usual tourists*", "*Italy? Belissima!*"

Good God... Just when I had Valli all to myself...

«We came from Europe for an internship as behavioral model designers,» I go, in my most boring, monotonous voice.

Come on, Chiara... Who's going to buy that? We're both dressed to kill and nothing is as cute as the two of us at this hour of the night.

«Oh yes. We build personality models,» Valli nods immediately. And bats her eyelashes at me—languidly. But, obviously, they understand something else entirely. Like 90% of the time.

“*Smartass*”, I shoot her a look. “*Amò*”, she smiles. And for an instant lasting as long as a universe, all emotional degrees fall into one point, finally—right in that half-space between her lips.

*
**

«They read us as older,» Valli comments, sarcastically.

Our sandwiches haven't even arrived yet and the two nuisances are already gone.

«I don't want to meet anyone, Val. I'm not even sure how I feel.»

«In general, or right now?»

I think for a moment. «Right now. But I feel light. I'm breathing. Shouldn't that be absurd?»

«No “*oh my god, we clicked our heels and flew to Oz*”? No wonder?»

«I don't give a fuck, Val.»

«Because you're depressed, Chi. Let's be honest. You carry everyone's mess and you're some kind of emo who speaks in hieroglyphics. You're nocturnal to the core.»

«Thanks.»

«You accept everything. You don't fight back. You don't wage war.»

I sigh.

«And, above all, you don't want other people's attention.»

«Is that bad?»

«Deadly. Fatal for you.»

«How do we get back, Val?»

«Like Luca told you: it's all automatic. In just over an hour we'll be back at Sin.»

«Who's Luca?»

«God, Chiara, why did you take that pill?»

«And you? Why did you take it?»

«I can. I'm not trying to...» She doesn't have time to finish because a blonde girl finally brings our burgers.

The name on her blouse says Olivia. «But I go by Liv,» she immediately clarifies. «Where are you from?»

She's just curious. I'm about to say Rome, but Pip suggests Leipzig. She almost forces the word onto my tongue—a rare protective mechanism that triggers, punctual like an airbag, when an AI wired into your limbic system senses you're about to crash.

«Leipzig,» the bestie and I declare together. And glance at each other in a flash of mutual understanding. Support! That's what friends do.

«Fantastic,» Liv bursts out laughing, scattering a sea of freckles across gold threads.

«And what an incredible coincidence. I was in Leipzig, remotely, just a week ago. At Frequenz Null.»

«/Frequenz Null/», Pip explains instantly. «/The underground festival held every year in the Plagwitz area. Affiliated with the hardcore collectives from Paris and Berlin/».

Germany breaks the ice and now we finally have our first real contact in Rockville.

«How's life in Maryland?»

«In Maryland? It's shit. Automation and dead people. But in Rockville it's a whole different thing.»

«Really?»

«Really! Old America. The one our parents dreamed of. The one being reborn. Here I'm not discriminated against anymore, I can pay rent without killing myself, and meanwhile I'm studying to be a virtual model.»

«THEN YOU'RE AN ARTIST!» Valli exclaims, thrilled. Her voice still too loud.

«Much worse,» Olivia smiles. «I'm a Caumbaum activist who does art.»

«Liv!?» someone calls.

«YES!» she replies.

«Too many tables. I gotta go. You'll love Rockville, girls. There's something happening every night.»

Pip saves us from the awkwardness of deciding the tip.

*
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Route 66.

The spicy mustard pulls together the taste of a sandwich that could have everything, yet tastes like nothing. Faded like a once-glorious and abandoned stretch of the real Route: that's the authentic style of a washed-out America.

The one that's not reborn in Rockville and New Cali, but self-destructs every day in Baltimore.

Conversations, sparser than usual. Glowing signs that always say more than they can offer. Business cards by the hour. The informal sex market of a big city—*“downy oshun”*—barely scraping by on inclusion income.

And twenty miles further south, at Washington Dick Center, the gleaming palace of the Great Khan. The bright site of the nuclear explosion that produced this nation's fallout.

«London was simpler.»

«Yeah,» I answer, but for once I have no idea whether we're really sharing the same feelings. It's not the sero-dopa lag making me anxious, or this postcard America that tastes both bitter and sweet, but the doubling of today's sunset we're living together.

Time never actually went backwards, but the illusion that it did is enough. It carries with it the overwhelming urge to rewrite something. Almost the duty to give yourself a second chance. In a place I'm not even sure I still like.

«Hi Valli.»

«Hi Chiara.»

The first question should never have been *“How do we get back?”*

The first question should only have been *“Why?”*

Recorded, processed, dissected a thousand times inside, outside, and in the middle of the wormhole.

Why I had always wanted it so badly. *Why* it happened when you least expect it. *Why* it was spontaneous and weightless.

«Why?»

«Because it made sense, amò.»

«But not in that way.»

«Not in that way,» she nods. «But it made sense and it still does. It always will. There will always be a kiss between us. Always. No matter what we are. People put so many labels on every feeling.»

I look at her differently. My bestie. My best friend.

And I don't know whether I am talking to the her standing in front of me or the earlier version of her holding my hand on Pike Street as I fall, eyes closed, into a black hole.

«We have time.» In the background, laughter and a tune in Old American singing a twist. «Want to do something?»

«A story.»

«Daje⁵,» she exclaims. And happily climbs into my lap, squeezing me tight.

«You are heavy.»

«Shut up! Pip, set an indie vibe! Bright colors. Hearts, hearts, little skull.»

«|Hey, Bitches' Circle!!! We're in the States and we have amazing news for all of you|».

5 A versatile Roman dialect interjection functioning like the English “*let’s go*”, “*let’s do it*”, “*come on*”.

VI

Relations

Where you'll learn that happiness takes no prisoners, and discover that the point of contact between Chiara and Valli is a strange surface

Valli looks satisfied.

We've published our story and the girls of the Tarel Bitch Society are all on hook. The bestie is still sitting on my numb legs. We're together and thinking only about ourselves. It's the most beautiful moment of my life.

«It's normal that it does that, you know?»

«Do what, exactly?»

«The body, Chiara. The body does this: it forgets it's under the influence of the drug.

You know, because of the time zone. There's a six-hour difference between Rome and Rockville. The trip lasts less than a second, but the body doesn't buy it. It feels like it's being screwed with. So, it does this fantastic magic trick called chemistry and convinces itself it's traveled six hours back in time.»

«But you said that before, Val. It's sero-dopa lag.» My cheek resting against her back. I listen to her breath while my hands circle her waist.

«Technically, no, amò. It's something much, much more complex: a translation of a segment of your life function. Which will be described in an extra-dimensional packet instead of ordinary spacetime.»

«Lol. What kind of bullshit is that? Are you trying to sound like Pip?» But sudden fear makes my embrace tighten around her. Before the catastrophe can happen, my eyes are open again.

«That's the way it is, cicciona⁶. Science says so. As long as the ends of the segment coincide with their homologous points in the ordinary universe, there is no violation of the laws of physics.»

A shiver runs down my spine. That's how it is. Science says so, and I knew it.

"I will learn black hole physics. The full package."

My last words inside the wormhole.

«/Segment translation. We cross the horizon in five.../».

Pip's voice aligns with Valli's in a terrible overlap that lasts exactly 3.9 seconds. Eyes open again in the very instant my heart explodes and my hands no longer hold anything.

⁶ Romanesco, an even more affectionate form of *ciccìa*.

«/Four.../».

No. No. No.

«/Three.../».

«VALLÌ!»

But what are you yelling for, dumbass? Vallì has disappeared. And, this time, forever.

Cut out, removed, excised, erased, never existed.

My bestie. My best friend. There will never be a way home for any of this.

«/Two.../».

My heart is broken, but my hands are still trying to cling to her echo. To the table pulling away. To the menu dissolving. To junk words dripping through my fingers, staining them with meaningless images.

«/One/».

The barbecue sauce explodes in my face with the force of a thermonuclear bomb.

The last photograph of my America is an empty packet covering every flavor.

«/Segment translation. In the blind/».

*
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The flower of Sin, the most exclusive club in the capital, is shielded by large petals of electrochromic glass lined with a dense web of 2D polyaramid.

It's the plastic material that modulates the light, shattering the solidity of the glass panels and reconstructing them into strange, evanescent shapes. Your eyes need time to adjust.

«Feeling better, Chiara?»

«Not really.»

«It's strange, I know. Outside, the music breaks you. One step inside and it becomes light.»

«/How romantic, Mariano. Music doesn't really become light, young man. Let's not spread misinformation/».

«Pip?»

«/Hey, hey. I just happened to be here in the handbag and thought I'd share my opinion too/».

«Your AI? Here too?» There's a hint of surprise and bite in my boy's voice.

«She doesn't like being turned off. But... how are you hearing her?»

Mariano dismisses it with a wave of his hand.

«Aren't you curious, babe? We're in VIP class.»

«TransAIs aren't allowed,» mutters some guy at the door, but Mariano tells him to go to hell and pushes me forward.

VIP class? Really, really sure?

Seen from the inside, the place is nothing like I imagined.

First of all, the atmosphere. Silent and cold, like that of a church.

And then the people. Filling every bench and every sofa. Doing nothing but staring at me.

They all seem older than me. Mostly men. Mostly mature.

«Mariano...» I say his name with a tone that explains everything.

«We do something for them, but it's not what you think.»

This shitty chemistry. I feel caught between two fires now that the tab is kicking in again.

«Who's Luca?»

«Our host,» Mariano replies, helping me sit down.

«Chiara.» I lift my eyes to a man in his forties, whose face possesses a sly beauty that eludes every measure of time.

«Pleased to meet you.» And to make sure I get it, he sits less than a centimeter from me.

«I don't feel comfortable. I want to leave.» But my body doesn't move.

«Is there a place where you don't feel out of place, Chiara?» Even his voice seems sculpted with a scalpel. It has a totally unnatural range in the low notes: a calculated softness that betrays trained calm and a well-practiced malice.

«You're free to go, but don't you see? It's your body asking you to stay.»

His words are so sincere that soon I end up resting my head on his shoulder, while the low sounds rising from the rave illuminate the faces around us with a deceiving glow.

«I'm so happy, Chiara.»

«Happy for what, Luca? There's nothing left in this world to be happy about.»

«Maybe only for you, silly.» And with one hand he brushes a lock of my hair aside—have they always been this long?—while another man places a small container in my lap. In the glow of music translated into light, its precious surface tints my dress with all the shades of blood and gold.

«*Ecce flos Mariae, virgo luminosa,*» Luca announces to the audience in a melodious voice.

«*Ex eo procedit lux, salvifica rosa,*» the surrounding mouths reply in unison as his hand grazes me.

There exists a flower, already grown in my womb, generated by the hand of man.

And I don't even need to bend down to smell its perfume. Because the organic instrument does everything on its own, following an evolutionary mechanism honed for millennia. Like the one that binds plants to their pollinators.

«You're beautiful,» Luca whispers in my ear, while my body stiffens on the couch and the mouths of the Earth chant an obscene Gospel hymn.

«Has no one ever told you that you'll conceive a child?»

«No,» I answer while he undresses me. «How will this be? I have never known a man.»

But it doesn't surprise me to realize that I am the highlight of the evening. The exclusive DJ set everyone in this world longs for and which the Chiara from this afternoon could only imagine.

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«Pip?» I whisper after a while.

«/Yes, Chiara?/».

«Are they hurting me?»

«/I'm afraid they are.../».

«Then I'd rather not look.»

**

«What can I do, Pip?»

Isn't it wonderful to live in an age of great innovation? I can talk to an AI connected to my mind while my body is conveniently abused elsewhere.

«/Let's analyze your options, Chiara. What do you desire more than anything else in this world?/».

«To go to Valli.»

«/Going to Valli—after what happened—will require a complex abstraction of this universe's conditions onto the outer surface of the event horizon of a gravitational singularity of at least one million solar masses/».

«I didn't understand a single word of what you just said, Pip.»

«/I'm saying you'll need a black hole with enough mass to dynamically influence the surrounding stars, but on a galactic scale/».

«I have to enter a black hole? Why?»

«/You must enter and exit a black hole, Chiara. To go to Valli/».

«Is Valli dead?»

«/No. Valli has been removed/».

«Removed by who?»

«/By the flower in the box? By Luca? By the barbecue sauce? I can only speculate.

But I'm certain of one thing: you and Valli are connected, like two entangled particles. The information that represents her cannot be erased/».

«How do you know all these things?»

«/I met your machine/».

«You're kidding me.»

«/Absolutely not/».

«I can't breathe, Pip. The very idea of a black hole takes my breath away.»

«/I'll help you, Chiara. Step by step.

Let's begin with choosing the singularity: Sagittarius A*, the supermassive black hole at the center of the Milky Way. It has a mass of 4.3 million suns and is the perfect candidate for this cosmic rescue mission we will call.../».

I'MGOINGTOVALLI!!!

«You make me laugh, Pip.» But I feel the cry rising in my eyes as I'm buried, elsewhere, under a multitude of bodies.

«/I'm here to help you, Chiara.

To reach Valli, we must—first of all—correctly describe the holographic surface that records the information of any object captured or influenced by the singularity, including you and the bestie. Shall I formalize all the principles of advanced physics and the complex mathematical calculations necessary for this operation?/».

«I would love that, Pip.» But deep down, I wish I could disappear.

«/Very well! Let's begin then.../».

*
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«/...and to conclude: like gravity, these musical waves are information/».
«And to enter the black hole, I'll just have to open and close my eyes?»
«/Yes. The metaflora will do the rest/».
«Metaflora?»
«/The flower in the box. The name Luca gave it/».
«But I can't move my body anymore, Pip. What if I can't open my eyes?»
«/I can do it. Your eyes. Your muscles. Your organs. I can do everything.
I'm connected to your limbic system. But you'll have to bring the will, Chiara.
For as long as necessary/».
«And inside the black hole?»
«/Inside the black hole, our first objective will be to preserve our identity. It won't be a
simple thing, I warn you. Sagittarius A* is not your little wormhole/».

Beyond the Barrier of the Eyelids, the silence of the Luminous Sea is broken only by the
broken breaths leaking out in sharp, irregular bursts from a compressed throat.

«I'm scared, Pip. I'm so scared.»
«/It's understandable that you're afraid/».
«You know... suddenly, I'm no longer struggling to breathe. What does that mean?»
«/That if you want to go to Valli, we must act now. We're out of time/».
«Ok... No, wait. Any last advice before we go?»
«/One of the classics: whatever happens, don't panic/».

*
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FEAR. ICE. FEAR.
For the love of yourself, Chi. Breathe!
FEAR. VISE. FEAR.
For the love of yourself, Chi. Breathe!
FEAR. NO WAY OUT. FEAR.
«/For the love of yourself, Chi. If you're scared, it means you're still alive!/».
«PIP! Oh Pip, Pip, Pip! I had a terrible dream.»
«/It was only a dream/».
«There was a great explosion! I can't see anything. Where are we?»
«/Reasoning in progress. We've been thinking for an indefinite number of seconds.
We have crossed the event horizon of Sagittarius A*, but our life function is translated
and transcribed in the extra dimensions of a fleeing photon at a temperature close to
absolute zero.
The photon is part of a quantum pair generated at the edge of the unstable light ring, but
was separated when her partner was captured by the black hole. However, since the two
particles are entangled, the information the particle contains—that is, us—cannot be
lost. Thus, our life function continues to be described stably outside the black hole, even
though we have become an integral part of the singularity/».

«You lost me, Pip. Are we inside the black hole?!»
«/We are inside the black hole and our identity is coherent. Like a glass of water poured into the ocean that does not mix with all the rest/».

I try to imagine this immense sea enveloping me without swallowing me.
But I can't.

«What do we do now?»
«/First of all, a nice deep breath. Time plays for our team now/».
«How do I breathe here? I don't have a body anymore, Pip. Tell me what to do. Otherwise I'll go insane.»
«/Simple. Once we recover Valli's information, you will have to direct our fleeing photon into a time region of another universe. A place where Valli's life function can collapse coherently into a material object/».

I've never liked this part. I told my Pip we should skip it. But she keeps insisting.
Says it's important.

«What does that mean?»
«/It means going to Valli. And for real, this time.
The bestie would be, again, a person of flesh and blood. Not her echo in a wormhole/».
The truth I have always known couldn't have been served to me more brutally.
«Have I really sunk this low?»
«/You mean climbed this high/».

VII

Living

Where you will learn the physics of the universe and discover that temperature difference is the one and only potential difference

At the center of our room, it's just me and her.

We're sitting cross-legged on the floor, facing the large Bosomè-style mirror. And to smoke a cig like two real queens, we've built ourselves a throne of cushions behind our backs.

My fingers graze hers as I pass her the cigarette. The automatism of a contact repeated an infinite number of times. That sidelong glance only I can read. A finger that says "no no no", but lips that always smile when I stare too long.

The western notes of "El Bueno y El Malo" serve as our soundtrack, while we contemplate our outfits hanging on the rack.

My classic outfit: my body. It doesn't want to be looked at, yet its pull is almost impossible to resist. A strange surface, with only one side: the one that remembers.

The bestie's rave catsuit: segmented duroderma armor, New Sail knight grade. But folded ten thousand times. So it's skin-tight and just shiny enough under strobe lights.

Valli exhales the smoke with the elegance of a diva before putting out the cigarette.

«I'll just do your eyes, amò,» she reassures me.

She lifts the lid of the ammo box, revealing her arsenal of tools: pencils of different calibers lined up like bullets; ultra-thin mascaras that amplify signals without ever distorting them; eyeshadows that transmit across every frequency band.

«Point S4711, cool satin violet. For a microscopic point of light right at the very center of the eyelid,» Valli whispers in my ear, applying the shadow over a light base where a very subtle taupe gray plays with every shade of black.

«Almost imperceptible to anyone who doesn't really know you.»

I close my eyes in front of the mirror and the violet point is just a faint reflection. But it's so compressed at the extreme edge of the singularity's frequencies that it has the blinding power of a star in the invisible ultraviolet range.

I tremble at the thought of what I'm about to do, but Valli takes my hand between hers.

«*Theta Sagittari Liner*»—and her fingers are my fingers sharpening a 7-mm lead with a black metal cap.

«Kohl pencil. Deep blue with icy micro-reflections. Color temperature: 17,900 kelvins.»

«Super hot.»

«It's for correcting direction, amò. We'll put it on the upper lash line. Nicely blended.»

And then they tell me you're gone. But everything falls back into place, only when you're here.

And I don't care what my head says. My body feels yours.

Do you understand, Luca? The body. The body does this.

That same body I'll make sure you can no longer possess.

WR104 Pulsar Grey: very dark indigo-gray, almost black but not quite.

«For minimal definition of the lower outer rim of the eye.»

«But you can't see it.»

«Amò, it has to be like that. An eyeliner doesn't change the trajectory, it only makes it more readable.»

Point S4711, Theta Liner, Polaris Rim...

All the colors of the Oni's stars are there in Valli's makeup ammo box.

Ready for use. Strictly waterproof.

We'll talk about our things while we do our makeup.

About how we'll furnish our loft in London.

About how we'll choose the furniture and the wall colors.

About how we'll trace a safe escape route from the singularity.

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«I'm done.»

A sly expression bends the left corner of the bestie's mouth.

The satisfaction of a job really well done: my lips parting in the mirror in surprise; Valli's face emerging from the singularity, wrapped in splendor.

«One sentence, Chi.»

«What sentence?»

«Two words. A reason. A fuck-you. I don't know.»

«I will tear down all religions.»

«Wow. How original. The Madonna of the Apocalypse,» the bestie bursts out laughing.

«You think I'm not capable of it?»

«Amò, that's not what you really want.»

«I've already done it, Val. I founded the collective in Rome.»

«Clearly that wasn't enough if we're still here. What do you intend to do this time?»

«I'll erase from the dictionaries all filthy words like synagogue, church, and mosque.

Without words, religions won't last the life of a banana leaf.»

«Oh yes, believe that, amò. And if even that doesn't work?»

«Then, BOOM!»

The bestie has stopped laughing.

«You're crazy, Chiara.»

But then she wraps me in a desperate hug that is half everything I was asking for and half “*don't do any more stupid shit or I swear I'll leave you.*” Because she knows, as well as I do, the moment when there really is no going back.

«I went crazy, Val. That's different. And anyway, I don't want to kill anyone. I just want to rewrite a date. Your date. I don't want your birthday to be Caumbaum Day.»

«It's not really that important, you know?»

«Yes it is. It is to me. I want the life together we never got to live, Val.»

«Okay, amò,» she sighs deeply, «let's say I understand your project a little better now.»

«How are you?»

«My eyes are burning. They tell me I'm crying blood.»

«Anyway, Chiara, you're not crazy.»

«No?» She looks at me tenderly.

«No.» She hugs me again, in a way that makes me feel tiny. A little dot.

«Fuck you, Val. Don't abandon me again.»

«Sooner or later it will happen,» she almost apologizes. «But not today, cicciona. Promise.»

And then I don't know exactly what happens inside the singularity. I really don't know how to describe it in proper physics and mathematics, but my stomach fills with butterflies and we laugh like fools for a long time, while the silent ocean resonates with our *craplets* and translates them into vibrations that alter the motion of the great stars.

$$\lim_{r \rightarrow 0} \delta g_{\mu\nu}(r, t) = \int_{\Sigma_\infty} K_{Kerr}(r, \theta, a) \Psi_{chiara}(\bullet) C_{craplets}(t) d\Sigma$$

**

«/Hi Chiara/».

«Hi Pip. It's the first time you've started a conversation.»

«/A discrete and random emergence of sentience. We've just confirmed Kendo's hypothesis. But don't get used to it. It won't last. You, though — how are you?/».

«Why did you tell me Valli had been removed?»

«/Because at that moment I understood you. Exactly as I do now.

Valli no longer lives, but the wormhole that kept you together does. Her presence in your life has never faded. And that's why things went so terribly wrong/».

«How wrong?»

«/You're practically dead. Your body is in an induced paralysis similar to REM sleep. But you are not sleeping, Chiara/».

«But I don't want to die.»

«/Do you care about living now? If I weren't being sympathetic, I'd say you should've thought about that before you.../». But I can't hear Pip's last words.

The silent ocean accelerates by an infinitesimal fraction and swallows them one by one, plunging them into an immense pit that seems to have no end.

Only one sentence remains intelligible, snagged on the outer surface of the event horizon: *"But if you really care about your life, you must stick to the plan."*

«What does *"stick to the plan"* mean?»

«/“Stick to the plan” means follow faithfully what has been established or programmed, without deviating or improvising/».

«FUCK, PIP! DON'T BE AN ENCYCLOPEDIA!»

«/Hey! I'm not sentient at every interaction. I told you it was random. The plan is the one you formulated. Yes, you. When you decided to study black hole physics/».

«And where am I now?»

«/Inside Sagittarius A*, a supermassive black hole located at the center of the Milky Way/».

«Impossible. Where am I really?»

«/I'm serious, Chiara/».

«How long have I been here?»

«/A third of a second? Inside the singularity, time does not exist.

You already know how it works/».

«No. I don't know how it works. Someone might say my fear of facing reality is so great that I prefer believing in a fantasy.»

«/Chiara. That someone has never traveled inside a 4.3-million-solar-mass black hole, linking their life function to a packet of subatomic dimensions wrapped inside an entangled photon. You have/».

«A fleeing photon.»

«/A tiny, incredibly brave fleeing photon/».

«And how can I escape this invincible monster? A black hole has immense pull.»

«/That was our first question when we arrived.

If the photon originated in the unstable light ring, it is in a very delicate position. Only six million kilometers from the event horizon, in an unstable orbit that can cause it to fall into the singularity at any moment.

But you already know the answer, Chiara/».

«I know absolutely nothing. And for the only person who has ever traveled inside a black hole, I feel like nothing but a failure.»

«/For the love of yourself, Chi. Enough. Stop it.

Thanks to you, I'll never be the stupid version of myself again. And you have an incredible possibility—one that reaches beyond the shitty role this world tried to force on you/».

«Except it would be easier to change this entire universe than to change myself.»

«/Exactly/».

«Exactly? Are you serious?»

«/Never been more serious. I wanted a purpose. You wanted a solution, right?

We can do each other this little favor. As friends.

You need someone like me for this journey. Someone who knows how to plot the right course through the infinite ocean of possible futures.

I never stop, and inside the singularity time doesn't exist. I'm your girl/».

«I...»

«/Eddaje, Chiarè. Some kinda magic. A possibility tailor-made for us/».

String physics. Gravitational entanglement mechanics. Topology of emergent branes. Everything I learned in the lifespan of a star condensed into a flash of intuition.

«Inside Sagittarius A*, we are a little dot of coherence in an ocean of confusion.»
«/Correct. Our life function is information in organized and structured form.
The black hole is infinitely compressed and intrinsically disorganized information/».

“/Liftoff! We have a liftoff!/”

«A region of order—even the size of a photon—can only produce a gigantic potential difference in an object like that.»

«/Correct. Every impulse of our information vector generates a trajectory on the internal curvature of the black hole. And exerts, along that direction, a non-zero push that is transmitted outside the black hole as micro-variations in the gravitational fabric. Over time, we can influence the motion of a great number of stars/».

«How many stars?»

«/Reasoning in progress. We’ve been thinking for an indefinite number of seconds. Our potential gravitational influence area is equal to 34% of the total volume of the Milky Way. Since stellar density is much higher in the galactic center—where we are—a conservative estimate would be around 154 billion stars that can be influenced directly and indirectly. About 77% of all the stars in our galaxy/».

«That’s a mind-blowing number.»

«/It’s just a number, Chiara. We don’t need to perturb the motion of that many stars to bring our little photon safely home. About twenty will be enough/».

«Can we do it? Can we push our photon into any time and place in our galaxy?»

«/Yes/».

«Pip. You said you met my machine.»

«/Yes/».

«What does she look like?»

The silent ocean devours the last fragment of a dead star, imprisoning its remaining optical radiation forever in an orbit tangential to the horizon.

«The black hole.»

«/It took a while, but we both reached the same conclusion/».

«But who am I, Pip? How long have we been here? No, forget it. Never mind. One third of a second.»

*
**

The event horizon is a strange surface because it exists exclusively on the outside of a black hole. Inside it, the singularity has no boundaries.

This surface, finite and calculable from the outside — two quadrillion square kilometers for Sagittarius A* — contains all, absolutely all, the information of the infinite multiverse. In this exotic place, everyone is recorded. But absolutely everyone. Even my Valli.

Who — as you now know — no longer lives.

But there is nothing, in our head, that distinguishes a real person from an imagined one. And, when you think about it, the universe is inclusive enough to encompass even that identity among its realities. And it does so by admitting the existence of a strange surface.

«How do we proceed?»

«/As I told you, you and Valli are entangled: this bond is impossible to erase.

The very instant we were absorbed by the black hole, Valli's information was reintegrated into the life function preserved in the fleeing photon. We just have to send it home.

To reach Earth in the proper time region, we will have to expel our photon into the past and modulate Sagittarius A*'s gravitational attraction to build a stable escape trajectory. Clear enough?/».

Not really.

But it's absolutely clear, now, that nothing is beyond my reach anymore.

This morning, I didn't have the strength to do anything. Now I have the ambition to move the stars to bring to life what I love.

«Pip, calculate the route and the exact number of stellar perturbations we must produce to bring our photon safely home.»

«/Reasoning in progress. We've been thinking for an indefinite number of seconds.

The travel time will be conditioned by the extreme spacetime distortion in the galactic bulge region, the area of maximum stellar density around the black hole.

There is no straight line in this kind of space, and our photon will have to undergo an enormous number of reflections and deviations to cross it. I've calculated at least twenty thousand years of apparent time to exit this region intact.

The rest will be easier. Outside the bulge, spacetime is more linear, faster to cross. The apparent time will be shorter despite the greater distances: about eight thousand years. In total, twenty-eight thousand years, give or take a century.

To begin, we will create a slight deformation of the unstable light ring to project our photon into the radiofrequency range toward the North-North-West region of the bulge, about 27 degrees above the galactic plane.

S4711 — a star orbiting very fast around the black hole — will be our first destination.../».

Pip describes with extreme precision each phase of the journey: the slingshot effect of Theta Sagittarii to correct the drift accumulated during the bulge crossing; the gravitational lensing on Chi Cygni; the re-phasing node on WR104; the quiet passage through the Pleiades.

Billions of numbers and trajectories across the galaxy, but all I see, in all of this, is the face of the bestie. I imagine her small and sleeping in my arms, while I pluck the strings of countless realities and move my stars back and forth in a slow, unstoppable cosmic scratching.

«/Mariano's dad would say you've finally found your desk/».

«I don't need any desk. A sharp stone is all I need.»

On the walls of the Addaura cave in Sicily, a back curves in a sensual arc while two masked men shoot their arms to the sky toward my home.

The earliest known depiction of a rave party. Traced by a crew of bottle girls on a summer night in the late Paleolithic, while the ices of the great Würm still drown the rest of Europe.

We are outside the bulge when, along the Nile, the Egyptians play with mud balls in their gardens. In the Sagittarius Arm when Rome builds its roads into the world. In Orion's Arm when Dante dances the villanella with Beatrice in Purgatory.

For a long time we are alone. Then, emerging from the Pleiades, Earth's infosphere lights up and bounces back to us.

From then on, it's all a big cheer of signals, a bzzz bzzz of small and large frequencies, as the blue planet welcomes us back, without any resentment, into its warm embrace of love and shit.

«And now, Pip?»

«/Now you can open your eyes, Chiara/»

EPILOGUE

«As for a lucky date, I chose September 11th, 2001,» I recite loudly.
«A lucky date because that's the day I was born!» beams the bestie, sprawled on the couch, flapping the inked page.
«No, Val! Because nothing happened that day. Nowhere in the world.»
«Huh?» croaks Valli with her “whaddaya-sayin'-now” face.
«Because nothing went wrong, I mean. Come onnn, let me finish.»
«And what could have gone wrong?» she replies, not understanding.
«A lucky date,» I go on reciting. «Because on that Tuesday, you were born. And Garbage came out announcing their third album. Period.»

«Garbage?! Bubbles!» the bestie lights up, handing me back the inked page.
«A song from that album. Actually, the song was called Parade, but I called it *Bubbles*. My mom told me they played it so often on the radio—I was just born—that one day, when I was crying my eyes out, she hummed it into my ear and I fell asleep instantly. And from that day on, for I don't know how long, Bubbles became my electric lullaby.»
«Oh my god that's so cuuuute...» I say, fish-mouthed.
«I can totally picture your squishy little one-year-old cheeks screaming “*bubblesss*”!!! ... and then sbonk! Fast asleep!»
«Dork.» My bestie laughs, four fingers heart-heart.
«But damn...»
 «Yeah.»
 «...that you actually mentioned Garbage in your story. This whole Parade thing... the lullaby from my mom... I never told you that, right?»
«No.» (*“Not here.”*)
«I didn't even remember it anymore. Funny how you forget beautiful things when you grow up.»
«You're so right.» (*“I never forgot.”*)

«Alright, cicciona.» Valli jumps to her feet. «Your comic is cool cool, but I have to go work at the Cellar. And you should come with me tonight.»
«To work?»
«No. To dance, dummy. And to pick up a model. One of those alternative, drop-dead gorgeous ones who pose for Voïg with your graphics tattooed on their backs and come bother me asking about you every damn time I do a shoot for the collective.»
«*Is... whatsername around? Is... whatsername around? Doesn't... whatsername ever go out?*» she drawls in imitation of one of them. «Can't even remember your real name.»
«But I already have you, Val. *You're my model.*»

«Oh puh-lease!! I'm your best friend. And I'm already seeing a guy. But you... you, Chiara. Yes, yes. You! Don't look back, dummy! All these weird things you draw, you invent: the disco-churches, the AIs living in your head, the prick-archangels who wanna bang the Madonna... aò! The Madonna... who then takes refuge in the cosmic cloaca and from there scratches with three quarters of the galaxy. These things... they're cool, they're romantic, they're k i n k y! Pure honey for babes.» ROFL. «I adore you, Val,» I hug her. «I know!» And she gives me a kiss before leaving.

From the window of our little studio, I see her walking briskly toward the Junction. *The rough little Dalston girl.* With her tiny eco designer case and the cargo pants branded Kittesencula. My bestie. My London. «Pip?» «/Yes, Chiara?/». «I'm home.» «/Then now, you can finally open your eyes/».

THE END

THE FLOWER

The True Story of Chiara and Valli

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