ONE

I had an active, carefree childhood. If I try to live it again in my memory, rekindle it in my conscious mind, I always fail. I see the child I was at six, at ten years old, but it is as if I am dreaming her. It is a lovely dream, delicate and vibrant as a piece of music, clothed in light. The least recall to present-day reality can dispel it. But it leaves me with a sense of enormous joy.

For a long time, in the darkest periods of my life, I looked back to my earliest years as if they had been perfect, completely happy. Now, with less anxious eyes, I look back and can see that even then I was troubled, that even as a little girl I never believed myself entirely happy; though never wretched either—I'm sure I always felt independent and strong. I was the eldest child and confidently asserted the authority this gave me over my brother and two sisters. My father made it obvious that I was his favourite, and I was aware of how much he wanted me to improve and progress as I grew older. I was healthy, graceful, and intelligent—everyone told me so—and I had games, sweets, books, and a piece of garden all to myself. My mother never denied me anything. Even the friends I played with unquestioningly accepted my leadership.

The only thing that dominated me was love for my father. I took my love for my mother for granted, but for him I felt boundless admiration, and I was aware of this difference in my feelings without every trying to explain it. *He* was my model; everything that made life seem worth living belonged to him, and I believed without doubt that his charm had been given him by the gods. There was no one who could equal him; he

knew everything and was always right. When I walked beside him along the city streets or in the countryside beyond the city walls, holding on to his hand for hours upon end, I felt extraordinarily elated—nothing else could possibly matter. He told me stories about my grandparents (they had died just after I was born) and about his childhood and the wonderful things he had done; he told me that when he was only eight he had seen French soldiers arriving in Turin, "before Italy was unified." What a glamorous past! When I looked up I could see him, tall, slender, and agile, his proud head held high, the smile of a young conqueror on his lips. At these moments the future seemed filled with promises of adventure.

He supervised my homework and my reading, although he never demanded much effort of me. When my schoolteachers came to visit us they seemed amazed at his knowledge, and often treated him, I thought, with profound respect. I was one of the best pupils in the school. Occasionally I suspected that this was because I was in some way a privileged child. Even in my first year I observed differences between my clothes, the food in my lunchbox and those of my friends; I began to work out what sort of families they came from—workers oppressed by the harsh rigour of factory life, or shopkeepers who had never had an education. When I went home I could see my father's name and status inscribed on a polished plate beside our door.

I was born in a small, impoverished town where father was a science teacher. When I was five he quarrelled with his employers and lost his job, so he went to work for a brother-in-law, the owner of a large business in Milan. I realised that he could not have been very satisfied with this new situation because he still spent all his free time in an untidy little room where he kept all his equipment for experiments in physics and chemistry. I was convinced that only in that room did he ever feel really happy. My father taught me so many things!

Although as a child I was rarely impatient, I was intensely

curious, and this sharpened my appetite for living. I was never bored. Sometimes when mamma went out to visit her friends in the afternoon I would refuse to go, staying at home instead to loll in an armchair and read any book I could lay my hands on. I found many books incomprehensible, but some were like wine to my imagination, transporting me into a different world. Occasionally I paused as I tried to find words for the confused ideas my reading had suggested; sometimes I spoke these words out loud, as if reciting lines of verse welling up from an unknown source; and then I would blush, just as I blushed in that same armchair when I experimented with languid poses, making believe that I was a beautiful, seductive woman. I doubt if I was able to tell what were my real feelings and what was fantasy. Father greeted all manifestations of the poetic spirit with an indifference verging on contempt: he claimed that such ideas were beyond his understanding, and although Mother sometimes recited verses of out-dated lyrical poetry or passionately declaimed fragments of old epics, she never did so when he was there—and I always thought his judgments more trustworthy than hers.

Even when he flared up in one of his tempers I believed that he was in the right—although they terrified us all and threw me into a state of unutterable anguish. Mother, suppressing her tears, would flee to her room. She often seemed humiliated and discouraged when Father was there. All the same, it was he, not she, whose authority we children respected.

Yet I do not remember them having any serious quarrels in front of us: only occasional complaints or bitter criticisms or angry questions. Usually, Father's tantrums seemed provoked by our naughtiness or a servant's carelessness, but even so mamma seemed to feel responsible and she would hang her head as she listened, as if suddenly exhausted. Or else she would smile. How I hated that smile and the way it deformed her beautiful, resigned mouth!

I wonder if at times like these she remembered that in the past things had been different.

She rarely talked to me about her childhood, but from what she did say I formed a picture far less interesting than the one my father's memories conjured up. Her father had been a white-collar worker, and her family had lived in very modest circumstances. Like my father's mother, her mother gave birth to many children, most of whom now lived abroad. I gathered she had grown up in poverty, without much love, a family Cinderella. She had met papa at a ball when she was twenty. Once she showed me a picture of him as he was then: he still looked a boy, with a sweet, handsome face. Only his eyes betrayed his indomitable will. It was the year before he left university. As soon as he graduated he accepted a teaching post and they married.

Within a year of the wedding I was born. Whenever my mother talked to me about the two small furnished rooms they had first lived in, her face, normally so pale and aloof, became radiant. I couldn't understand why she didn't look so enthusiastic and happy all the time. Nor could I understand why she cried so easily when it was obvious that Father couldn't stand the sight of her tears, nor why, if ever she plucked up the courage to express an opinion, it was always different from his. Why did we children fear her so little and obey her so seldom? Sometimes she lost her temper with us just as Father did, but in her it always triggered off violent sobs, as if she had held back her tears for too long. Father's irritation might be excessive, but always seemed natural; Mother's outbursts against us or the servants always seemed to contrast painfully with her normal gentleness—like convulsions which took her unawares and which she instantly regretted.

I saw my mother's eyes glistening with unshed tears so many times: they stirred up in me an almost uncontrollable sense of unease, a feeling which was not pity or pain or humiliation but rather the terrible frustration of realising that I

could not respond properly, could not prevent happening what was about to happen. Yet I had no real idea of what that might be. When I was eight I became aware of a strange anxiety: perhaps I didn't have a "real" mother, the sort I had read about in books, who gave their children superabundant happiness through their love, and the confidence of constant protection. This fear gave way two or three years later to the realisation that I couldn't give my mother all the love I would have wished to give her. It must have been this fear which held me back from examining the reasons for the constant feeling of distress in our household, and prevented me from demonstrating my spontaneous affection. For I wanted so much to throw my arms around my mother in the hope that I would be understood and to promise that when I was older I would look after her, thus sealing the same pact of mutual tenderness and support I had sealed with my father so long ago.

I could tell that she admired me, although she never told me so. She was as proud of me as once she had been of her husband—she thought we had the same iron will. All the same she didn't approve of the education he so ardently wanted for me. She was worried for me, fearing that I would grow up devoid of emotions, fated to live only through my intellect. Yet she lacked the courage to argue openly with him about it.

Yet I didn't feel that Father made any real attempt to understand me either. At times I felt completely alone. Then I withdrew into daydreams, the secret mainstay of my inner world.

I was beginning to learn the meaning of shame. A hidden life grew inside me, parallel to my everyday existence but quite different from it. In my first year at school I started to think about my character and realised that it was made up of different elements. There, I was angelic, even exemplary—a girl with a tranquil face and timid smile, always attentive. But once outside the school gates I took a deep breath as if trying to fill my lungs with every molecule of the air around me, and

danced off down the street, babbling nonsense, entering our house like a whirlwind; and all the other children would have to stop their play and prepare to submit to my autocratic demands.

Yet I forgot them all when the time came to do my homework, and went alone to my room or into the garden, returning happily to my books and to the challenge of intellectual effort. It was sheer pleasure: competition with my schoolfriends and desire for prizes never entered into it.

After that mamma would come to me, and before I went to bed we would recite together a short prayer in our dear Northern dialect I loved so much: "Oh Lord, help me to grow strong and to be a consolation to my parents." Then I would be left in the dark next to my sister, who was already asleep. And I would feel such a sense of calm and contentment, beyond the merely physical, that it was as if in that moment, lying constrained by darkness, silence, and stillness, I was more free than I had been throughout the entire day.

I liked looking into the darkness. It held no fears for me because my father had told me that I would find witches and bogeymen only in fairy tales: like the devil, they didn't exist. I would think about the events of the day, remember Father's seductive smile, Mother's hands as they moved in a gesture of annoyance, my own irritability with the younger children and their stupidity, and I would speculate on what the next day would bring: exam results, outings, new books, new games, new friends, new teachers to be turned into allies.

I prayed every evening because my mother wanted it. I prayed to God . . .

When I was in my second year at elementary school I heard someone refer contemptuously one day to another girl who sat near me in class as a "Jewess." She turned white, but didn't reply. After a while she burst into tears, and when the schoolteacher found out what had happened she was very angry. I was astonished by this incident because I had never

heard of differences in race or religion. But something my schoolteacher said astonished me even more. She argued that all religions were worthy of respect because they all brought men nearer to God; the only people who should horrify us were the *atheists,* and even they deserved our pity. Immediately I thought of my father. I was sure he was an atheist. He often talked about atheism, and he never went to church. Did that mean that as far as my teacher, my friends, everyone was concerned he was an object of pity?

I still worried about this as I lay in the silence of my bedroom three or four years later. Father was now more open with me about what he considered a time-honoured lie. He told me that before there were men on earth other creatures had lived here who were similar to us, and that they had been preceded by other animals and by plants and that before any of these had existed the earth had been a desert. He told me that our earth was only a small point in space, similar to the stars we saw in the sky, and that those stars were really other worlds which might be inhabited by other beings. He told me all these things so naturally that it never occurred to me to doubt him.

All the same he never explained, and nor did I ask, why it was that we existed on this earth. The answers in the school catechism seemed more satisfactory. We existed because there was a God who made us, watched over us from on high, and took us to heaven if we were good. Our lives were merely a passage.

Yet people seemed to attach so much importance to this passage! Although no one took the idea of hell very seriously, everyone seemed afraid of hurting themselves or falling ill and dying. I was prepared to agree with papa that hell didn't exist: no angel or tempter had ever stood at my shoulder—if I was good it was because I wanted to be, if I felt guilty it was because I had done something wrong. Even so . . . my mother, my father, my teachers, the workers in the streets, everybody in fact, even the rich and powerful, worked day and night to earn

money which they then spent on food which they ate so that they wouldn't die. Yet days passed, and weeks and months, and they did die; and the same would be true of myself and my brother and my sisters.

It was a worrying thought, but I could feel sleep creeping over me. I would have the same useless thoughts again tomorrow night. Would I ever find an answer to them? As I lay half asleep mysterious words crowded into my ear: "eternity," "progress," "universe," "consciousness".... They danced together until even their sounds became confused. I thought back to the troubled expression on my teacher's face. I wondered if mamma went to church on Sundays because she really believed or because of her strange fear of other people. And then I remembered an evening in May, the one and only time I had ever been to hear a sermon. I remembered an altar shimmering with lilies and wax candles, a monk waving his arms imperiously in a pulpit as his voice descended on the kneeling congregation, telling them about the miracles some saint had been able to perform: everyone seemed to believe him. As he finished, an organ started to play, accompanied by an invisible choir which intoned an anthem like a pure stream of silver from on high. I shivered to hear them, and shivered once more whenever I remembered this experience. I felt unutterably sad that I didn't know how to pray; I felt painfully aware of my own isolation. But this feeling quickly vanished. After all, why should I complain? I might be young, but I didn't want to be deceived. I would understand everything one day, when I was grown up.

I could hear my sister breathing evenly in the bed beside me. What was she dreaming about? Was it the crystal doll's house I had promised her if she left me more space in the bed? I had no idea how I would find it for her.... But when I was older—*then* I would be more loving towards my brother and my sisters. I would stop making them cry so much, and Mother would become more cheerful...

In the meantime I must sleep; I was tired. I wished for a puff of wind to come and blow me to the top of one of the mountains I had seen on holiday that summer. I had loved them so much. I was sure I could hear their bells in the distance calling to me . . .

TWO

One morning, just as I was wondering what my parents would decide about my education after I had finished elementary school, my father suddenly arrived home from work an hour early. A clerk followed him, carrying a trunk on his shoulders. Father picked me up for a moment and looked into my face; then he said to Mother, who was watching him anxiously, "Well, that's over with . . . I've finished with him. At last I can breathe."

For some time now the brothers-in-law had been finding it increasingly difficult to get on with each other. Their personalities were so different that they constantly ended up in conflict: as soon as one took an initiative the other applied the brakes. Office routine bored my father, too, and he felt that his salary was too low to give him adequate compensation. That morning a trivial incident had sparked off a violent argument, which brought their partnership to an end.

At thirty-six Father was starting his life all over again. Just as the last time, his thirst for new excitement and independence was driving him on.

That morning he took me out for a long walk. I have a confused memory of the vast Piazza d'Armi lying veiled in autumn mist while my father talked and talked, almost to himself, and I grew silently more and more elated. America . . . Australia . . . Oh, if only he would take us around the world! He hinted at less adventurous possibilities too—going back to teaching, starting a business—but always away from Milan. Until then I had loved the city without really thinking about it,

but from that moment I found it unbearable. A host of new enchantments lay in wait for me elsewhere, and Father was beginning to take me into his confidence. I seemed to have grown in years and in importance. All my plans for future study simply melted away. Why, I might be called upon to go out to work in order to support the family! As I gazed up into Father's face he must surely have seen the light of enthusiasm sparkling in my eyes.

But when we returned home Mother was like a lost soul. I couldn't understand what she had to fear. She was still a young woman: she was younger than papa; she had strong, healthy children.... And I could tell that Father wanted her to be more courageous!

A few weeks later a man who wanted to build a chemical plant in the South asked Father to be the factory manager, but even that didn't reassure mamma. It was true that Father would be taking a big risk if he accepted the job: he had no experience of that kind of work. It was the cheery confidence of his smile that had seduced the man who was putting up the capital, and he offered Father an excellent contract which would allow us to spend the next few years in a sunny climate. Father had never been one to look very far into the future. For the moment he felt happy just to be taking a risk. He paid no attention to Mother's anxieties and agreed that we would leave in the spring.

Oh, the sun, the sun! There was so much dazzling sun! In this new landscape everything sparkled; the sea was a broad band of silver, the sky an endless smile above me, which wrapped me in its infinite blue embrace and made me see, for the first time, how beautiful the world could be. The green meadows of Brianza and Piedmont, the Alpine valleys I had glimpsed as a child, with their placid lakes and charming gardens, were as nothing compared to this immensity of space, this abundant miracle of water and sea breezes. My eager lungs inhaled all

that clear air, all its salty savour: I ran along the beach underneath the sun, defying the waves and feeling that at any moment I might change into one of the great white birds I saw skimming the foam before they disappeared over the horizon. After all, wasn't I really just like them?

Oh, how happy I was that summer! How I rejoiced in my beautiful, carefree adolescence!

I was twelve. In our village (dignified by the locals to the status of a town) there was only an elementary school. A schoolmaster was brought in to give me lessons, but was quickly dismissed because he was unable to teach me more than I already knew. So I chose a large room in our enormous new house as my study, and stayed there during the noonday heat, leafing unenthusiastically through the fat textbooks on botany, physics, and foreign grammar which Father had given to me. If I went out on to our balcony I could look down at the people who habitually loitered in front of the chemist's shop and the bar in the square below: there were peasant women whose lives seemed weighed down by intolerable burdens, and unkempt youths who wrangled with each other in their sonorous, incomprehensible dialect. Beyond the square the sea glittered. And just before sunset I was able to pick out in the distance the sails of fishing boats making their way back to port. As they gradually drew near they glowed red and yellow, following each other into the harbour, and the babble of fishermen's voices carried right up to me; I could hear the rhythmic chanting of the men who dragged the boats ashore.

If I went out, I would run to the huge building site by the railway line where the new factory was springing up with incredible rapidity, and where Father was almost always to be found. Sometimes he found me little jobs to do. I carried them out anxiously, exact to the last detail. "You'll help me later on as well, won't you?" he used to ask. "Would you like to be my secretary when everything is ready?" My old shyness was now struggling with a new sense of independence and boldness.

Father may only have been trying to compensate me for the education he had brought to an end, but unnoticed by anyone else I was developing a pride of my own. I felt that I was now in contact with real life, and believed that the things I saw around me were far more complex and absorbing than anything I could read about in a book.

The building workers were handsome and sun-tanned peasants who had come from the surrounding countryside looking for work. There were girls, too, who scaled the scaffolding like acrobats, balancing buckets of lime on their heads. They smiled when they saw me, and I felt a sort of comradeship for them, overridden by a strong sense of curiosity. When I went home I recited their romantic-sounding nicknames to the younger children and wondered if I would ever dare order them around the way I did the maids.

Father was totally suited to his new job—firm and decisive, full of energy, always involved in his work. Sometimes after our evening meal we would walk with him along the main streets of our village. The local people watched us from their doorsteps with a mixture of admiration and fear; they thought my mother a picture of the Madonna come to life, and we heard women's voices following us, murmuring blessings on her children. Small and delicate in her unpretentious clothes, she thanked them with a gentle smile. At times like these even she seemed happy, and she watched her husband with a respect verging on veneration, as if she were discovering anew how fascinating he could be.

I remember a photograph of myself taken a year later, when I started to work regularly in the factory office. I was wearing an odd assortment of clothes—a straight-cut jacket with lots of small pockets for my watch, pencil, and notebook, over a short skirt. My hair fell in curls over my forehead but had been cut short at the back, making me look like a young boy—at my father's suggestion I had sacrificed my glossy pigtails with their golden gleams. My odd appearance reflected

clearly the way I thought of myself: no longer a girl, but as yet with no proper sense that I was a woman. I thought of myself as a conscientious worker, and drew confidence from the importance of my job. Just to feel useful was a source of endless satisfaction, and carried out my father's orders with absolute loyalty and fierce devotion. I was as absorbed as he was in all the factory's problems, and was never bored by my task of entering figures in a ledger for hours upon end. But watching the labourers at their work or chatting to them in their brief breaks was like looking in on some fascinating game. There were over two hundred workers. One group came from Piedmont, and they kept the furnaces going day and night. The rest, local men, moved constantly about the yards, and in and out of the sheds. It was clear that not all the men liked me, yet when they saw me appear suddenly, with my rather severe expression, it seemed nevertheless to give them some sort of pleasure. They conveyed this by consciously moving more briskly, creating for a moment the illusion that they gladly accepted their work.

Father terrified them, and they believed that I was more reasonable than he, so by naïve flattery they tried to get into my good books, hoping that I might use my influence with him on their behalf. But I knew that it would be useless to try to relax his rigorous discipline, and in any case, like him, I considered it necessary. All I ever tried to do was to get them to accept him, even attempting to persuade them by using my own obedience as an example. Perhaps Father was aware of this. On the short walk between the factory and our house he talked to me with a note in his voice which only I ever heard—a tone not especially affectionate or gentle, but calm, relaxed, and untroubled. "Let's try things this way, or that..." he would say, "then let's raise the wages a little." He seemed to be asking for my opinion, and I was acutely aware of how happy it made me to be asked to help solve his problems. For both of us the factory had taken on the power of a monster in a fairy tale:

it demanded our total commitment, it steadied our nerves even though it made us dizzy with fear and excitement, and it dominated us completely even though we believed that we were its masters.

When I went home in the evenings I felt as dissatisfied as I had been as a child coming home from school. I felt I didn't really belong there, and allowed my sense of isolation to show through my obvious contempt for the others. I was like a young man recently come of age who is full of arrogant complaints about the servants. My voice had the same superior ring as I pointed out how thoughtless my brother and sisters were, how they neglected their homework, and how mamma lacked the calm authority which might have made them more disciplined. The servants must have told hair-raising stories about me. I was never seen with a needle in my hand, was rarely at home, and showed no interest in helping with the housework.

Then there were my tantrums: they could only be compared to my father's. Perhaps I was too highly strung and these eruptions marked some slight relaxation of my nervous tension, or perhaps they were simply the sign of adolescent crises. Wherever they came from, they were as much a mystery to me as to those around me. My only way of dealing with them was to leave the house, hurl myself into a mad race along the beach, and draw in great gulps of air, to return calmer, having erased the memory of my own anger. But in the process I would also have forgotten my mother's distress during my scenes.

My mother! I can hardly believe how much I neglected her. At this stage of my life I hardly thought about her at all. From the moment we arrived in that place she started to go into a slow decline, but I have no recollection of its stages. From the outset she suffered from a crippling timidity which even prevented her from going alone or with her children to the beach or into the fields. The district offered no other form of relaxation. The local middle-class women, ignorant, lazy,

and superstitious, rarely left their homes. The peasant women worked harder than their husbands, and most of the community lived by and from the sea, huddled together in shacks only a hundred metres from the water's edge.

She had no interest in the factory either, and so found no distraction in its problems. Personally I was quite pleased about this because I was not sure that she would have approved of everything that I did there, but it also made me feel, even more than in Milan, that her tastes and interests were totally alien to those of my father and therefore to mine. I also sensed that this difference was at the root of the bad feeling between them, the mutual dissatisfaction which they were not always able to hide. Not that I let this perception disturb me: I evaded such worrying thoughts and never tried to work out what lay behind them. Perhaps I was afraid to find out things I was too young to understand, but I did observe one small incident which made me begin to realise that perhaps my father didn't love my mother as much as he did me.

It happened towards the end of our first winter there. Mamma, papa, and myself had been invited to the provincial capital to have dinner and then go to the theatre with the factory owner and his wife, who had paid us a visit during the summer. As the sun began to set the time to catch the train drew nearer. When father came home I was dressed and ready, and in no time he was ready too. But Mother hovered in front of the mirror, doubtful about her evening dress, which she had not worn for a long time. She was passing the powder-puff across her face over and over again, when father, irritated by the delay, appeared once more in the doorway to their room.

I can still see the room, the mirror, the window through which seemed to filter not the glow of sunset but the sea's reflection, gray and troubled. And I can still hear, quivering in the air, a phrase hurled like a knife: "Must I conclude, then, that you are nothing but a flirt?"

Half an hour later in the train I was shivering still, unable either to criticise papa or to defend mamma. Then suddenly I saw her face, turned towards the compartment door, running with tears. Was she re-living that bitter moment? Or remembering many others like it? Or was she distressed because I had witnessed the insult? I began to think of her, for the first time, as a sick woman, melancholy and weak, who didn't want to be cured or even acknowledge that anything was wrong. In the books I had picked up at home I had read about love and about hatred; I had observed our neighbours' friendships and antagonisms; I thought that I knew a lot about life. But I could not explain to myself why our family life was so miserable.

Months passed. Mother became increasingly sad. Father's concern for her diminished; their walks together became rarer. And I, although no longer a child, went on living my life as though nothing threatened it. Why? I can't explain my blindness simply by my continuing absorbed admiration for my father. Perhaps Mother was too ashamed of her illness, too pained by it, to want to confide in me, young as I was and devoted to the man who hurt her so. Or perhaps she had decided to leave explanations to the future, relying wearily and ambivalently on the arrival of some providential opportunity.

Even though, at Father's insistence, she no longer went to church and so gave sanctimonious women cause for gossip, she was so well-bred and so polite that the local people respected and liked her all the same. Perhaps from the very beginning they had concluded that she must be unhappy with a husband like my father and a daughter like me—for in no time my father had aroused obdurate hostility locally. He was the only rich man in the neighbourhood, apart from the owner of the factory, who mainly lived in Milan, and a count who owned nearly all the land in the area but rarely appeared there (when he did appear, with his wife laden with jewels like some pagan idol, men and women would bow down as they passed until

they almost touched the soil). The middle class comprised professional men, including a handful of lawyers who fomented long lawsuits in which they ensnared the small farmers who were already bled dry by taxes. Together with a few priests and police officers, they were the leaders of our community. But Father never gave any sign of having noticed them. Worse than that, he rejected out of hand a dinner they proposed to give in his honour, and refused to become chairman of some ancient and pompous local institution which needed funds. Such behaviour was unheard of—as unusual, and almost as offensive, as his systematic refusal of the gifts people brought him. I often saw women leaving our doorstep distraught and bewildered because he would not accept the chickens they had hoped might soften his attitude to their sons.

It was the working people who were the most attractive members of the community, for all their lethargy and lack of education. At least they seemed to have a certain instinctive goodness. Their only complaint against "the director," as they called him, was that his standards of discipline (greatly exaggerated by word of mouth) were unprecedented.

At first my father responded to this general antipathy by laughing at it. But as he gradually came to know the local workforce he grew bitterly resentful. He was most incensed by the prevailing hypocrisy, and the more isolated he became the more implacable were his judgments. He exaggerated the difference between this almost oriental people and his fellow northerners. They seemed to press in on him; he felt surrounded by squalor. Perhaps he was unconsciously reacting to the fear of being assimilated or seeing his children assimilated into the community, but as a result he was finally unable to be objective. He so overestimated his own superiority that his contempt developed into provocation. At first he wanted to employ only Piedmontese workers in the factory—to found a kind of colony. The owner refused to let him—for economic reasons, but also from prudence. Nevertheless, all the skilled

craftsmen were from the North, and they and their families lived in an isolated group, much distrusted by the indigenous workers.

I, too, used to measure the distance between ourselves and the "others" and found it enormously exciting. When I hurried home from the factory with my red cap pulled over my short hair I could hear people talking about me as I passed. There were the usual idlers outside the bar who watched me, grinning. I seemed to arouse their curiosity, yet also to deprive them of their usual pleasure in seeing the local girls pass by, timid, cautious, yet flattered by their interest. These men made me detest the place. I only liked it for its extraordinary natural beauty, of which I never tired. I became infected by a strange nostalgia for Milan—strange because I had left the city without a pang—which I only ever voiced in letters to my girl friends. When I looked back to my own north country, now veiled by memory, it seemed desirable and full of magic. I longed for the inexhaustible city and the thronging crowds which gave it such vitality. I would try to recapture it in its most typical moods, summoning up sharp images, making believe that I was still there, a little girl, holding my father's hand as we walked in fog or dusty sunlight. These memories of my childhood city were shot through with a sense of unutterable regret, so intense that sometimes as I reminisced I trembled uncontrollably.

Papa took me to Rome and Naples as a reward for my first winter "in service," and this desire for the city, where "life" really existed, blazed up inside me again. For the first time in two years I moved among crowds and met people whose faces were marked by intellectual activity and lively intelligence. I felt a child again: insignificant, ill at ease, but eager to learn from everything and everyone around me. I suspect that this experience had a much greater emotional impact on me than did any art gallery or wonderful landscape. My letters to my mother and the diary of our journey which Father

encouraged me to keep were full of naïve observations, ecstatic comments, and childish criticisms, but the intensity of my emotional response continually showed through.

That holiday was the crowning point of my triumphant adolescence. I remember it only indistinctly, bathed as it is in too vivid a light. The images I recall are piled on top of each other, like the syllables of a new word which might hold the key to existence. I made them a part of myself, gravely, yet with surprise; I could feel a new warmth snaking through my veins, a languor for which I could find no cause, a longing for tenderness and for wider horizons . . . yet in the present I felt only lethargy; did all this mean that I was about to enter a new phase in my life?

THREE

It was our third September in the town. The bathing season had been and gone, no different from the ones before. As far as I remember I divided my time between the exhausting pleasure of swimming ever longer and more daring distances, and reading too much, which tired my brain and left me with a vague feeling of discontent.

I remember nothing special from that summer about what I felt for my mother, brother, sisters, or friends, nor even my father. But one evening we gave a sort of party for summer visitors and local families. It must have been Father's idea. Three rooms of the house were taken over and decorated with plants and lanterns. About forty people came: women from Rome and Naples, their eyes gleaming with amusement at our provincial ways; soberly dressed men, watching my father curiously as he played host; some clerks from the office; and the local school teachers with their families. Young and old danced to a small band. As the eldest daughter I had to join in, although I did so reluctantly because dancing gave me a headache. I felt I was being singled out by the boys, and their hesitant approaches amused me. In the interval between one dance and the next I caught myself watching my parents. Father, an enthusiastic and excellent dancer, seemed a young man again, his good humour catching everyone's attention. As his tall figure wove its way through the couples he once more symbolised for me simple, joyful energy. I wondered if my mother was happy that evening. Wrapped in a dress of black lace glittering with seed pearls, she brought back memories of

years past, of evenings when I had watched her leave for the theater on my father's arm, timid but proud in her elegant clothes. She was still graceful; that evening she looked no more than thirty.

Yet her behaviour made me suspect that she had now completely lost her self-confidence, although I couldn't imagine why. It was only by making a huge effort that she was able to follow the games and conversations. Whether this was equally obvious to papa and our guests, I could not tell.

I got up just before eight the next morning. Passing Mother's room and thinking she was still in bed, I knocked to see if there was anything I could do for her. I heard her wearily call me to come in. Father was still asleep: I could see his face turned towards the door. But her face was indistinct among the pillows and the bedclothes, and so I closed the door and went to have breakfast with my brother and sisters.

Some time elapsed. Then a cry, followed by many more, and a great shout from the square below, made me leap up from the table. Before I had time to reach the window the noise shifted to the foot of the stairs and I ran back towards the door, followed by the maid and the children. I could hear shouts of surprise and alarm, and feet shuffling as if people were carrying something heavy. The maid, hurrying to the staircase, screamed, then turned back quickly to shield us from the sight, and hustled us into the dining room. But I saw my mother's body being carried by two men. It was white, half-naked. Someone had thrown a cloth over it, which, dangling down, accentuated the limpness of her arms, feet, and hair. A crowd of people followed behind. I thought I was going mad.

But I wasn't mad. It really was my mother. Her eyes were closed, her face white as death, and there were red stains along one arm and down her side. Father came out of the bedroom. He wasn't fully dressed and seemed utterly bewildered. As he clutched his forehead his face filled with fear. After that I remember nothing because I fainted.

When I revived I heard a babble of women's voices discussing what had happened. They had seen a white figure on our balcony and in the sunlight had mistaken it for one of the children. Although they signalled to it to go back, the figure leaned forward, then let itself go, plummeting to the ground.

The doctor came. I went with him into the bedroom, where mother lay motionless on the bed. Father, completely distraught, was standing beside her, wringing his hands. When he saw me he let out a great sob, the first I had ever heard from him, and then collapsed on to a chair, pulling me between his knees and burying his face in my shoulder.

I was overwhelmed by an unbearable sense of loss. The strength of Father's emotion filled me with terror; I had a secret foreboding that this was only the first of many such dreadful moments. I didn't want him to let go of me. For the first time in my life I wished I could close my eyes and disappear. I could think of nothing to say—could not even ask whether she was still alive.

She was alive. Miraculously, her head and body had been unhurt. Only her left arm was broken. She was unconscious for three days, and afterwards refused to say anything about what had happened. One evening Father pleaded with her on his knees to talk to him about it, but she would not. All she would say was, "You must forgive me, forgive me..." We were all together in the room. Father wept, and to this day I don't know which was the more heart-rending—his tears or my sick mother's faint speech, coming as if from the dead.

I wanted to believe that she had done it in a fit of madness, though even this thought frightened me. Father, subdued and trembling in the darkened room, sounded passionately sincere when he asked her what had provoked such despair. She gazed at him silently. I had the strange feeling that she was waiting for an explanation from him... Yet I was convinced that he had no idea what he had to reproach himself for.

She was in bed for two months, wracked by a fever which

threatened cerebral congestion, present as never before, yet absent too as if she had finally renounced us. An ominous atmosphere spread through the house, something different from our anxiety about her continuing illness. Hard as we tried to resist this mood, it continued to grow. The younger children were not so aware of it—they simply lived through the sadness. But I noticed, at first uneasily and then with alarm, that although my mother was slowly growing stronger, there was a peculiar insistent sluggishness about her, that there were gaps in her memory, and that she reacted with either excessive affection or hostility to those around her. However, I kept myself busy running the house, working a few hours a day in the office, reading, and writing letters. I certainly made no effort to examine these new perceptions or try to resolve the conflicts they produced in me. I felt sorry for my father and watched over my mother with vigilant care, as if by doing so I might be able to charm away her new symptoms, so afraid was I of her illness. By that time I was certain that I loved them both, but now I had developed a new anxiety. Gradually I convinced myself that from now on I was alone with my feelings, quite separate from these two people, and though I cared about them and pitied them, I felt I did not know them, and certainly that I did not dare pass judgement on them.

By the end of the winter Mother's recovery was almost complete. Only the arm she had broken was still weak. It had had to be re-set twice because of the incompetence of the surgeon, and she couldn't move her hand properly. Constantly fatigued, and old before her time, she seemed more demoralised and crushed than ever. Tears came to her eyes every time my youngest sister kissed her crippled hand. She seemed to have returned to us a child, a frightened child, trapped in the memory of her own mistakes.

Father had mastered his distress as soon as she was definitely out of danger, and seemed to regain his self-control. But he began to be absorbed in long, silent meditation and, not

daring to interrupt him, I too would sit and think. I thought about the past and for the first time tried to explore it for clues which, linked together, would offer some explanation of the present.

I began to realise that the conflicts between these two people I loved so much were of a completely different quality from the arguments I sometimes had with my father. They seemed to have deeper roots, and to come from something inevitable and invincible. It threw new light on some of my own antagonism to certain people and the things they did. Once upon a time Father must have loved that poor creature very much, and now, in his silent isolation, he must be recalling a past of which I knew nothing. But I felt sure that by now their happiness existed only as a memory. Furthermore, I could no longer believe that my parents would learn to find new strength in loving each other or that they would re-establish family ties.

Although Father was very considerate, even affectionate, with Mother and controlled his temper, he accepted her persistent melancholy with a certain resignation. As for her, she seemed weighed down with shame, heartbroken, yet longing for reconciliation.

One day, when the house was full of sunlight, they stayed closeted together for more than an hour in the little room where Father now slept alone. When they emerged Mother's face was flushed, and she was smiling the misty smile of a young girl. I hadn't seen her look like that for a long time. She stared at me as if she didn't recognise me. But Father looked miserable and refused to meet my eyes.

During the following weeks I was often to feel disturbed by the sight of my mother resting wearily against my father's shoulder. I was sure he was avoiding me. Indeed, he seemed to be avoiding us all, gradually making hs escape from the house, almost without anyone being aware of it.

That spring dragged past. Sometimes in the cool twilight

I felt overcome by a need to weep in anguish, to break down. Where had the carefree days of childhood gone: Why was Father cutting himself off from me? Couldn't he tell how I was suffering? Didn't he love me any more? Oh, I was sure he didn't. I seemed to be losing confidence in him, in myself, in life altogether.

But slowly youth and optimism reasserted themselves. I went on with my work and wrote long letters to my friends, expressing a new found asceticism. I flirted naïvely with the Piedmontese workers—perhaps to offset my irritation with local people and local things.

And I was changing physically. My features and movements were now less awkward. My face grew brighter, more expressive. It was my father who first made me examine myself anxiously in the mirror. One evening I heard him say to himself, in joy and amazement, "She's going to be a beauty. . ." I didn't really believe it, but it gave me unutterable pleasure.

Others also noticed my transformation. There was a handsome young man who came from the village and worked in the office alongside me. I enjoyed his company and made friends with him. When we were left alone in the breaks between one job and the next we would argue cheerfully and exchange jokes. Before that spring he had always treated me with respect, even if he had often been mildly sarcastic. But now he began to pay me compliments. At first, his new attitude amused me. He told me the local gossip and repeated everything his friends said about me. One of them, he claimed, was in love with me and wanted to carry me off. This was common practice in those parts, where rape would be followed by marriage. I treated it as a joke and dropped hints about my father, whose name easily struck terror. But afterwards I was annoyed to find myself meeting the eyes of my self-styled lover.

The young man in the office also told me that the priest had made several references to our family from the pulpit, and

had claimed that my mother's troubles were a judgement from God. He swore that some of the old ladies made the sign of the cross whenever I passed. They called me an "imp of Satan" and thought me a strange, even dangerous person possessing mysterious qualities. The men, on the other hand, admired me, according to him, and he was determined to make me aware of their flattery. It seemed to give him pleasure just to tell me about it. I didn't know whether to feel complimented or insulted by his stories. Yet he seemed sincere, and because he was the first person to recognise my feminity, I was prepared to excuse him for forgetting his place—after all, I was the boss's daughter and his social superior. I tried to turn everything into a joke, to show him that I didn't attach too much importance to what he said. Sometimes I would suddenly change the subject. He wasn't very well-educated and had rather conventional attitudes: I would deliberately lure him into discussions where I could quickly put him at a disadvantage. Then I would laugh, a high, pealing laugh, so girlish that his face lit up with childish amazement and he ended up laughing with me.

An old woman who came to help mamma with the housework was another victim of my caprices. We often chatted together and she would say that when I was older and a wife and mother, I would look back at my present job and smile. Calmly I assured her that *I would never marry,* that I would never be happy unless I could go on working, and that furthermore all girls should do the same as me, for marriage was a mistake—Father said so. The old woman was indignant. "And what would happen then? The world would end with no more children born, don't you understand that?"

I was speechless. Years before my mother had talked to me about the mysteries of the female body, but she hadn't explained the relations between men and women. Even if he wanted to abolish marriage I was certain that Father still wanted children to be born. I was sure that he didn't want the

end of the world. But as yet I felt no special responsibility for the future. I was still determined never to marry.

Although Mother was there when I argued with the old woman she never joined in. She was increasingly self-absorbed, as though she had withdrawn to live in an internal desert. Towards the end of spring, Father suggested that she and I should go to Turin for a month to stay with relatives. I felt such a weight of responsibility at the thought of going alone with her: my constant fear was that she might be driven to commit some wild or destructive act yet again, and since I still wasn't sure that I loved her as much as I ought or wanted to, I felt helpless in the face of her unhappiness and bowed down by my own sense of enormous regret.

But we went, and on holiday she seemed in fact calmer and more hopeful as well as physically more active. As for me, I found that to be unexpectedly back in my childhood haunts helped to dispel some of my more obscure fears and gave me new courage.

Then once again it was summer. I was fifteen. Another colony of bathers arrived. They met each day on the beach, inviting us to join in their games. Everyone was curious about me; men of all ages watched me wherever I went. I day-dreamed, first about one boy, delicate and teasing, then another, still pubescent with a strong agile body and curly hair, reminding me of bronzes I had seen in museums. But none of them made my heart beat faster or inspired me to flirt with them. I constantly wondered whether I was falling in love, but I treated it as a source of amusement, as something which gave new flavour to this life I was now living so fully. For hours upon end I cradled myself in the waves under the hot sun, enjoying the danger of swimming so far out that I was no longer visible from the shore. These physical exertions made me feel at one with nature, making me conscious that I was young, healthy, and free—and glad to be so.

But at home a sense of returning unhappiness frightened

me. Mother was becoming increasingly embittered and was losing her mental equilibrium. Moreover, Father pointed this out to her in the crudest terms possible. The younger children were more than ever left to fend for themselves. It had been a long time since Father had joined in our games, pretending to be a child himself. He had obviously had enough of family life and no longer cared what the rest of us did. In the autumn he began to say that he had to stay late at the factory every night. He appeared in the house only for meals, which he sat through in silence. His employees bore the brunt of his increasing brusqueness, and he now treated me no differently from them. Dismayed by this treatment, I tried desperately to discover what the reason could be.

I was not left in ignorance for very long. My office friend and I were often alone together in the big city, grey room with its rows of tables, its shelves covered with files and ledgers, and a huge charcoal stove, which made the air stiflingly hot. Another clerk came only in the afternoons, a fourth was often away. In the breaks between work we still exchanged more or less frivolous remarks or pursued more serious conversations which we interrupted and then picked up again later in the day. He was twenty-five, very masculine and full of energy, with an olive skin and lively dark brown eyes. He talked easily and at length. Yet there was always something about him which jarred, and I didn't always bother to conceal this. Not that he would attach too much importance to the comments of a little girl. The only thing that surprised him was my independence, so accustomed was he to think of women as naturally servile and submissive. I knew very little about him. I had heard a vague rumour that he had courted a woman before he went into the army and that she had tried to kill herself when he rejected her on his return. My father didn't like him. He tolerated him because he was a good worker, but if ever he found us chatting together he would rebuke me.

Perhaps as a kind of revenge, this man told me what many

people in the village apparently already knew—that my father had a mistress, a young girl who had been a worker in the factory; that the affair had probably started when Mother and I were away in the spring; that papa went to see her nearly every evening; that she, together with her large and poverty-stricken family, was maintained at his expense in a house outside town.

My father! A thousand little incidents were clarified for me. I was forced to believe the terrible revelation. Sick with pain and shame, I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me.

Until then Father had been my model; yet in an instant he was transformed into an object of horror, a man who had brought me up to respect sincerity and loyalty but had deliberately concealed a part of his life from Mother, and from us all. Oh papa, papa! Yesterday I had been so secure in the knowledge of our superiority, and now that was all gone: corrupt as the people around us might be, we had fallen lower than them. Oh, my innocent brother and sisters! And my mother, did she know? I suddenly felt drawn to this unfortunate woman as my heart filled to bursting point with anger and remorse—some of which I started to turn against myself.

Perhaps when she had tried to kill herself Father had already been unfaithful. I had rejected the thought at the time with serene conviction, and I rejected it again now. It would be too horrible. But neither could I accept that her physical and mental illness since then was any justification for his behaviour.

If only I could bring him to his senses, match my courage and determination against his, and save the whole family from ruin!

But now the man who had told me this, who had dealt me this terrible blow, either maliciously or unthinkingly, convinced me that such a response would be useless. At the same time he painted a gloomy picture of the future. In other circumstances I would have found the pity he lavished on me offensive. Now I hardly noticed it. He pressed my hands,

stroked my hair, and unconsciously, although I trembled with rage and despair, I submitted to the pleasure of the contact.

I couldn't understand what this powerful force, this presence of which I had just become aware, could be. Was it love? The picture I had drawn of it from books had been so romantic. Could love be a terrible, degrading experience? Was it strong enough to master and humiliate even my father?

I had not thought very much about what life had to offer. I always assumed that it contained an endless supply of goodness and beauty. Now it seemed despoiled, incomprehensible.

How many days did I live in this dreadful state of torment? I no longer know. All I do know is that in the periods of depression which followed my initial frenzy I heard a young, ardent, persistent voice beside me murmuring increasingly open words of admiration. I might be exhausted, in a stupor, but the voice continued, accosting me with eloquent passion. And I began to respond, always with a sense of disbelief, but also with new hope: I became gentle and submissive.

I didn't tell him I loved him; nor did I even think it. All I told myself was that here was a man who cared about me.

Somehow Mother did find out about Father's affair. One evening, for some reason I now forget, some men called to see papa after dinner. One of them was a solicitor, an insignificant, soft-spoken man who had become my father's closest friend. My friend from the office was there too. They were all chatting. Suddenly my mother burst into a violent fit of laughter and asked the solicitor, "Tell me, is it true that you and my husband go walking at night along the river? Tell me what you talk about . . ."

The men exchanged glances, appalled. White now, and trembling, Mother got up, saying she felt ill, and left the room. The rest of us remained behind. There was terrible, suppressed anger on Father's face. Slowly, almost in a whisper, he declared: "That woman is going mad!"

Suddenly I burst out, "And I shall go mad as well, papa!"

As I glared at him in rebellious despair, I was shaken by a terrible convulsion.

"You hold your tongue," he yelled. Enraged, he lunged toward me as though he wanted to tear me limb from limb. But then he restrained himself with a great effort, and shouted, "Leave the room!"

I do not know how I managed to get through that night. The next morning Mother stayed in bed with a temperature, undoubtedly waiting for him to go to see her so that she could beg his forgiveness; but he didn't go. As for me, I was told that at the end of the month my job would come to an end. That was his response to my outburst of the night before.

By the time I reached the office I was in tears. I loved that factory life intensely, I couldn't bear to give it up. I couldn't imagine doing anything that would suit me so well. All this I poured out to my friend, who had come to stand beside me.

"And what about me? What shall I do?" he whispered. Going back to his desk, he hid his face in his hands. His shoulders were trembling nervously. Forgetting my own pain, I went up to him. He caught hold of me, pressing me tightly against him.

"You were beautiful last night, so proud. I wanted to throw myself at your knees and kiss you . . ."

I closed my eyes. Was he telling the truth? With all my heart I wanted to know. My eyes were closed for some minutes. His lips descended on mine. He wouldn't let me go. Instead of arousing my senses, it soothed them. I waited, expecting to be filled with overwhelming pleasure.

A sudden noise made me start away from him. The next day we were alone again, and I went to him for comfort. He told me he loved me, stopping my mouth with little kisses. It disgusted me a little and I shook him off. But I seemed to need his company in the days that followed. When I was with him I forgot my unhappiness, forgot the sense of disbelief I felt whenever I looked my father in the eye. My feelings seemed paralysed: I wanted only to forget.

My friend sensed my ignorance and noticed my frigidity—that of a girl of fifteen. Using gestures and playful smiles, he concealed his own sexual excitement. Slowly he caressed my body, making me stroke and kiss him as if we were playing a game of forfeits. In my imagination I was beginning to sketch out a great work of love, and this seemed only the pleasurable preface.

And so, one morning, I was standing in the doorway which divided father's office from ours, with a childish smile on my lips, when he surprised me by an unusually brutal enbrace. Trembling hands ransacked my clothes, turning my body over until, still struggling, I was half-lying across a bench. I felt suffocated and began to moan, my voice rising to a scream, which he suppressed by covering my mouth and flinging me away from him. I heard the sound of footsteps running and someone slamming the outer door. I staggered into the little laboratory behind father's office, hoping I would be safe there. I tried to pull myself together, but my strength seemed to have gone. Suddenly I felt suspicious. Rushing out of the room, I saw him. He seemed bewildered and was breathing heavily, his eyes silently pleading with me. I must have conveyed immense horror, for as he came toward me I saw his sudden look of fear and his hands clasped in a gesture of supplication.