Serafino da Ferrara

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Also by Paolo. G. Grossi *The Tiergarten Tales*

Serafino da Ferrara

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To Silvio G.

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Here vigour failed the lofty fantasy:
But now was turning my desire and will,
Even as a wheel that equally is moved,
The Love which moves the sun and the other stars.

Paradiso - Canto XXXIII

Italian, Italians, and *Italics*

As with my previous work, *The Tiergarten Tales*, I have been parsimonious with the use of italics.

Both books are set in continental Europe through various historical contexts. The number of terms and expressions which should be set in italics is perhaps too extensive.

I might have broken a few rules in doing so, but I was worried about pages ending up looking like the tiled walls of the Topkapi Palace.

As for some Italian terms and expressions, most of them (if not all) are Latin-based, hence easily recognisable. We live in the age of Kindle and Google Translate after all.

Some idioms are colloquial or outright slang and it might be more complicated to understand their exact meaning, though the characters conveniently do some of the explaining for me.

For example, Italian students use the word 'Prof' as an abbreviation for Professor (male or female). It is, however, a kind of vernacular used mainly between pupils, not to address the teacher (at least in my times, nowadays students might be less deferential).

To avoid misunderstanding, a *Liceo Artistico* is not, despite the name, an 'Art' school in the strict definition of

the word. It isn't an Academy of the Arts, but one of the four *Licei* (roughly the equivalent of American High Schools) where boys and girls with artistic tendencies and/or talent are generally (but not always) sent between the age of fourteen and eighteen. In theory - a very loose theory - pupils with a passion for sciences and maths should attend the *Scientifico*, the ones who are fond of literature the *Classico*, and those versed in foreign languages the *Linguistico* (though Ancient Greek and Latin are taught in the latter, more 'no-longer spoken' than 'foreign', but there you are).

In reality, quite frequently (too frequently) parents pick the more convenient Liceo because of distance from home, reputation and so forth, blithely ignoring the vocations of their children.

For anyone not wholly familiar with the Renaissance period, leading and less leading artists would gain, at some point in their careers, nicknames associated with some sort of quirk in their lives.

Agnolo di Cosimo was known by the sobriquet *Il Bronzino* due to his dark skin and reddish hair.

Tommaso di Currado di Doffo Bagordi became known as *Il Ghirlandaio* because his father was a garland-maker, crafting head-dresses for Florentine ladies.

Giovanni Francesco Barbieri was nicknamed *Il Guercino* because he was cross-eyed, though it didn't seem to prevent him from producing masterpieces.

The fictional character of Jacopo da Cremona earns the appellative of *Il Formaggiaro* as he is the son of a rich cheese merchant from that city. Trust me when I say that it doesn't

sound very complimentary in Italian, never mind how delicious the cheese might have been.

Almost invariably they became known by the first name followed by 'da' (from), and the city of provenance.

If you are Italian you might not recognise yourself in some of the characterisations depicted in modern day Florence. And some are admittedly slightly exaggerated for dramatic effect.

But I was born and bred in Milan, where I attended a Liceo Scientifico, despite believing Maths and Physics to be Satan's revenge on humankind.

Uniquely among European countries, Italy has never been - and never will be - a homogenous entity. Even cities and regions next to each other have at times very little in common or, in some cases, thoroughly despise and revile their neighbours on a regular basis. In the past, of course, the disdain and the offensive language were skipped in favour of a good old reciprocal slaughter on the fields of this cantankerous land.

Furthermore, in some cases we can barely understand each other as our dialects are more or less different languages altogether. It doesn't help.

I. *All happy families...*

He hears the final bell. The school erupts, classroom doors slam open barely holding on to their hinges, the metallic noise of lockers being opened and shut again is deafening.

Summer break is here. A torrent of students regurgitates into the street causing an almighty traffic jam. SUVs with mothers or nannies at the wheel vie for space, right of way, and ultimately a not-too-subtle parade of the best four wheels in Georgetown.

This is no cheap suburbia, most of their husbands or employers are toiling at some desk or chairing important meetings at Foggy Bottom, on Capitol Hill or the White House. Most often all three.

Parker walks out of the front door with his hands in the tight pockets of his slacks and his rucksack on his shoulders. A few hugs with the girls and some high-fives with fellow boys ensue. His older brother is already waiting at the bike stand. When he gets there the high-five is followed by a manly hug.

'Dude, summer break and birthday tomorrow. Lucky little bro.'

'Bet you know what the old folks have got me.'

'Sure I do.'

They start cycling. When Parker reached the age of

fourteen, their parents went out and bought a cheap bike for his growing frame. The Hendersons' pristine drive sports the standard two SUVs parked neatly by each other, yet their mother wasn't fond of school runs. In their opinion he was still a bit too young to cycle all the way to school by himself but the city had finally built some decent bike lanes and Tommy was now seventeen so they made them promise to stick together on the journey.

Tommy, who finds cycling by himself rather dull - he's not much of a loner, any activity has to involve other people - had gone out of his way to promise to look out for his little brother at traffic junctions.

They had also promised never to set off without their helmets, though Tommy had swiftly pointed out to Parker that "setting off" with them was not the same as "wearing them". Parker, the more academic of the pair, had found the distinction clever though he had laughed while retorting that it was still cheating.

So when they are a couple of blocks away from home they stop, unlock their helmets from their rucksacks' straps and don them before reaching the driveway. A few times Parker had remarked that one day they might get caught by their mother driving by.

He walks to the garage door to open it but he's shouted down by Tommy who parades himself in front of it.

'Off-limits until tomorrow, bro.'

A smiling Parker leaves his bike with his brother and heads for the kitchen door. Tommy has just narrowed down his guesses for his present. One doesn't need a garage to hide a watch or a pair of trainers.

To his surprise he finds them both at home, sat at the kitchen table with two mugs of coffee in their hands. After kissing his mother on the cheek (Tommy is starting to cringe at that, but Parker still likes it. Tomorrow's birthday might change that), he meets his father's closed fist with his; they have gradually stopped hugging.

'Why are you home?' Parker's face frowns in suspicion. 'You've got the day off tomorrow, haven't you, Dad?'

"No worries. All free tomorrow. Left office early, not much to do at the moment. There might be a few changes in my career; new President, new direction.'

Tommy comes in. His parents are resigned at getting neither hugs nor kisses from him. Apparently at some unspecified date he had decided that he had become a man and those are for little boys. The Hendersons are uber-liberal and just shrugged at that.

'Dad, you home? What's up? You are free tomorrow, are you?'

'Why does everyone think I'm going to miss out on my son's birthday?'

Parker winks at Tommy.

'Obama is promoting Dad to Secretary of State.'

They all laugh though Elizabeth is slightly reproachful.

'Stop mocking your father's career. It's paying for all of this.' She showcases the the faux-Georgian house with her hand and points her finger at Parker. 'And your present.'

Larry is already in his shorts, trainers and vest. Tommy is heading upstairs.

'Change in a second and back for a game, Dad. Parker, you coming?'

Tommy and his Dad built a good size basketball court at the back of the house. Elizabeth did not like the view ruined by a metal post with a net attached to it but she came around when Larry pointed out that the two boys were doing well at school (Tommy at sports and girls and Parker at everything else) and their elder sister had just been admitted to Princeton.

'Basketball is healthy', he had remarked while kissing her, 'Would you rather prefer them to do drinks, drugs and sex?'

At which point Mrs. Henderson couldn't help observing that they must do some sex at least.

The men of the house like their game and at around five Olivia is sent to holler at them to get upstairs, shower and get ready for dinner.

The fare is never fully American. The Henderson are mid-atlantic urbanites and Elizabeth never tires of shopping for overpriced food items at Gennaro's, the Italian deli conveniently located a few blocks away. Tonight she has laboured intensively on a mushroom risotto; whatever the result, everyone knows better than to make cringing faces. Larry and Parker actually like the European taste, Tommy is resigned to it (he goes 'all-American' with his team pals at the hamburger bar near the school), and Olivia eats like most eighteen-year girls who are thin and beautiful and want to stay that way.

Parker is always inquisitive at the table and everyone likes that. Dinners are never boring.

'Why do we eat so early?'

Elizabeth is pouring the risotto.

'We always eat at six, Parker.'

‘That’s what I mean. I read that in Spain they eat at eleven at night.’

Larry smells the risotto.

‘That smells delicious. Every country has different traditions, buddy.’

‘Why do we have this one?’

That’s the only drawback of Parker’s curiosity: it’s entertaining but it never ends.

‘Bro, that’s nuts eating at eleven. We have to be in bed at that time.’

‘Obviously Spanish kids don’t.’

Elizabeth, strokes Parker’s spiky brown hair.

‘They do. When it’s summer holiday they stay up late as it can get very hot out there.’

Parker takes a forkful of the risotto. They don’t say grace as Europeans don’t, not even the most religious ones.

‘Mom, it’s awesome. It gets very hot here. We still eat at six.’

Olivia throws a sardonic smile.

‘You’ll never get away with anything with him.’

They have learnt how to curtail the machine-gun-like inquisition by now. They precipitously change subject though they are convinced that Parker keeps ruminating more questions in his mind. Larry volunteers for the task.

‘Well, looking forward to the party tomorrow. Now, I understand it’s your friends in the afternoon and you’re not going to want your old folks around at that time but we can have a “tail” later on when they are off.’

‘Why?’

‘We just stick around discreetly, that’s all.’

Parker frowns.

'You're not a hundred years old, I'm not embarrassed by you. When do I get my present?'

'Do you want it at the garden party in the afternoon?'

'Yes, Dad.'

'You got it. Now, your mother and I have been thinking. The spare room on the top floor is full of junk; boys, what do you say if we clear it up and you can have a room each?'

The sudden silence is not one which usually follows the bearing of good news and both parents detect that. Tommy throws an inquisitive look at his brother. They both lift a forkful of risotto while staring down at the plate. Elizabeth is the first to acknowledge the lack of enthusiasm.

'I thought that you two might want a bit of independence.'

The pair looks at each other again, then Tommy speaks directly to Parker.

'Do you, bro?'

Parker just shakes his head. Tommy turns to his father.

'Do we have to?'

'No, of course not. Usually it's the opposite but glad that you get on fine.'

'Well, it's not that I can take girls back here anyway, can I? Little bro is cool, even with all those damn drawings of his everywhere.'

Larry and Elizabeth smile at each other, fully aware of Tommy's phobia of being alone. They hadn't thought this through.

Olivia's lips widen in a sneering smile.

'I bet they still do those disgusting things boys do.'

Tommy sneers back.

'At least he keeps his mouth shut while we jerk off. As if Jack doesn't do it. Yeah. Right.'

Larry points his finger at his son.

'Tommy, we are very liberal but swearing is still not allowed. Apologise to your mother and your sister.'

'Sorry Mom, but Olivia started it. It's none of your business. And your boyfriend totally does it with his pals.'

'Tommy, enough. Olivia, there is no need to poke fun.'

Parker has listened to all of this in silence, then he looks at his Dad.

'Are you sure that it is swearing?'

They all burst in a loud laugh, Tommy almost crying in his plate.

'Man, you're funny, bro.'

They are in bed now. Tommy playing Nintendo, Parker drawing on a notepad with a pencil.

Their room is spacious and it has been transformed into a tale of two cities. On Tommy's side basketball posters, sport cars and a typical cataclysmic chaos, his bed never made up. On Parker side the atmosphere is more refined. There are indeed drawings everywhere, much less untidiness and hardly any computer games paraphernalia except for the laptop on his desk. He doesn't quite make his bed up but he tentatively pulls the duvet over in the morning, a bit conscious about his mom discovering the mess. Tommy seems not to care a jolt.

There haven't been many fights in the years they have shared the room and mostly only about Parker taking too

long in the bathroom with Tommy shouting: 'Hurry up, you damn girl!'.

'Show me.'

Parker hands the notepad over.

'You're drawing Olivia?'

'She's a good model.'

'Yeah, but girls never shut up. You're lucky, bro.'

Parker is unsure what his brother means. In any case Tommy's underwear has gone and he can already hear the thrusting sound. He lowers his pants and silently joins in. Tommy is right, they do it in silence, he thinking about girls' body parts and Parker not yet sure what to think about while he does it. He likes it and his brother is at it every night without fail so, why not?

They never bother to clean the mess up, they just pull their duvets over. Tommy once remarked how disgusted their sister would be if they told her (something they were very tempted to do). He turns the lights off.

'You sure you don't want your own room?'

'Yeah.'

'Night, little bro.'

'Night, big bro.'

* * *

Tommy is a boy of few words, no hugs, no kisses (definitely no kisses) and has never in his short life told anyone in the family that he loves them. Not that he needs to: everyone knows that he does. They also know that schmalz is anathema to him so they all steer very clear of it. When his mother started crying while watching The Hours on television, he

got up, hauled a box of Kleenex from the downstairs bathroom and held it for her to help herself while shaking his head, wondering what it was all about, blissfully unaware that his silent action had spoken a thousand words.

When Jack was invited for lunch for the first time as Olivia's official new boyfriend, he was, like every boy meeting his girlfriend's parents, a nervous wreck.

That changed quickly upon meeting Tommy who, despite the two of them being dressed up for lunch, lured him on the basketball court for a long afternoon game and loud banter leaving Elizabeth holding her daughter's shoulders and kissing her hair while looking at the pair now wrestling on the floor.

'I'm sure Jack loves you. But boys are like that.'

Parker genuinely wants to keep sharing the room with his brother and, being the sensitive boy he is, he also noticed the veil of panic on Tommy's face when their father had proposed to split them. Tommy does not do loneliness.

And he probably never will. Blond, athletic and impossibly handsome in the boy-next-door fashion, he is way too popular with almost every girl at Georgetown High. Parker is often used as a go-between, something he thoroughly enjoys. He also wallows in reflected glory as he often remarks to boys in his year how awesome with the ladies his brother is.

His dates don't last much though and when Parker enquiries about why the latest one has been dumped, the reply is always the same.

'Man, she wouldn't shut the fuck up.'

To which Parker usually responds with raising eyes to the sky.

‘Well, all girls want to talk, big bro. What you gonna do about it?’

When Parker joined the same school, he knew bullying wasn’t far away. He was resigned to the rite of passage. He wasn’t exactly weedy but a bit skinny and a little too gentle. More of a European. His look was elegant preppy cool, his round spectacles way too intellectual, and his passion for drawing anything that moved was honey to any bullying bee. It only took a few days before he got smashed against his locker by Logan, a boy three times his size in Tommy’s year and basketball team. Parker knew it was only a matter of time before he would be beaten up and he was kind of preparing to defend himself the best he could, which was just about zero.

He had decided against telling Tommy. That would have been dead slimy and he wasn’t a snitch.

But Tommy was also the star of the team and some of his loyal teammates reported to him about Logan’s pestering his little bro while proposing to teach him a lesson. Tommy just said no.

At the end of a spectacular win, the coach had walked down to the changing rooms and given a satisfied talk to his boys.

‘Guys. Awesome win. Henderson, man of the day.’ He went on to high-five Tommy who coolly replied while throwing his towel on the bench.

‘Just as well. Because I quit.’

That dropped like the proverbial lead balloon. The silence was broken almost immediately by a shouting hail of ‘What?’, ‘What’s the matter, man?’, ‘Are you crazy, dude?’.

The coach struggled to restore some order but he finally managed to sit them all down on the benches, Tommy standing by him.

'Ok. Ok. Can you just all shut the fuck up. Tommy, what's this crazy stuff?'

'You see coach, I don't want to play with cowardly assholes who take it out on boys half their size.'

His eyes turned on Logan.

'I say, come and take it out on me, if you have the balls.'

The trainer was coaching Parker's junior team too and instantly knew what it was all about.

'Well. I guess someone here must apologise.'

Some of the boys started to nudge Logan and hit him with their towels.

Logan stood up.

'Ok. Ok. I'm sorry. I'll leave him alone. Sorry.'

'Cool. By the way, my little bro is no snitch. He told me nothing. Just start hitting on the girls, man, and quit being a jerk, it ain't cool.'

Tommy couldn't fend off the hugs and the high-fives. Parker was met by Logan in an empty corridor and closed his eyes, waiting for blows which never landed.

'Hey. You're no snitch, little one. That's cool.'

* * *

All happy families are alike and the Hendersons would make Tolstoy proud. Larry and Elizabeth met at Princeton, he on his way to a law degree, she shining in Freudian essays towards her masters in psychiatry.

Larry had been a confident and sporty young man,

sensitive and polite. Their upper-middle-class origins hadn't taken long to converge in an all-American happy ending and the beginning of a new chapter.

Cosseted by east coast parental financial power, a lavish but tasteful wedding came first, followed by a well-paid starter job at a Boston law firm, the purchase of a brownstone downtown and a fragrant and slender Elizabeth expecting Olivia. She never bothered to use her degree for any work. Larry's salary and perks were more than enough to conduct a comfortable yet restrained eastern seaboard existence: some occasional dining out, entertaining friends and sporadic evenings at the Boston Symphony Hall of which Elizabeth became a patron.

At a dinner party a rather brazen acquaintance had once remarked how the Hendersons could stand in if the Kennedys were ever to be fully exterminated. The word 'extermination' in conjunction with Massachusetts royalty had caused a mild unease at the table until the hapless guest with an importune sense of humour had remarked that it was a 'goddam' joke.

Yet a silly quip had got Larry thinking. Standing by the bed in his dressing gown he had tested the waters with his wife.

'Well, why not?'

Elizabeth, brushing her long, silky hair at the vanity desk, had turned with a frown.

'Why not what?'

'Politics? You know, that stupid joke about us looking like the Kennedys?'

Elizabeth turned back to face the mirror.

‘Bobby can be such an idiot when on far too much Chianti. I’m not sure whether I cared for that. At least they are a good-looking family to be compared to.’

Larry’s silence became suspicious. She had turned again.

‘You mean it, don’t you?’

‘The guys at the party would be over the moon.’

She had faked a pensive pose.

‘I’ve heard the White House is rather uncomfortable to live in.’

Larry had laughed.

‘I was thinking about a position at the State Department rather. Let’s not get carried away.’

‘This is America. You are supposed to be carried away with this kind of dream.’

And it happened. Larry’s record at Princeton and his CV had impressed Foggy Bottom no end and his affable yet professional demeanour had done the rest.

Thus Tommy and Parker were born with fewer voting rights then their fellow Americans and grew up in the capital, with only Olivia at times missing the gentler and more European scent of the north east.

They still took their vacations in Nantucket as Larry’s parents were happy for the whole family to come and visit, complaining when the time lapses between trips were too long.

The boys had never disliked Georgetown. Tommy had plenty of friends, Parker fewer still but neither had ever been unpopular over their school career.

* * *

Parker wakes up first, the excitement of his fifteenth birthday having the better of him. He parts the curtains of his window and stalls, smacking his forehead with his hand.

'Dad is at it.'

Tommy hears him and gets out of bed in his pants while awakening his blond hair with long strokes of his hands. Squinting his eyes he approaches the window. There is a giant red and blue "15" balloon floating and intermittently banging against the glass. From close inspection an extensive display of more balloons is being arranged by Larry who is on a ladder trying to reach the gutter with a string of little stars and stripes flags.

'Happy birthday, little bro.'

Parker nods. They slide into their dressing gowns and rumble down the stairs barefoot.

Elizabeth and Rose, the day-maid-cum-cleaning lady are assembling dishes arranged around a cluster of cards.

'Happy birthday, Parker.'

He kisses his mother and both the boys sit at the table, Tommy gorging down his glass of milk.

'Dad is going nuts with balloons.'

'Well, he's doing it for you Parker and you Tommy should help.'

'He loves doing it by himself.'

Parker inspects the cards.

'Shall I open them now?'

Elizabeth is shuttling between the table and the kitchen counter.

'As you like.'

The bell rings, Rose proceeds to the hallway to open the

door and reappears with an elegantly dressed lady holding a card in her hand.

'Parker, Miss Moore is here.'

Parker gets up and walks towards the lady.

'Good morning, Miss Moore.'

'Good morning, Parker, and happy birthday.'

'Thank you, Miss Moore.'

Elizabeth joins them and grabs Parkers' shoulders.

'Good morning, Miss Moore, would you like to have a coffee with us?'

'No thanks, very kind of you. I briefly came by to bring Parker's present.'

Parker widens his big brown eyes.

'A present for me? That's very kind, Miss Moore.'

'Well, here it is. It's all in this card. Hope you'll enjoy it, Parker.'

'I'm sure I will, Miss Moore.'

After her departure, Parker returns to the table and sits by his brother who gives him such a big shove that he falls on the floor laughing out loud.

'Teacher's pet...'

'Tommy, don't shove Parker on the floor. Miss Moore is very proud of his grades in her art class, if only you could say the same.'

Their three children are popular and the crowd is on the unmanageable side. The catering is a mix of homemade cakes and Gennaro's Italian pastries, the fridge stuffed with cannoli siciliani. A balmy southern spring allows everyone to be in polos, shorts and t-shirts. Larry, Elizabeth and the

maid circulate discreetly as they try their best not to embarrass their children.

What they fail to comprehend is that their charming beauty has actually the opposite effect, sometimes with embarrassing developments.

Elliott, a boy in Tommy's class, became his best mate a few months earlier and the pair often came back for a basketball game or, less often, to study together.

Elizabeth, who always spends the afternoons at home to look after her three children and make sure there is no slacking on the homework front, is equally attentive and motherly with their mates too. Drinks and snacks are always at the ready together with words of encouragements.

Elliott was polite, sensitive and very grateful for the attention. Among the various thanking phrases, he thought nothing of dropping the casual compliment for her 'beautiful dresses' and 'elegant hair styles'.

Needless to say, Tommy cringed at all that garbage, until he realised that his mate meant it. When she discussed it with Larry, her husband smiled.

'Not surprised to have a rival, you are still so gorgeous.'

'Don't make fun, you know it really hurts at that age.'

'Yeah. Well, if I had a dollar for every seventeen-year-old having a crush on their friends' mothers... I wouldn't worry, it usually goes away.'

One day, while confronting an essay on the kitchen table, Tommy had lifted his head from the laptop for a casual observation.

'Not inviting Elliott around anymore.'

His mother had turned from the window with a sigh.

'Tommy. Don't cut him off. It happens. Some boys lose it a bit with older women. It will go away.'

'You're my Mom. It's gross.'

'Well, he's not going to get any encouragement.'

In the end, Tommy had confronted him and had made it clear that he wasn't cool on the idea of his best friend flirting with his mother. Like all teenage crushes it duly melt away and it wasn't long before a girlfriend appeared from the blue.

Larry's athleticism, handsomeness and elegance cause equal stirs among the girls in both Parker and Tommy's class.

Parker, who doesn't have the squeamishness of his brother, had once made everyone at the table choke on their pasta alla Carbonara.

'Emma Myles really fancies the pants off you, Dad.'

Parker adores being the centre of attention and the party is a success. When he bumps into Olivia and Jack, he stalls them with his open hands.

'Wait, I have something for you.'

He runs upstairs to his bedroom and swiftly returns holding a brown A4 envelope. He pushes it into Jack's hand.

'For you, Jack.'

'For me? It's your birthday.'

'Yeah, I know, but I finished it yesterday.'

'Finished what?'

'Well, open it.'

Jack looks inquisitively at Olivia who shrugs. She's used to her brother's weirdness. He opens the envelope and looks at the paper. Olivia cocks her head to have a peep and shrieks.

'Parker! When did you do this? This is so embarrassing.'

But Jack stops her in her fretting tracks.

'What? Why is it embarrassing? It's beautiful. Man, did you do this all yourself?'

'Yeah. Had to memorise all angles as sis wouldn't pose for me.'

Olivia is having an unnecessary tantrum.

'I can't believe you did this. Sorry about my brother.'

'Why are you sorry? For what? It's an amazing portrait. Parker, I'll hang it on my bedroom wall.'

Olivia melts in that ocean of insecurity where girls of that age usually drown.

'Really?'

Jack, who is the most matter-of-fact boy one could think of, frowns in mocking puzzlement.

'Well, yeah. Why? Do you want me to throw it away? Not gonna do that.'

She looks again at the drawing. Parker has drawn her eyes staring aimlessly at an infinite space, melancholic yet inquisitive and mesmerising.

'I mean, really? You like it? You don't find it weird?'

'No.'

Parker, who is standing there with his hands in his pockets, smiles.

'You two must have some amazing sex.'

Jack bursts in a spitting laugh while Olivia almost screams.

'Parker!'

Between hysterical giggles, Jack manages to utter a few words while led away by his girlfriend.

'Your bro is dead weird but so funny.'

When the garage door is lifted, a bulky rectangular box is

wheeled out. It is wrapped and has a big bow on top. Parker is egged on by everyone to open the main present of the day.

Helped by his Dad and Tommy, he unwraps the box to reveal the latest model of a blue and white Bianchi-Campagnolo racing bike.

Parker is on cloud nine as everyone gathers around to check the state-of-art import. He hugs his parents, then they leave him and the rest of the young crowd to the excitement of the discovery and tiptoe to the kitchen to retrieve the cake.

He also receives a spanking new helmet from Olivia and Tommy and a flaming red Lacoste polo from his mother.

The cake is gone and so are all the guests. He is elated by the amazing day and offers to help his Dad and brother to assemble the pedals and the handle of his new toy. Larry won't have any of it.

'Nah, it's your day. Tommy and I will do it. It'll be ready for you to be off tomorrow. All you'll have to do is to adjust the saddle's height.'

They change into their t-shirts and shorts and set out in earnest to complete the task. They also start to clear the party debris, surveyed with satisfaction by Elizabeth through the kitchen window. Jack has just texted Olivia with a picture of her portrait hung on the wall of his bedroom, sending her in a state of loving meltdown.

The Bianchi-Campagnolo is assembled and stands gleaming on the driveway in front of the garage, Larry patting his son's back.

'Good job. I'm really thirsty, I'll get some drinks.'

Tommy sits on the low wall adjacent to the driveway, drying the sweat with his t-shirt. Larry returns with two bottles and hands one to Tommy who frowns in puzzlement.

'Beer?'

'Oh, come on. You are seventeen, we are in our home and I'm here. The FBI is not going to swoop in. One more year and you will be able to legally buy a Kalashnikov but still no beer. Talk about insanity.'

Tommy laughs and they clink their bottles.

After a few sips in manly silence, Tommy stares ahead, then at the pavement.

'Dad...'

'Yeah?'

'About Parker.'

'Yeah, what about him?'

He looks away. He is a boy of few words and the ones he is about to utter are momentous.

'Little bro is never going to like girls, is he?'

Larry doesn't move. He doesn't need to ponder his answer but it needs to be slow and calm.

'No. It's not going to happen. How did you know? Has he told you? Or did you find something in his desk?'

'I had my suspicions. You know, little things. And he hasn't set up a password for his laptop, together with forgetting to erase its history.'

Larry smiles.

'He's the daydreaming type. Nothing too hard I hope?'

'Nah. Mostly naked boys; a bit older than him, that's all.'

Larry takes another sip.

'How do you feel about it?'

‘I’m ok with it. Except...’

He finishes his beer. Larry grabs both bottles, gets up and winks.

‘I think we need another one.’

Tommy puts his thumb up. When his father reappears with the bottles, he finds him pensively gazing at the pavement.

‘Except?’

‘Well, it’s weird. It freaks me out if he’s not... I don’t really know how to put it.’

Larry knows he’ll never be able to blurt that out.

‘If he’s not the “man”. Is that it?’

Tommy nods.

‘The thought of someone, you know... I mean, my little bro... I’d just beat the shit out of them. Sorry.’

‘Tommy, that is Parker’s choice. You can’t be selective. And it is something which he will probably never reveal to you, me or anyone else in the family. Rightly so.’

‘You seem to be dead cool with it.’

Larry crosses his legs and sits up on the wall.

‘Your mother and I have known this for quite some time. She was first to come up with doubts and thoughts. You know mothers, they know everything. They feel it.’

Tommy turns with a worried expression.

‘Yes, that includes you, young man. By the way, we should all wait for him to tell us. Don’t put any pressure on him. I know you’re very protective of Parker.’

‘No probs.’

Larry gets up and stretches.

‘We’ll better have a wash for dinner before your mother starts yelling at us.’

He sets off for the kitchen. Tommy calls him out.
'Hey!' He lifts the bottle in a toast. 'Great chat.'

On his way through the kitchen he notices Mrs Moore's card on the table, still unopened. He places it upright against a bottle of milk for Parker to open the last of his birthday presents.