



100 Days of Happiness: A Novel

By Fausto Brizzi

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What would you do if you knew you only had 100 days left to live? For Lucio Battistini, it’s a chance to spend the rest of his life the way he always should have—by making every moment count.

Imperfect, unfaithful, but loveable Lucio has been thrown out of the house by his wife and is sleeping at his father-in-law’s bombolini bakery when he learns he has inoperable cancer. So begin the last hundred days of Lucio’s life, as he attempts to right his wrongs, win back his wife (the love of his life and afterlife), and spend the next three months enjoying every moment with a zest he hasn’t felt in years. In 100 epigrammatic chapters—one for each of Lucio’s remaining days on earth—*100 Days of Happiness* is as delicious as a hot doughnut and a morning cappuccino.

Wistful, touching, and often hilarious, *100 Days of Happiness* reminds us all to remember the preciousness of life and what matters most.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Funny, moving. . . I defy anyone to finish this story without tears in their eyes.”—**Graeme Simson, bestselling author of *The Rosie Project***

“Why we’re reading: We could all use a reminder to enjoy every moment.” —**Esquire.com**

“Depressing? No. Uplifting? Yes. Funny? Often. Although it’s a countdown to death, this story is a celebration of life. Grab a doughnut and treat yourself to a good read.” —**Hudson Valley News**

“I loved the style of writing in this impressive book. Author Fausto Brizzi delivers an enjoyable tale which should be sad and depressing. I laughed throughout this tale. It is a wonderful novel that I hope everyone gets the opportunity to read. I loved it.” —**Open Book Society**

“100 Days of Happiness is a celebration of everyday life masquerading as a countdown to death. To read it is to realize that the child within us is still alive and well, ready to laugh, play, love unguardedly, and eat hot doughnuts.”—**Martha Woodroof, author of *Small Blessings***

About the Author

Fausto Brizzi is an Italian director, screenwriter, and film producer. *The Night Before Exams*, his debut directorial work, won him numerous awards, including the David di Donatello. *100 Days of Happiness* is his first novel, which was a bestseller in Italy and has been sold in more than twenty countries.

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Allow me to tell you about the three most important days of my life. I wouldn’t want any of the three to think I’m playing favorites, so I’ll list them in strict chronological order.

* * *

The first was Friday, October 13, 1972. Friday, the thirteenth.

On that date, as a Fokker turboprop crash-landed in the Andes with forty-five passengers who would ultimately devour each other to survive, Antonio and Carla, that is to say, my mom and dad, eighteen at the time, conceived me in the backseat of an unprepossessing off-white Citroën Dyane. The two teens had parked their vintage junker in a large empty square on the outskirts of Rome, included in the zoning plan by far-seeing city administrators as a handy refuge for lovebirds. It was a bleak setting, filled by the occasional abandoned refrigerator and stacks of battered cars.

A perfect backdrop for a tender love story.

Antonio and Carla had met that afternoon at a birthday party for Manrico, a sweaty overweight loser from Frascati who’d been pining after Mamma ever since middle school. She’d just turned down his offer to join him in a slow dance to the languid notes of a young Elton John. And that’s when she saw Papà staring at her from a distance and almost choked on her tuna, mayo, and tomato panino. And, truth be told, Papà was the

kind of guy who regularly made girls choke on their panini. He was tall, skinny, and too cool for school; he played the electric guitar and regularly wrote rock music cribbed shamelessly from lesser-known songs by the Rolling Stones. He resembled Sean Connery's better-looking brother, but with a scar on one cheek that gave him a mysterious smolder that 007 could only dream of. He could hold a roomful of people rapt for hours with stories about how he'd got that scar. Depending on the audience, either he'd received it in a bloody brawl in an open-air market in Mexico City, or else he'd been stabbed by a hulking rugby player from the mountains of Bergamo, brooding over a two-timing wife and a welter of painfully justifiable suspicions. Or else it had been that time that Frank Sinatra broke a bottle over his head because he couldn't stand what a good singer Antonio was.

Papà was a professional bullshit artist so outstanding in his lying skills that if he'd set his mind to it, he could easily have become prime minister of Italy. But I, and I alone, knew the truth, whispered to me by a dangerous double agent from the south, namely, my aunt Pina: Papà had taken a tumble with his tricycle when he was three and had landed face-first on the sidewalk. Be that as it may, Antonio the lady-killer liked to retire each night to the backseat of his Citroën Dyane with a different blushing passenger. That night it was Mamma's turn, and she was indeed seduced but not, however, abandoned because at the very instant of supreme pleasure, a red Fiat 500 smashed into the rear fender of my parents' car. At the wheel and riding shotgun were two half-drunk twenty-year-olds from Frosinone, completely unaware of the role they'd played in tearing a condom at a crucial moment, thereby directly contributing to my advent on life's grand stage. So let me say it now, guys, wherever you may be: my sincere thanks.

* * *

That fateful Friday, the thirteenth, I'd been set down on planet Earth as an uninvited guest, but that never kept Antonio and Carla from showering me with a fair-to-moderate amount of parental love, at least for as long as they were married. That's another story, though, and an infinitely sad one. If I'm up for it, I'll tell you about it later.

* * *

The second most important day of my life was September 11, 2001. While everyone in the world was staring at their TV sets as special news broadcasts played and replayed footage of two Boeing 767s slamming into New York's Twin Towers, giving the rest of the world a new enigma to puzzle over and the American people a new enemy, I was in a restaurant at the beach with all of my closest friends, and Paola, the love of my life. It was a classic end-of-summer dinner, and it had been planned for weeks, but in truth this was no ordinary grilled-seafood banquet: it was the night I was going to ask Paola to marry me, the furthest thing imaginable from her mind—and my friends' minds.

An elderly waiter had agreed to be my accomplice. For a twenty-euro tip he'd douse the lights, play our song (which, for the record, was and remains "Always on My Mind," in Elvis's immortal rendition), and triumphantly wheel in a gigantic mimosa cake with the engagement ring perched on top, concealed inside a bar of extra-dark chocolate.

It was a meticulously planned event: a night sky so bright with stars that it looked like a Christmas manger scene, a group of friends so warm and sincere that it could have been a TV commercial for an Italian after-dinner drink, and a gentle sea breeze so agreeable that it could have been God's ceiling fan set on low. Every detail was perfect. Or almost.

I'd failed to reckon with my best friend, Umberto, who is a veterinarian.

When the cake made its entrance, he leaped from his chair and prankishly swiped the chocolate bar,

exclaiming: “Guys, this chocolate bar’s all mine!”

Crunch.

Next thing you know, the gold engagement ring had shattered a molar.

Emergency run to the dentist’s office. So long, magical and unforgettable romantic interlude.

* * *

Despite the pathetic outcome of the evening’s main event, Paola said yes.

We were married early the following year in a charming little Gothic church on the outskirts of Milan, and it’s one of the few things I’ve never regretted.

Paola is the star of my life. And as far as I’m concerned, she deserves at the very least an Oscar for her performance in the role of my wife. The story of her starring role in my life comes later.

* * *

The third day I’ll never forget was a Sunday, July 14, 2013, exactly one week after my fortieth birthday. I should have guessed it was a special day because there were no shocking aviation disasters to steal my thunder.

It was a useless, tropical summer Sunday, and nothing noteworthy at all took place. Except for the fact that at about 1:27 p.m., I took my last breath and died.

* * *

I know, I know, now I’ve spoiled the ending and you’re not going to want to read the rest of the book. Well, because you can’t unread a spoiler and I’ve ruined the plot, but you’ve already bought the book and just stopping at page 4 is no fun either, I’ll go ahead and tell you the name of the killer. That’s right, even though this is no Agatha Christie murder mystery, there is a killer. In fact, I think we can say a *serial* killer because the villain in question has killed not just me, but millions of people, the kind of career achievement that could give Hitler or Hannibal Lecter an inferiority complex. Every year, roughly a third of all deaths can be attributed to this killer. Statistics tell us that we’re talking about the leading cause of death in the Western world. In short, I’m in very good company.

* * *

This killer has just a short, simple first name, astrological and deeply unfunny: Cancer. Some call it tumor, which is Latin for “swelling” (so it turns out that studying Latin was useful after all), but physicians call it neoplasia, which means “new formation” in ancient Greek (so it turns out studying ancient Greek was useful too). But I’ve always called it *l’amico Fritz*, in Italian, just like the name of the opera by Leoncavallo. My buddy Fritz.

This is the story of how I lived the last hundred days of my existence here on planet Earth, in the company of my buddy Fritz.

And how, in spite of all expectations to the contrary, those were the happiest days of my life.

PREVIOUSLY, ON THIS SAME SHOW

At this point, I'll need to take a step back and give you a brief summary of my life up to the past few months; otherwise you'll have a hard time following the plot, sort of like watching the sixth season of *Lost*.

* * *

My first name is Lucio, which in the all-time hit parade of bad first names comes in seventh, after Pino, Rocco, Furio, Ruggero, Gino, and the unparalleled and unbeatable Gennaro. My mother was a fan of good old Lucio Battisti, whose voice back then was pouring out of every jukebox in Italy with songs like "La canzone del sole," and so there you have it, my John Hancock for the rest of my life: Lucio Battistini. Get it? The most popular singer in the country is Lucio Battisti, and I'm *little* Lucio Battisti because my father's last name was Battistini! Do you see now why my whole life has been an uphill climb? Just think of a kid in the seventies: Fatso, Pizza Face, glasses with Coke-bottle lenses, and stuck with almost the same name as Italy's most famous singer. Admit it, you'd have made fun of me too.

I'll confess, I was neurotic, miserable, and self-sabotaging. Today I'd go by a different, shorter, almost affectionate term: *nerd*. I had every defect needed to drive the girls away like an escapee from a leper colony, including an unhealthy obsession with comic books, splatter flicks, and songs by suicidal crooners. I had only two paths open to me in life: either I could become a computer genius, design an operating system in a garage somewhere and make billions, or else I could walk into a supermarket with a submachine gun and become a mass murderer. When my face made the evening news, all my neighbors, relatives, and friends would comment, without getting too worked up about it: "Odd? Yes, he *was* odd!"

Instead, I identified a third way, and, from ugly duckling that I was, I turned into a swan. Not a fabulous super swan, but a perfectly respectable swan, fully deserving a passing grade, a gentleman's C. When I was fourteen, I lost forty-five pounds, chiefly because of a raging hormonal hurricane, and got contact lenses. Three years later, still a minor, I became Italy's youngest water polo champion ever, Series A, Italy's major league, and no laughing matter. Truth be told, I was just a stand-in goalie, and I spent almost all my time warming the bench in a terrycloth robe, but I did play short stretches of two games that year, and once I even blocked a penalty shot, so the title still holds.

Swimming has always been my favorite sport, and my specialty was the butterfly, which kids all call the dolphin kick out of an innate sense of logic, because butterflies can't swim. I never became a real contender because of a basic conflict of interest with the other fully requited love of my life: bread, butter, and jam. Easy to calculate: 110 calories in a slice of bread plus 75 calories of butter plus 80 calories of jam, total 265 calories. Unfair odds.

I laboriously managed to maintain my washboard abs for ten years; then, when I hit age twenty-six, I gave up competitive sports after a Vespa crash that devastated the ligaments in my knee and resulted in the inexorable expansion of my waistline. According to my own disagreeable reckoning, I gained back the 45 pounds I'd lost as a teenager and possibly a few more on top of them. Think of a Chewbacca, standing six feet three inches and topping out at 240 pounds. Got it?

* * *

So: I finish high school with a focus on the humanities, I play water polo, I get a certificate at the Institute of Higher Studies in physical education, and at age twenty-eight I get a job in a gym. Not a gleaming picture-perfect gym like you'd see in a John Travolta movie, no, just a local gym in an outlying neighborhood,

tucked away in the basement of a discouraging complex of fifties-style apartment buildings. There's even an undersized swimming pool with faded blue ceramic tiles that secretly dream of being reborn as part of a Club Med infinity pool somewhere in the Caribbean. I am the—cue drumroll and trumpet fanfare, thank you—swimming instructor, aerobics coach, LAB expert (make that L.A.B., for “legs, abs, butt”) and, most important of all, aquagym point person. In my off hours, I also work as a personal trainer, on request, usually for plus-sized desperate housewives who are stubbornly holding out against the inevitability of liposuction. In short, I make ends meet, working with my hands—which emit a perennial odor of chlorine. By the way, did you know that the smell of chlorine—which we all know well as far back as we can remember—is actually generated by the chemical interaction of chlorine itself with swimmers' urine? The stronger the smell of chlorine the *less* advisable it is to get in the pool. Now don't say I didn't warn you.

In other words, after growing up on dreams of Olympic gold medals draped on my chest as the captain of the Italian national water polo team, the Settebello, with the national anthem blaring out over the crowd and goosebumps running up and down my arms, I found myself forced to settle for the job that life had saddled me with. That is, six hours a day spent in a calisthenic subbasement where the scent of sweat blended magically with the odors from the Vietnamese restaurant next door. But in my spare time, I did manage to achieve a little dream of mine: coaching a boys' water polo team. All of them between fourteen and fifteen, the worst of all ages. I recruited them at the school where my wife teaches, and I coach them at a city pool a couple of evenings a week, with results that I have to admit have been pretty disappointing. Last year, after lots of hard work and lots of goals put through at our expense, our ranking in the boys' water polo league championship for our province was a brilliant second from bottom. And luckily, we couldn't be kicked down to the minor leagues because we were already as minor league as it gets. This year, though, we're bobbing along in the middle of the league: could be better, could be worse. I can't complain: teaching kids to love sports is the most wonderful thing there is.

* * *

So that's my life in professional terms, and then there's the more important aspect, which I've already mentioned in passing: my family. I met Paola when I was twenty, at a pub; she was the girlfriend of a girlfriend of a girl in my class. Usually the girlfriends of the girlfriends of the girls in my class were uninteresting unlovely skinny runts. But when Paola walked into the place, it was like she was radiating with the phosphorescent glow of a yellow highlighter that called her out over all the other women there that night. A bright yellow aura gleamed around her entire silhouette, identifying her as the one thing I wanted to be sure *not* to forget. Like a phrase you need to commit to memory, learn by heart. Ten minutes later I'd already extended a pickup artist's smarmy invitation to come watch my water polo team compete (and I'd already made a mental note to go down on my knees and beg the coach to let me play at least two minutes in that match). At the time, I was still a professional player and she worked in her parents' little pastry shop, which, over time, played a fundamental role in the loss of my fighting trim and my abs. The house specialty was *ciambella frita con lo zucchero*—sugar doughnuts. Fragrant, yielding—the taste of childhood. There's a tradition that dates back at least thirty years: at two in the morning, Paola's father, Oscar, rolls up the metal shopfront shutter to half-mast, so that the good-for-nothings and roving vampires from all over Trastevere can sink their fangs into sugar doughnuts that are still hot and greasy. Now that Oscar's wife is dead, there's no one running the pastry shop but him and a Sri Lankan assistant who laughs constantly. Paola ended up getting her degree in literature and philosophy, and, after substitute teaching for a while, she now has a tenured position at a good high school with a liberal arts focus.

After a couple of months together (everybody knows the first two months of any love story are always the best), I successfully got myself dumped by Paola in the way only men seem to know how—for flirting with a certain Monica, a good-looking girl from the Marche who studied psychology and sneered at the idea of shaving her armpits.

I lost sight of Paola for nearly ten years. Love is simply a matter of timing and we hadn't been properly synchronized at first: she already wanted a family, while what I wanted was more along the lines of bedding every fertile woman on earth, with or without shaved armpits. It was a challenge to reconcile the two objectives.

Then one day, fate chose to bring us together in a supermarket checkout line. Actually, on account of her transformation from long blond hair to brunette pageboy, I hadn't really recognized her at first, and for the first ten minutes I was convinced I was talking to the granddaughter of one of my grandmother's friends. But I never told her that.

I immediately invited her to dinner and unleashed my consummate tarot-card technique on her. Let me explain.

There's an aged and venerable tarot card reader known as Zia Lorenza who works in Piazza Navona. She has a tattered deck of cards, white hair tied back in a bun, and a glib line of patter. Obviously, she doesn't know anything about the future, but she can still hoodwink anyone, especially when she plays dirty. I regularly used her to impress girls. The tactic was as follows (by all means, feel free to use it; it's not patented): a romantic stroll arm in arm through the most beautiful piazza in Rome, a pleasant talk, a pleasant walk, and as we pass by the old fortune-teller's stand, I secretly toss Zia Lorenza a crumpled ball of paper with all the biographical details—her tastes and whatever information I've already managed to cull—about the girl in question. On our next circuit of the piazza, I've already adroitly brought up the subject of the “paranormal”—taking a skeptical approach if she's a believer, and a more accepting stance if she's a skeptic. That's when phase two of the plan comes into play: I invite her to have her cards read—just for a laugh, my treat. No woman on earth is going to say no. And sure enough, Zia Lorenza puts on her show, reconstructing with stunning accuracy the present and past, and of course creating a future life where, she states, “The name of the man of your dreams starts with an L.” “L,” as in Lucio. I take advantage of her bewildered emotional state: witnessing a paranormal event together can only unite our spirits and, in most cases, our bodies as well. I will say that no one can predict the future. No one but me when I'm squiring a young lady around Piazza Navona. In that case, I know exactly how the evening will end. And Paola was no exception. But I swear to you, that's the last time I used the trick. That night, caressed by a gentle westerly wind, we kissed for our second first time. We became officially engaged then and there, and in less than three months, we were living together in a studio apartment overlooking Tiber Island. A classic rekindling of the flame. But this time, we were finally fully synchronized and in love.

As I've already mentioned, we were married outside Milan, in the little church of Saint Rocco Flagellated Martyr—a considerable inconvenience to all our guests from Rome. But there was a romantic motivation behind that choice of church. Roughly fifty years earlier, my grandparents (on my mother's side), the glorious apartment building concierges Alfonsina and Michele, were married in that same church. After I lost my parents (more about them later), my grandparents were all the family I had.

I believe that on the seventh day God didn't rest: He dreamed up my grandparents, and realizing that this was the best thing He'd come up with yet, decided to take the rest of the day off to hang out with them.

I lived with them for almost fifteen years, and the dinners the three of us had, with chicken-fried turkey and mashed potatoes with gooey mozzarella, remain an indelible memory. In fact, even now, if I close my eyes I can smell the aroma of frying from the kitchen and the distant voice of my grandmother calling, “Dinner's ready and it's getting cold!” Whenever I go by the concierge's cage where the two of them worked and practically lived, I expect to see them still there, Grandpa with his glasses on, sorting through the mail, and Grandma lovingly watering her geraniums.

Alfonsina and Michele stood by me as my witnesses when I married Paola, and I have to say I believe it was the best day of their lives. I've never seen a couple of octogenarians cry for joy like that. At a certain point, the priest, Don Walter, skinny as a beanpole with a strong Calabrian accent, even interrupted the ceremony to scold the two of them, while everyone laughed.

A few years ago my grandparents passed away, a couple of weeks apart. They died in their sleep, undramatically.

They just couldn't stand to be apart. They'd only just met my son and daughter: Lorenzo and Eva.

It's not fair.

Grandparents are like superheroes. They should never die.

A few months later I finally cleared out the two-room flat next to their concierge's cage, and at the back of a high shelf I found an old-fashioned cardboard suitcase, the kind the traditional Italian emigrant carried. In it were pictures, lots and lots of photographs. Not the classic assortment of snapshots from vacations on the beach, strangers' birthday parties, and so forth. No. Grandpa had taken a photo of Grandma every day for the past sixty years. Every single day. He never missed one; on the back of every picture was a different date, first black-and-white and then, in time, full color, Polaroids, and the last ones printed from digital files. The pictures were taken in all sorts of different places, in their concierge's cage, on the street, at the beach, at the bakery, at the supermarket, in front of the Teatro Sistina, on Piazza del Popolo, on the old Ferris wheel at the Luneur amusement park, at Saint Peter's, wherever fate took them over their long lifetime. I couldn't stop looking at them. First Grandma as a young woman, then gradually the first wrinkles and expression lines, the graying hair, the extra pounds, but the smile never changed. But what impressed me most wasn't the aging, it was the backgrounds. Behind Grandma was Italy being transformed. Behind her was History. You could glimpse blurry symbols and personalities of every era: the old Fiat 1100 and the Citroën "shark"; long-haired hippies, Timberland-wearing bomber-jacket-clad *paninari*, and punks; concert posters for Paul Anka, Charles Aznavour, and Robbie Williams; Lambrettas, Vespas, and other scooters; Big Jim dolls and Graziella folding bikes, Rubik's Cubes; SIP phone booths, yellow taxis, shops with hand-painted signs. By the way, the first photographer—though almost no one seems to know this—was a Frenchman named Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, one of the absolute geniuses of the nineteenth century. But once again, the earliest experiments were done by good old Leonardo da Vinci. There are even those who claim that the Holy Shroud of Turin was a rudimentary experimental "photographic plate" contrived by the hyperactive Tuscan inventor. A fascinating theory.

* * *

Forgive me, I'm losing the thread.

So, I was saying: the characters . . .

MY FAMILY

Five of the leading characters in my life have already shyly tiptoed on stage, namely: my wife, Paola; my father-in-law, Oscar; my son and daughter, Lorenzo and Eva; and my friend Umberto, the veterinarian who's always hungry and is missing a molar. To that list I should add Corrado, my other best friend, an Alitalia

airlines pilot, divorced multiple times and very predictable (you know the type, a dark and handsome airline captain who's constantly seducing flight attendants).

* * *

But first and foremost, Paola. Paola. Paola.

My Paola.

* * *

Paola is beautiful. To me, she's beautiful. To others, she's likable. She's that girl in the third row from the front with hazel eyes, braids, and nice round hips who falls in love with you while you're stupidly chasing after the giggly little blonde who sits in the front row.

Paola is an Italian-style Bridget Jones. She's sunny, self-deprecating, affectionate, and with a self-supporting thirty-six-inch bust. A woman as rare as snow on the Maldives. She's an impassioned reader—she devours novels one after another with ravenous curiosity. Her favorite book is *The Little Prince*, and she has editions in every format and language.

As I mentioned, she's a teacher at a good high school. And not just any teacher: she's the Maradona of high school teachers. She teaches Italian, Latin, history, and geography, but with a genius and brilliance that—this time I have to admit it—not even Leonardo da Vinci could ever have equaled.

And I'm not saying this just because she's my wife. She's really a special teacher.

Let me explain.

The most important job on earth is teaching, and it's also the most monotonous one. Every year, a history teacher tells her students for what feels like the hundredth time who the Phoenicians were and why the Second World War broke out, a math teacher explains integrals and derivatives, a Latin teacher drills students in declensions and conjugations and teaches his students how to translate the poetry of Horace, and so on with all the various subjects. Sooner or later, teachers get bored and tired. And that makes them less effective and empathetic, and in short, worse teachers. Paola, who is well aware of this pitfall, has come up with an original method for combating boredom and repetitiveness: each school year she “plays” a different teacher, coming up with a set of characteristics for every course she teaches, a way of dressing and talking, and she never breaks character until the final report cards have gone out. One year she put on the show of a waspy, mean old-maid teacher, another year she became an athletic unassuming one, a different year she did a hyperactive teacher with radical mood swings, and then once she was a ditzy capricious one. Her students would watch her transform herself from one year to the next and they enjoyed it enormously. They absolutely idolize the “actress” schoolteacher, even when she gives them a demoralizing D after an oral exam. The principal, on the other hand, envies her popularity and has a dim view of her. Paola has been carrying on her one-woman teaching show for fifteen years now. I just laugh when I see her come home dressed as the sexy schoolteacher from a seventies movie, or else as Fräulein Rottenmeier, from *Heidi*. She has a passion for teaching that she and I share, even though what I actually teach my boys is lofting shots and counterattacks.

She's a very special woman, but that didn't stop me from cheating on her a couple of months ago. I know, I know, you were just starting to like me and I've already proved to be a disappointment. What can I say in my own defense? Perhaps I could show you a snapshot of the specimen of womanhood who dragged me into temptation? No, I'm afraid that would only strengthen the case against me. To make a long story short,

people, there's no point beating around the bush—after eleven years of marriage, I fell into the pathetic booby trap of infidelity. I'm sorry, but I'm going to beg you to trust me, there were some extenuating circumstances. Let's take things in order. First of all, characters: Lorenzo and Eva. My children.

* * *

Shaggy-haired Lorenzo is in third grade and he's the last in his class. His teacher doesn't know what else to try with him, and unfailingly, she repeats the classic of all classic lines: "He's intelligent but he just needs to apply himself." And as if that weren't enough, my firstborn child is a discipline problem. Paola says that it's my fault because I'm never home, because I spend all my time at the gym or playing water polo, and I never really say no to him. The truth is that young Lorenzo has other interests. He doesn't give a hoot about how the ancient Egyptians fertilized the desert with the silt of the flooding Nile or whatever became of the Assyrians and Babylonians; he just wants to spend time pursuing his hobbies. The two principal ones being playing the piano and dismantling expensive electronic devices.

The upright piano belonged to my concierge grandparents, and no one ever knew how to play it, not even them. One day I heard some practically harmonic chords coming from the end of the hall in the three-bedroom apartment we live in. It was Lorenzo, hard at work on his preliminary efforts to become a self-taught concert pianist. Now he's capable of playing by ear any pop song he hears on the radio. I'm not saying that I have Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in my living room, but my budding young musician is very promising.

The second hobby is a little more unsettling. For as long as he's been able to coordinate his little fingers, Lorenzo has been vivisectioning with the deft precision of a medical examiner everything that comes within reach. But the autopsies are performed on objects that are still perfectly serviceable. From the television set, the dishwasher, and the engine of my station wagon to the snack vending machine at school, the blender, and the traffic light on the corner. He has a full-fledged passion for mechanical engineering and electronics. And as far as that goes, this pastime might be amusing and even instructive. But the problem is that he never puts anything back together again and leaves a swath of destruction worthy of Attila the Hun wherever he passes, transforming anything and everything into a still-to-be-assembled piece of furniture from Ikea, only without an instruction sheet. And so, evidently, there really isn't much time left in his day for studying. My wife, good and conscientious schoolteacher that she is, is quite worried. I'm not. What most worries me (actually, let's say, what most hurts my feelings) is that Lorenzo still hasn't learned to swim; in fact, he actually seems to be afraid of the water. He has the same flotation line as the RMS *Titanic* has currently. The minute he's put in the water, he goes straight to the bottom. It's really too bad.

* * *

Freckle-faced Eva, on the other hand, is in first grade and is the pet of every teacher in her elementary school. And she's a budding militant environmentalist. She strong-armed us into adopting animals and now we share the apartment with a cross-eyed limping German shepherd (which for simplicity's sake we named Shepherd), a white hamster (Alice) with urinary incontinence, and no fewer than three lazy stray cats that we named after the Aristocats: Berlioz, Toulouse, and Marie.

At home, Eva is a hurricane of words. She talks and talks and talks. Before getting around to the point, her conversation is interspersed with a series of whys and wherefores and detailed descriptions and circumstances so tangled that not even Perry Mason mounting a difficult defense could manage to produce so much smoke and mirrors and confusing details. I feel sure that when she grows up, she'll be either a television news anchor or a politician, which, more or less, amounts to the same thing. She applies her passion for environmentalism to everything. She demands that the family undertake a differentiated waste

collection that turns recycling into a high-level form of connoisseurship and collecting—classified by shape, material, odor, and color. She’s cute as a bug, but she doesn’t take advantage of the fact. She only uses her smile and her big baby-blue eyes the color of the mid-August sky to persuade her fellow humans to go along with her exaggerated sense of civic responsibility. When she greets people, she says *miao* instead of *ciao* because she claims that she was a cat in a previous life.

Every so often she remembers that she’s just six and a half years old, and she comes and snuggles in my lap on the sofa and watches cartoons. When that happens, time slows down and stands perfectly still. They say that the love we feel toward our children is the most genuine kind of love, the kind that lets you scale mountains and write songs. And it’s absolutely true. When Eva runs to greet me or when it thunders with lightning in the middle of the night and she climbs into our big warm bed, I get a smile in my heart, my wrinkles stretch out, and my muscles regain the spring and power of when I was twenty.

The best possible medicine.

Eva is also the darling of yet another star of this story. My father-in-law, Oscar.

* * *

Oscar isn’t hard to picture: he looks exactly like the Italian actor Aldo Fabrizi, with the same balloonish physique, the same gait and stride, and he even mutters and mumbles just like him. His life is divided into two parts: before the accident and after the accident. Ten years ago or so his wife, Vittoria, the kindest, quietest woman who ever lived, was killed by a hit-and-run driver while she was out with their binge-eating Labrador retriever, Gianluca.

I can’t seem to keep from arguing with him, though as soon as he starts coming out with his theories on the meaning of life, he makes me laugh so hard that I’d gladly hire him as my own personal guru. One day they’ll talk about him in textbooks, and students will hate him just as much as they detest his colleagues, Socrates and Plato. I’m sure of it.

His favorite theme is life in the afterlife. His theory is that those who were good in a previous life are born into this world hale and healthy, the children of wealthy industrialists, intelligent and good-looking. Those who were bad are born ugly, crippled, stupid, and poor, or else die young or live on as invalids. A theory that, to hear him tell it, would justify all the injustices of this world. To Oscar, luck and unluck are deserved. In which case, I ask him, “you’re saying it’s not worth doing anything? Fate has already written all our actions?”

Oscar shakes his head and goes on making doughnuts. He doesn’t know the answer. He raises doubts and offers questions but not solutions, like all philosophers, come to think of it.

“When all is said and done, Lucio, my lad, the true meaning of life is nothing more than taking a bite out of a hot doughnut.”

I smile and bite into one. As always, he’s right.

SOMETHING THAT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH ANYTHING

You will soon find out that I’m obsessed with inventors, so we can’t really go on until I’ve unveiled for you

the solution to one of the most important mysteries in the history of mankind, namely, who invented the doughnut?

An Italian? Could it be the ubiquitous Leonardo da Vinci? No, my friends, it could not.

Leonardo did, in fact, invent a doughnut of sorts, but it was really a doughnut pool float, just a lifesaver for beginning swimmers, but, unfortunately, he had failed to invent inflatable plastic.

* * *

On the other hand, the doughnut has an origin that remains the subject of some controversy. It came to New York (which was still called New Amsterdam back then) from Holland, with the unappealing name of *olykoek*, which means literally “oily cake.” It described a dough kneaded with apples, plums, or raisins. According to doughnut lore, one day a cow happened to kick a pan of hot oil onto a bowl of uncooked samples of the Dutch pastry, which resulted in what we Italians call the *bomba fritta*. There ought to be a monument to that remarkably creative bovine.

So far, so good . . . but how did that hole come to be?

* * *

In the year 1847 a woman named Elizabeth Gregory, the mother of Hanson Gregory, a young New England ship captain, tweaked the recipe for oily cake by adding nutmeg, cinnamon, and lemon rind, as well as inserting walnuts and hazelnuts in the center, which was the part that was always the last to cook through. The cake thus prepared became so delicious and irresistible that when her son set off for a long sea voyage, he always asked his mother to make a large batch of her oil cakes for the whole crew. The story has it that the New England captain disliked the walnuts and hazelnuts that his mother used to stuff the center of the cake, and he always cut them out before eating his, leaving a hole in the middle of the pastry. At the captain’s orders, the ship’s cook made all pastries from then on in the shape of a ring, removing the middle with a round tin pepper mill.

This was an invention that certainly didn’t pass unnoticed. In Clam Cove, Maine, in fact, there’s a plaque honoring Captain Hanson Gregory, “who first invented the hole in the donut,” and in 1934 the Chicago World’s Fair declared that the doughnut was “the food hit of the century of progress.” The fact remains that the hole in the center marked the beginning of the spectacular international success of doughnuts.

Of course, we Italians, and my father-in-law, Oscar, in particular, find this story or legend—whichever it is—completely unacceptable. What? we say, doughnuts, or *ciambelle*, or better yet, *graffe*, as they call them in Naples—those aren’t an Italian invention? Impossible.

* * *

Whatever the truth, the one thing I know for sure is that you’re hungry now, and therefore, before you stop reading to get a snack, let me go back to where we were first interrupted. Characters.

MY FRIENDS

My passion for doughnuts is one I share with my best friends: Umberto and Corrado. We’ve all known one

another since middle school and we've been friends our whole lives, even though Umberto was held back after flunking his freshman year of high school. We've always done everything together, spent our holidays, and even gone on camping trips when we were Scouts together. The three musketeers of North Rome. I was the oversized Porthos, Umberto was the pragmatic Athos, and Corrado was Aramis—the lady-killer. All for one and one for all. I really know everything about them—all of their secrets. We've beaten each other up, laughed together, fought over girls, lent each other money, and held lasting grudges. In other words, we've done everything that best friends do. And twenty years after, just like the three legendary musketeers of France, we're still here.

* * *

Umberto, aside from swallowing engagement rings, is, as I described to you earlier, a veterinarian. He's single, and none of the relationships he's been in has ever lasted longer than a year. Which is mysterious, given that Umberto is the living prototype of the ideal husband. He's never in a bad mood, he's self-deprecating, he's not handsome but he's healthy, maybe just a little untutored and impulsive when it comes to his manners. His one shortcoming, if you leave aside his heavy Roman accent, is his punctuality. Which is an unforgivable defect in Italy's capital. Do you know the kind of maniac who, if you arrange to meet in a restaurant at one o'clock actually shows up at five minutes to one? Or the kind of guy who's already waiting outside the movie theater when you get there, and has bought tickets for everyone? Or even worse, if you invite him over to dinner, when he shows up on time he catches you still in slippers and bathrobe, wandering around the apartment?

Umberto can be an inconvenient presence because most of the population of Rome lives about half an hour behind the rest of the world in time. I'm habitually late, and Umberto has always made a point of complaining about it. He claims that he's spent a total of one year of his life waiting for me. His life is just a series of wasted time periods spent waiting for other people, and so he's gotten organized and decided to find a way to fill in these stretches of dead time. He opted for the age-old but immortal lifesaver: reading books. He always carries a pocket graphic novel with him, and he calculates that the time it takes to read it perfectly matches my average delay.

Umberto often spends evenings with us. My wife and my daughter have a special relationship with him. Paola considers him sort of like the brother she never had; she confides in him and coddles him, serving him pans of eggplant Parmesan and lethally rich dishes of tiramisu. Little Eva calls him uncle and chats eagerly with him about their shared love of nature. It goes without saying that he is the trusted veterinarian of our little domestic farm. Sometimes, like so many latter-day Cupids, we set him up on blind dates with schoolteachers who work with Paola, but without ever seeing any dazzling showers of sparks.

* * *

Corrado, as I mentioned before, is an Alitalia pilot. In fact, he's a caricature of a pilot, a perfect archetype: tall, handsome, with a neat goatee, a gentleman, with a full mouth of straight gleaming teeth, and muscular without overdoing it. In short, any stewardess's dream. He's been divorced several times, he has no children, and he has a tendency to set the hearts of all the women he meets afire, only to abandon them, leaving them heartbroken and depressed. To hear him tell it, he hates women because of his two stormy divorces, which have left him with nothing except the obligation to write alimony checks to his two ex-wives, whom he refers to as "the parasites."

His main hobby is just having fun. His chief passion is statistics, and has been ever since our high school days together. We sat at adjoining desks: I had a C minus minus average, he had an A minus/A average. It was just a matter of statistics, he used to say. He never studied a bit, but he managed to foretell, with the

accuracy of a Nostradamus, the day he would be given an oral exam and even the likelihood that he'd be asked this or that question. He remembered everything and he'd compute it all and draw the necessary conclusions: he invariably nailed it exactly. He applied this same method to everything, especially to women, who, as you must already have guessed, were and remain his weakness. Corrado has always gotten more girls than the Fonz. On account of statistics. This is his personal technique for hooking up: as soon as he gets to a party, he will always start chatting up all the girls there, in decreasing order of attractiveness. He'll go over to the prettiest girl there and ask her, with an overabundance of sheer nerve: "Do you want to have sex with me tonight?"

Courtship whittled down to the minimum, he gets straight to the point.

The answer is almost unfailingly: "Have you lost your mind?"

But as he checks off girls and works his way down the ranking, by the time he gets to the tenth or fifteenth entry in the improvised "Belle of the Ball" contest, he'll eventually wind up with a "Sure, why not?"

In my single days, I'd watch as he'd take her off to the nearest bed or dark corner, under my wide, sad eyes. Chalk it up to statistics. He'd calculated that out of a hundred girls, at least thirty would be willing to go to bed with him. To find those thirty, he just had to start optimistically with the prettiest one and then settle for the first one to fall into his net, never the homeliest girl at the party, and always one who was at least cute. All this while I was furiously courting the prettiest one there and coming up empty-handed after two hours of pointless conversation in a fruitless attempt to seem interesting and sexy.

When all is said and done, Corrado is the most thrilling and amusing man in the world to spend time with as a buddy. But, and now I'm addressing my female readers, if you ever meet him, avoid him like the plague. You'll recognize him immediately: he looks like Aramis.

WE'RE ALMOST THERE

Now you have nearly all the ingredients necessary to enjoy this story without a happy ending and witness the imminent arrival of my buddy Fritz. Just a few more essential details and we're done.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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