

No silence among these mountains

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Freedom, the improbable, impossible freedom, had come: but it had not brought us to the Promised Land. It was all around us, but in the form of an unforgiving desert plain.

Primo Levi, *The Truce*

There is an hour in the morning when you cannot be really sure about the existence of the mountains. It happens when the sun has not yet risen, it casts its first faint rays behind the valley; the sky then brightens to a gloomy blue, the peaks become barely distinguishable – they are unreliable lines, profiles that tremble if you stare at them for a long time. Nothing comes to reassure the gaze: the roads and the cars, the houses with their lights and promises of life – everything lies hidden.

It could be the first hour of the world.

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«Are you ready?»

The voice already firm and ringing, Giorgia knocks on the door of my room – which would actually be *her* room, that of her childhood.

«I'm coming».

«Come on, it takes us one hour to get to Casere by car».

I pick up the backpack I carefully prepared, following the list she sent me by text a month ago, after I had asked her

to come with me: inside there are enough snacks to eat every hour, a bottle of water, one K-way in case of rain, and an extra sweater for the night we will spend at the mountain refuge, after reaching the summit. I close the shades, put on the boots I borrowed from Giorgia: last night, trying them on, she tightened them to the maximum – I sat on the single bed, inebriated by the agile and decisive movements with which she closed the laces. At the end she smiled contentedly, feeling the toe of my foot to see how well they fit.

«Perfect».

Michael, my great-grandfather, was also leaving at this time in the morning. The village was still deep in sleep, no one would see him taking the path.

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I know the point where the Aurino river swells and mixes its waters, creating puddles that shine like natural pools, attracting every living creature passing through this valley – even now: not far from us a couple bend down to fill their bottles, a cow drinks behind them, surrounded by few curious children, and, even further away, a Labrador jumps into the water, breaking the sun's reflections, careless of the fresh air and of its owners' calls. I know the shadowy smell of the pines when they are covered in dew, and other times I have walked in the middle of summer next to these small Alpine huts, reddish in the morning light, all different and all identical with their proposals of *Sachertorte* to be enjoyed on long wooden tables. And yet, now that I proceed, following Giorgia's careful, rapid steps, along the path that from the parking lot of Casere will lead us to the mountains, this fragment of South Tyrol does not open around me like a golden childhood landscape; the impression, coming back here after many years, is rather that of walking in a diorama – the faithful reconstruction of something that should be familiar to me, and instead it looks at me through the distance of an unbreakable glass.

«If we keep this rhythm, we will arrive at the refuge in about three hours. That's the first 900 metres of elevation gain».

«From there to the Tauern Pass, how long will it take?»

«I cannot quantify it. Getting to the Austrian border is the hardest part. It's 2800 metres in altitude in all. It's tough, but we can do it».

What fascinates me about Giorgia is not only her lucidity, this practical approach to the mountain that does not allow idealisations. Nor is it just the tonicity of her body, emphasised by a tight black suit, made of some breathable material that blesses circulation. In her lexicon there are *altitudes* and *elevation gain*, she knows that the purplish flowers growing along the path, similar to small dried suns, are called *thistles*, and in the distant clouds she can guess the remote possibility of *precipitation*.

They did not have Georgia's experience. The men and women, the foreigners who came to descend this valley, did not know the language of the mountain. They travelled with clothes that were too light or the wrong size, shoes unsuitable for walking the path. I wonder if once arrived in Casere they enjoyed, at least for a moment, the beauty of the valley, or if they had too much fear, too much rush to get to the trucks that were waiting for them in the parking lot. I wonder how it must have been, for them who had read about the glorious Sinai on which God had engraved the first commandments, to discover, with a frightening journey, that the mountain is above all the ferocity of the elements, the cold and effort that do not forgive inexperience.

«Here we are, soon comes the first tear».

I look at Giorgia without understanding. She smiles, pointing to the rock wall that rises a hundred metres away from us.

«The first climb. That's how Alpinists call it».

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«You know, I'm glad you contacted me to learn more about such an unknown story».

Hannes Obermair connected from Bolzano, but he could have been anywhere: his jagged silhouette floated against the white, neutral background of Zoom. 'EURAC Research' was written in large red letters in the top left corner.

«The abbreviation stands for 'European Academy', the interdisciplinary research institute for which I work as a researcher» he soon clarified.

«Let's start with the numbers: more than five thousand Jews fled over the Tauern Pass, in '47, on their way to Palestine. Men, women – sometimes even pregnant or with young children. They came from different European countries: Germany, Hungary, Poland, Albania, Slovenia, Romania, or what was left of them. They belonged to the mass movement that led to the founding of the State of Israel the following year. An example of *Weltgeschichte*, if we think about it: a fragment of universal history that also reverberated in this valley».

Obermair expressed himself in a perfect Italian, only slightly cracked by the German accent, which gave his sentences an irregular cadence – it resembled the path I am walking now, this stony track that bites the mountain. An accent that makes the language more fragile, more exposed, which was also my accent in the past.

«The members of the Bricha, the underground Jewish organization that arranged the journey, acted with the utmost scrupulousness. They had chosen the Tauern Pass because it was the only section manned by the Italian Carabinieri, who were much more accepting of Jews, strange as it may seem, than the French and British troops who occupied the rest of Austria. England, in particular, at the time exercised a mandate over Palestine, and to avoid disorders it discouraged the repatriation of the Jews in any way. The journey began at night, from the Austrian village of Krimml», Obermair had moved his index finger slowly, as if to draw the route in the air, «and ended the following night in Casere, where the trucks were already waiting to bring them to the port of Genoa. You see, everything was organised in detail. But that none of the inhabitants of this valley would have noticed the passage of hundreds and

hundreds of people, that no one could remember it, seems unlikely to me».

As a historian, Obermair had formulated some hypotheses to explain this 'removal': indeed, as he spoke, I realised that he had devoted much of his thirty-year career to the investigation of this removal. The collaborationism, the ferocious diligence with which the racial laws were applied in South Tyrol, are still the black fire that fuels his life as a scholar.

«You see, anti-Semitism was well rooted in this region: it represented an evolution of the old Catholic anti-Judaism. In addition to this, it came», he paused, measuring his words carefully, «the Nazi *superstrate*. As you know, the province of Bolzano was a pro-Nazi territory during the Second World War. Partly, it must be said, in reaction to the fierce 'Italianisation' policy pursued by Fascism. But in general, there was a strong affinity towards Hitler since the beginning, and not only on the part of the German-speaking *elites* of this region».

«Careful. If you want to turn around and look at the landscape, you have to stop. Otherwise you risk to stumble».

The recommendations of Giorgia are arrows shot from different points of the climb; they force me to straighten my posture, widen my eyes on the path. I imitate her movements, proceeding with careful steps, the eyes fixed on the earth rising beneath my feet. There are points where history overlaps with geography more strongly: this is what I was thinking, listening to Obermair. Investigating the identity of a place also means identifying the elements of which it is composed, finding its *roots* and *superstrata* – almost to compose a scrupulous coring, a sort of geology of events. Throughout the 20th century, hate had been carefully sown along this valley, thrown like salt on the never-healed wound of annexation: this is how Obermair explained not only the silence around the exodus of more than five thousand people along the Tauern Pass, but also the indifference that the South Tyroleans had reserved for them. Resentment had now become the most authentic

fruit of these mountains, and the post-war hunger, far from eradicated it, had only made it more exposed, denuded – just as during the war, Giorgia tells me, entire mountain walls had been denuded, to prevent assaults and ambushes. We stop to catch our breath, a blue light mixes with my vertigo.

«So far, I have spoken of *Jews*, but it is not accurate: technically, the veterans of the concentration camps, and more generally those who had escaped persecution, were called *displaced persons*. Very often they were people without a passport, without a home, or a family context to refer to. Lonely, fragmented, atomized individuals, who found temporary shelters in special camps, waiting for their fate to be decided».

These ‘Displaced persons camps’, depersonalising places by name, were far from rare, according to Obermair: they were set up in Eastern Europe, in Austria and throughout the occupied Reich territories; sometimes even in former concentration camps.

«Yes», he confirmed, clearing his throat, «you got it right. Sometimes the concentration camps were the first support stations for the survivors».

I had not thought of Primo Levi’s *The Truce* [La Tregua] while conversing with Obermair: but now, as the effort weighs down my legs, and the breath breaks between my lungs – I can no longer understand what I feel, whether these shivers are cold or tiredness, hunger or vertigo – in this upheaval of the body over which I seem to have no control, the images of that book read years ago re-emerge; at the time, it had struck me for its strange mixture of poetry and rawness, because the elegant precision of the language coexisted with the horror it recounted. Written in 1947, *The Truce* is the story of Levi’s long journey back to Turin, after the liberation of the Buna-Monowitz camp; by a dark irony of fate, the first stop of the repatriation was Auschwitz. Deserted by fleeing SS men, occupied by a few unprepared Russian squads, the highly efficient metropolis of horror was now an open-air sanatorium, where the scythe of death irreparably distinguished between the lost and the saved,

between those who would have sunk forever into the concentration hell, and the *displaced* who would have instead returned to the world, free but not redeemed.

«We need to speed up: I'm starting to feel some raindrops». I cannot know where the journey of the women and men who crossed this valley continued. But I do know where the journey began: not really at the border with Austria, but much earlier, among the shattered barracks in which they had struggled to stay alive, discovering the darkest parts of themselves. In these 'stations' they had often stayed even beyond the end of the conflict, realising that they were something even less than spoils of war – which, despite its ruthlessness, guaranteed some value: in Obermair's words, nothing more than “a logistical supply challenge”, “numbers difficult to manage for the powers that won the conflict”, “subjects that no longer figured in any registry”. The condition of *displaced* was formed for the first time in my mind precisely by contrast to Obermair's formal language.

«How do you reconstruct the history of what happened, if no visible traces remain?»

Until then I had listened to Obermair attentively, taking notes; now that question arose spontaneously, surprising me. He waited a few seconds before answering.

«You know, Walter Benjamin used to say that the historical process should not be addressed to the winners, but to the losers, to the memory of those who would not be entitled to it. What happened on the Tauern Pass, the anonymity of the lives that crossed it, is precisely one of these cases. We have the edges, but we do not know much about the individual events, about the small, singular dramas. You have to work on the fragments: cross a lot of data, collect the stories of the survivors and their descendants. Above all, return to the place. Walk along it, looking for what we have missed».

Giorgia's voice announces the approach of an arrival point, but when I look up there is nothing certain: my eyes get wet, blurring the wooden profiles of the refuge, and she who is waiting for me with her hood up, at the end of the path, seems to me a black, slender trunk, unexpected at this

altitude. It takes me a few seconds to realise that all around me there are no more woods or trees, that the mountain has gradually opened to reveal nothing but layers of earth and grass – looking up, towards the still unimaginable peaks, everything fades only into dark stone.

As I walk with the last remnants of my strength, I do what I should not do: I turn to east, towards where I came from, and it happens. Tiredness and fatigue prevail. I see the mountains curving and sliding down to the valley, the peaks melting and mixing with the sibilant rivulets of water at my feet. The distant, sunny forests widen until they become lakes, strange pools of light that fill my eyes, and indeed something of me disperses too, something proceeds and clings to the mountain and something else slips away forever, together with the very cold drops that now fall on my warm arms – I realize that it is not rain, but *snow*, it is precisely snow that now, on a July day, falls tacitly on the path.

«You know, it is not at all unlikely what you wrote to me in your e-mail: there had to be someone to accompany the *displaced persons* through the valley».

It's the last thing I remember about the conversation with Obermair: his formality stretching into a half-smile, revealing a genuine curiosity.

«*Schmugglers*, yes. They knew the Tauern pass better than anyone. Along the path, even before the war, they bartered oil, sugar, basic necessities. It is possible, but I cannot be sure about it, that some of them could also work as guides. According to what you told me, your great-grandfather could have been one of them».

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Schmuggler, from the German verb *schmuggeln*, literally: the act of secretly transporting goods across a border, or, more generally, engaging in clandestine trade. Adopted in the literary language at the beginning of the 18th century, from the verb *schmuggeln* come the Danish *smugle*, Swedish *smuggle* and the English *to smuggle*. According to

accredited hypotheses, the term would have come into use in the Germanic languages near the North Sea, and would derive from the Norwegian dialect form *smokla*, where the variation in *k* carries a nuance of uncertainty. The original meaning of *schmuggeln* would therefore not be ‘smuggling’ but ‘sneaking away’, ‘disappearing from view’, ‘hiding’.

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«The glacier you see, on the other side of the valley, is the Peak of the Three Lords [Picco dei Tre Signori]. The highest peak in the valley, the northernmost point in Italy».

Lying on the wooden benches facing the mountain shelter, I turn my head towards the spot indicated by Giorgia: a blade of light is drawn under my eyelids, but I cannot bring it into focus. Tiredness has softened every muscle.

«Beyond that border, Austria begins. But we will go from west, on the opposite side».

I try to calm my breath, while the blood circulates convulsively and awakens every part of me; I feel my ankles throbbing against the boots. Unknown voices swarm behind me, strangers come to stop at the shelter.

«It is an unusual name» I say, «Peak of the Three Lords».

Giorgia sits again; she stretches her hand to caress the long stems that emerge under the bench. She told me that as a child she used to lay her palm on nettles, enjoying that restrained feeling of burning. «Always the same story. Three rich man – princes, bishops or whatever – discovered these territories and took possession of them». She rests an elbow on the table, turns to me and then back to the glacier; her brown hair is the same colour as the mountains. «As if it were really possible, to possess a valley».

I would like to name the distant ridges or distinguish the rocks that emerge here and there from the grassy mantles, but I do not have Giorgia’s knowledge; my vocabulary is poor at this altitude. I came up here on the trail of a man of whom I have nothing left but fragile clues, messy and unreliable chronicles. “Urgroßvater” in Italian is translated as “great-grandfather”, but it literally means “old and great

father”; and I really imagined him, as a child, this very old father, as big as a fairy-tale creature, sitting in the *stubelle* always saturated with cigarette smoke. This stranger, on whom an incomprehensible silence had descended in the family, resurfaced in the broken stories of my maternal grandmother – I did not know the word ‘dementia’, but I knew my Oma’s blurred eyes, as distant as unreachable lakes, her face frozen in that inexpressive stillness that is a temporary absence of life. Michael appeared in those cracks, from the fractures where her memory shattered and reassembled. Michael who had been born and raised among these mountains, when they still belonged to Austria. Michael who passed almost unnoticed in the village, and when customers came through the door of the family shop, it was not to him that they addressed, but to his wife Katharina. Michael who used to disappear for days on the mountains, none of the children were allowed to follow him. Only once Oma had seen him return: unable to sleep, she had cast her gaze beyond the window, and in the tense darkness she had sensed something, ‘something like a forest on the move’. Her father was barely recognisable – a stranger among strangers, a shadow among shadows.

I have never gone so far, I do not know the high mountains: but I do know that in each of us there are points to which it is possible to retreat, crevasses that cannot be measured, beyond which we become strangers even to ourselves. For the first time, after years of fantasising about Michael, I want to know more: not only who he was, and what happened in what would have been his last summer. I want to know the place where he used to disappear.

«What is that distant rumble? I hear it since we started the climb».

«The glacier melting. It happens every summer, it is the mountain changing its skin. In the last period it happens more and more rapidly».

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He wrote at night, when the dark rooms of the displaced camp of Saalfelden were saturated with the sleepy breathing of his comrades. Brightened by occasional lamps, Eliyahu Litani indulged in passionate, detailed letters: every week, he would update his loved ones on the number of *displaced persons* he and other members of the Jewish Brigade had managed to gather, lingering, not without a certain pride, on the gratitude that some of the exiles had reserved for him – shaking his hands several times, whispering “Shalom, Shalom”, before disappearing into the mountains.

Her son Rami still keeps every one of those letters: in connection from Tel Aviv, on a bright June afternoon, he showed me some of them; the memory of those angular characters now blurs with the irregular profiles of the stones that punctuate the landscape. The two thousand metres, Giorgia informs me, mark the threshold of uninhabitability: only rare species of flowers can survive beyond this altitude, and even if the climb that awaits us is less steep than the one we have already made, the fatigue of the journey will be more acute – «oxygen at this height is reduced by twenty-five percent». Around us, the mountain as I knew it has disappeared, giving way to a gloomy lunar landscape.

«In recent years I have realised this: *everyone is a story*». Rami accompanied his broken English with sweeping hand gestures and a firm tone of voice. He had no reticence in sharing fragments of his family history, on the contrary: talking about his father seemed to give him genuine enthusiasm.

«You know, when I was young, I wasn't very interested in his ventures. It was only a few years ago, with the birth of my grandson, that I began to ask myself: what will be left of me once I am gone? Then I realised that this is my vocation, to keep alive the memory of the people who crossed the Tauern in '47. I started a radio programme on this subject, and in a short time I received an incredible amount of testimonies from children or grandchildren of *displaced persons*, material that I would like to donate to a museum.

Everyone is a story», he repeated, sharpening a smile, «*even you*».

Rami was not speaking as a historian, but as a descendant: as one who has inherited an incomplete history and wants to be its custodian, confident that each fragment will find its place. I have the opposite impression: the more I rearrange the fragments, the more the overall picture seems to escape me. The more I dig into the silence that surrounds the figure of Michael, the more I have to deal with a greater silence.

«The Italian Carabinieri, guarding along the border, did not hinder the Jews. And probably there were some guides: I can't be sure about it, but it is not unlikely. The path was already risky during the day, imagine at night».

And I imagine it: I imagine that I cannot see the mountain that rises steeply to my right, and the void that now opens up to my left; I imagine that of this vertiginous slope I have only an impression, the disorientation of stretching my hands in the dark and finding no holds. I imagine that I cannot follow Giorgia's steps, but only perceive their dry sound in the darkness, and that I am responsible not only for my own life, but also for that of many others, because a stumble or a simple distraction could cause a slowdown, attracting the attention of guards never far enough.

«Unfortunately, I cannot tell you whether my father and Michael ever met. Nobody revealed his name along the Tauern route. I know that the Bricha members worked undercover: they infiltrated Austrian *displaced camps* pretending to be British soldiers, or perhaps took the identity of other refugees who had already reached Palestine. About the *displaced*, well, they often no longer had documents. And the Italians were afraid: they would have never revealed their identity, too afraid of being reported».

Rami had repeated it more than once: the *Italians*. For him, reasonably, the people of the Aurina Valley could only be Italians; German-speaking, perhaps, but Italians nonetheless – as it has long been established by the bureaucratic division of borders. Yet, in the idea I have of

Michael, in the confusing details I struggle to stitch together, I cannot imagine him as either Italian or Austrian. “We are the just mountain people,” Oma used to say: to me, who only knew the mountains in summer, and every summer in a distracted way, that formula seemed only a way of reiterating her disinterest, her total disregard for any change that took place in the rest of the country. Only now I recognise her wisdom, now that the stones beneath my feet are become huge boulders, and the path to the summit is just an intuition, a line to guess in the middle of a broken ground – as if the world had never begun, and after who knows what ancient eruption everything had remained potential, at a mineral stage, solidified before taking a form. ‘Italy’ or ‘Austria’ are already problematic definitions in the valley; here they lose all the meaning.

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Perhaps Michael, despite his habit, felt a strange vertigo looking down from here, towards the tiny houses, suspended in a veil of light. Perhaps he could only find ridiculous that the regimes claimed this place for themselves, sharing it as a spoil of war. With the *Anschluss* of ‘39 there were no more doubts, no promiscuity tolerated: on one side stood the *Austrians*, now citizens of the Reich, and on the other the *Italians*, equally imprisoned in their own fantasies of purity. The *Italians*, for Michael, now represented a very specific category: the men who appeared in uniform in the family drugstore, as in many other shops in the village, taking away what they wanted – Michael and Katharina had walked for miles in the valley to get that goods, knocking on the door of every house they met, stubbornly bartering every object that might have any value, chewing the bark of the pines when hunger clawed on their stomachs. But the looting would only be the beginning.

Michael had a sincere love for music: it is one of the few personal details I have left about him. He could play almost any instrument, and had a particular passion for wind

instruments. This mysterious man, who rarely engaged in conversations, had found another way to make his voice heard in the village. Concerts were the only social ritual he indulged in: one of these, a warm autumn evening, was also attended by a commando of *Italians*. All the while they danced, sang, laughed while raising their beer mugs. Then, at the end of the concert, they proposed to the whole square a toast to the Duce. Michael remained firmly seated, eyes down, intent on cleaning up his brass. He had always refused the Fascist salute, but I know for sure that he was not a partisan: in the few photos that remain of him, he appears indeed with a long mustache curled upwards – a heartfelt homage, it seems, to Franz Joseph of Austria. He felt nostalgia for an empire that he, born in 1909, had never really known, and I wonder if the occupiers were precisely annoyed by these contradictions, by the spontaneous hostility of a man who could not be ascribed to any political faith – “We are mountain people”. That evening, the *Italians* waited for him on the doorstep; they left only late at night, now certain that, with three fingers missing, Michael could never play again.

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«You know, there is something that my father never stopped to pointing out, in his letters as well as in his stories».

The light had now fallen in Rami's apartment; in the screen, only a blue-veined shadow remained of him.

«The Tauern Pass was used not only by Jews who had escaped persecution. Former soldiers or political prisoners, also veterans from the camps, travelled along the border; sometimes, even Nazi soldiers».

With a note of gloom in his voice, Rami confirmed to me what Obermair had also mentioned: men like Adolf Eichmann, Josef Mengele and Erich Priebke, together with thousands of Nazi collaborators, had fled to South Tyrol at the end of the war, taking the same route as the *displaced persons*; once arrived at the port of Genoa, instead of

leaving for Palestine, they would have sailed for South America or Argentina. The dioceses of Bolzano and Bressanone, as well as the International Red Cross, had provided them with fake identities and travel documents, but it was often the inhabitants of the Valley themselves who had offered them refuge; this, more than anything else, was a fact that Rami could not explain to himself: the doors had opened for the executioners, but not for the victims.

«You see» he had added, when a dark, unstable swarm of pixels now filled the screen, an image struggling to hold itself together, «it was above all from of their own villagers, that every *smuggler* had to be careful».

I listened attentively; I thought of Michael's body, found one September morning, right at the beginning of the path. His silhouette barely discernible among the tall grass caressing the trunks of the pines; the bruised face, every feature disfigured. Katharina had barely recognised him.

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«I can't do it».

«Yes, you can: put your feet exactly where I put them».

I listen to Giorgia's instructions until her voice thins to an unintelligible sound, a lapping of words that is impossible for me to translate into action. Fear prevents any thought, it is sharp and shiny like the iron rod to which I should cling, walking grazing the mountain: there is no other way to cross the void that opens up between two spurs of rock, a few meters from us. For a moment, I imagine the alpinists who must have installed this kind of railing: the precise calculations, the effort that must have cost them to sculpt and pierce the stone, to thread the hooks deep enough to guarantee a foothold.

«Give me your things, I'll carry them».

I try to resist, but Giorgia insists and takes off my backpack: she unrolls it and shapes it in her hands, until the weight I thought I had carried is reduced to a small bundle; she puts it inside her backpack, gets up again. Looking at her from behind, she is now a kind of tower on the move.

I try to imitate her as best as I can: I proceed slowly, step by step. When I grab the railing, I feel my heart beating at my fingertips.

If they had only been here in broad daylight; if they had not walked the path in the dark, but under this imperious sun; if they had seen the place into which they were going — this kind of high-altitude desert, this immense expanse without shadows — then even the most solid faith would have wavered. There is no celestial clue here, no promise of another world: approaching the summit you realize that the summit is as earthly as it gets. It is in the high mountains that the prophets listen to the word of God; the only things I can listen to are the slow and dull sound of the wind between the rocks, the distant bells of the goats that go up the steepest slopes and, above all, the inextinguishable rumble of the glacier that slowly decays down into the Valley, memory that everything transforms and disappears.

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I was grateful to Rami for his sharing: he had provided me with substantial information on the exodus along the Tauern Pass, but at a certain point I had felt a discrepancy between our visions. What he told was a linear story: people who had always been persecuted finally returned home, to the land that had been promised to them by ancient scriptures. This story, which interrupted in 1948, with the foundation of the State of Israel, did not consider everything that would have happened afterwards and that still happens today; it did not consider that the exodus of the *displaced* would have produced other *displaced*, and that the promised land would have not been a kingdom of peace, but yet another bloody frontier. The exodus on the Tauern Pass for me is not the fragment of a linear story, rather of a spiral tirelessly spreading day after day, so ancient that it is impossible to identify its origin. Indeed, it seems to me that there has always been a ghostly, unknown country of *displaced persons*, who cross empires and nations on foot, venturing along paths not suitable for men

– exiled, uprooted persons, changing languages, names and religions, but always remaining foreigners.

There was one other detail that Rami had told with some pride; it emerges now that I have one last climb to go. It happened that in the *displaced persons* camps the members of the Bricha held real Hebrew lessons: among the evacuees there were in fact people who had never practiced, or had practiced other religions, men and women for whom the Jewish origin had represented only one of the many roots that enriched their family tree – only the anti-Semitic laws had reduced them to a single, absolute identity. This detail gave me a cold shiver: and now that the valley has disappeared, transformed into a burning horizon, barely perceptible beyond this endless rocky sea, I can really see them, these *displaced* without a house or a language, proceeding compactly; a man guides them, walking nearby.

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Giorgia suddenly stops, dropping her backpack on the ground. She pulls her camera out, then points the lens at a patch of long flowers I hadn't noticed – their dense, dark-pink petals stand out among the brown rocks.

«Fireweed: one of my favourites. It only grows far from the passage of men, on the edge of crevasses». She crouches on the ground; for a few seconds I listen to the slow, steady beat of the shutter.

No more houses, no more woods or people can be glimpsed: if we spend enough time at this height, we might forget the people we were.

«Go ahead, we are close to the summit».

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He had to make the last climb at this time of the afternoon, just before the sun began to set. Looking up, he had to see the peaks as I see them now, edged with a light that has all the veins of fire.

He proceeded alone, accompanied by the echo of his own footsteps, but it must have happened to him too, at least once, that the distant sound of goats suddenly became closer, and the thin snouts pressed against his calves as if to push him; stretching out his hands, he could feel the shaggy fur of the animals running under his fingers.

He would have waited until evening, looking for a shelter among these high rocks that sparkle like tongues of fire. He would have spent the last hours of the day among fugitives, deserters, *displaced persons* from every country, among peasant women in long shaggy clothes who had come to smuggle tobacco with bored soldiers. And who knows if at least here, under another name, at the beginning and the end of every possible story, Michael ever felt at home.