

A STORY OF FOREIGNERS

Livia had just finished running. She was struggling to breathe and she didn't have any water left in her bottle. The only good thing was that she wasn't that far away from home. She had to sneak back home quickly or else her mother would scold her.

"Livaaaa! Leave your shoes out of the door! I keep on telling you every time!"

"Already done!" She shouted in the distance.

"How was your day?" Her mum had such a shrilling voice.

"Mummy, one moment! Let me get downstairs!" Livia couldn't stand her mum's rapid series of questions.

"Well, it was a good day." She answered.

"Really? I've heard you sighing from upstairs!"

"Oh, it's because I was running back home and I was short on water too."

She wasn't telling the truth. That same day, Livia had an oral science exam. She knew she would be picked, so she had studied really hard for that. Although she didn't want to, she kept on recollecting those terrible moments.

"What is the name for the cells in our brain?"

"Uhm..."

"Let's move on to the next question. Now tell me, what is the peripheral nervous system used for?"

"Well... it serves to rework the information coming from the central nervous system by providing the answer that will be redistributed in the body through the central nervous system."

"No, it's the opposite, that's the central nervous system!!! Livia, did you study for this oral test?"

"Yes, I hope so."

"Okay, Livia, you can sit down. I must say, there must be something wrong in the way you study then."

Mr. Pavan was pretty harsh sometimes, but that day, apart from his shocked reaction, at least he had tried to focus on a possible reason why her performances were pretty bad.

Livia was staring off into space, her eyes full of anger and disappointment. She was swollen and bursting with tears. Inside he thought:

"Here's another bad grade, how am I going to tell this to mom?"

This time too, her anxiety had played a bad trick, as if suddenly a thick fog had fallen into her head and had paralyzed her mouth. She had irrevocably sunk in total shame. She was feeling glum, depressed and angry with herself.

"Livia, I want to give you another chance. Let's reschedule a remedial oral test next Monday."

Mr. Pavan really looked like a human being that day. It was the thought of all the kids, besides this one:

"It's gonna snow today for sure!"

This is my chance to improve my marks or worsen my social and school life, that's to die. I wish I could disappear right now. She thought sadly.

Livia found speaking in public very difficult. When she had to talk in front of many people her hands sweated, her heart beat hard: all she knew suddenly disappeared. She was afraid of people's judgement. Suddenly, a glimpse of light hit her mind.

What if there was somebody that couldn't judge her? Her "sad memories recollection moment" was over.

"Livia! Hurry up! Bean pasta is getting cold!"

"Sorry mum, I'm only having a sandwich because I have to finish something for school. We have LOADS of homework for the next few days!"

"Okay, if it's for school it's okay. Maybe you'll improve your grades by the end of the trimester!"

Livia ignored that sentence. Her brilliant plan would work, and she was proud of that.

She rushed into the living room. Just as she was getting in, a brown-coloured flash speeded past her, sounding like a horde of faraway buffaloes running. Then it stopped, and the figure of an orange cat appeared on the carpet.

"Who's my favourite kitten? Oh, isn't it you Max?"

screamed Livia in her cutest voice. The only answer was a loud MEOW, followed by the sound of a cat pleasantly purring on the sofa. She sat down and spoke: "We have a lot of work to do!"

She took the cat, who planted his nails in the couch, making a huge hole on the fabric of the couch before scratching his owner aggressively. Livia ran back to her room, close the door, laid the cat down in a bag she found on her chair and said:

"I hope you like science, because for a couple of hours you will be listening to some interesting stuff!" Since it didn't have any way out, the cat simply settled on the comfy chair and pretending to listen to a bunch of meaningless words for two hours in a row. Livia's voice sounded like a robotic angel, due to the rhythm of the information. Sometimes it sounded like a song too, being interrupted by some loud MEOWS and some screams. The cat appeared really unsettled, as if he was in a prison, so he tore apart some pages from her science book. "Bother! You, bad cat!"

THE DAY arrived. Livia was nervous, but she remembered the pearls of wisdom her cat kept on telling her while rehearsing: "Meow!"

She confidently walked into class, pressing her lucky necklace. "My mom will be proud of me," she thought. Suddenly a veil of sadness covered her face. Sure, if only she was proud of her for other than the list of good grades in her diary. She threw that uncomfortable thought away: she wouldn't let her ruin that memorable day. She answered all Mr. Pavan's questions. It was a success.

On the other side of the class Nora, Livia's enemy, an annoying girl, was staring at her envious with his darker green eyes. Nora turned around, and her straight, long black hair waved through the air. How she hated that girl with that air of superiority, such a daddy's girl with an annoying personality.

Livia used to think she just acted like a goose. Suddenly Livia's eyes started to shine triumphantly, when she noticed a flaw in that perfect girl: a hole in her black trousers. You could hear all the laughs of the class. "Finally, I got my revenge" she thought. The girl was upset. Livia didn't know if she had to laugh or not. She didn't want to look stupid, so she decided to cackle. It was a poncey laugh. Livia didn't feel comfortable as she thought she would be, and she didn't know why. She didn't think much about it.

The sound of the bell spread in the air, making all the students run out happily.

"Livia!!" It was Paolo, his best buddy.

"Hii! Why are you so happy? Do I have to worry?"

"Tomorrow my dad will be out of town for the whole day. Do you know what it means?" he asked excited.

"Are you having lunch at our home? I can tell my mum, if you like bean pasta" she said with a disgusted smirk on her face.

"No! It means I have his inflatable all for me and we can take a trip in the Lagoon and fish all day!"

"You crazy? I can't play hooky...What excuse can I make up? Maybe I could ask her if she let me come"

"Right, she'll let you come for sure!" laughed Paolo "She's tougher than a police officer! Just find an excuse! I told my mum we're staying at school till late to finish our science project. My mum bought it so bad!" he suggested craftily.

"Ok, I'll tell her the same. If she asks your mum, I'm safe." Livia was too excited to refuse his friend's proposal. "I'll bring some snacks and my bathing suit!"

"And I'll get two fishing cans...you'll see how a proper fishman can fish."

"Don't be full of yourself! Or either no food for you!"

"I'll eat all the fish I catch! You'll see!"

That night Livia was super excited and anxious, too. When the sun lukewarm rose timidly she was already awake. Paolo had just snuck out and waited for Livia on her father's inflatable near the pier.

The silhouette of a little girl appeared on the horizon: "Here I am!" she panted. "I've filled my backpack with woolen blankets too, stolen from my mum's chest of drawers!" She was proud of her naughty act and wondered what would happen if her mum realised she had played hooky.

"Whatever" she thought. If she got worried a little bit about her daughter for once, perhaps she would understand she was worth more than a list of votes.

The dock of Chioggia was brimming with life in the early morning: fishermen returning home, fishmongers getting ready to sell their fish, seagulls looking for food. The people were all in their business and no one noticed two little kids blending like fishers.

They felt excited, but also alert in case somebody discovered them. Paolo had a passion for the sea, inherited from his father, who used to take him as a child hunting for gilthead breams and sea basses in Venetian waters. The dinghy speeded up. They felt free as the wind ruffled their hair. Paolo's blond curly hair constantly got into his face, making it hard for him to see and drive.

The Venice Lagoon stretched like a maze of canals between reeds and islets.

On the horizon the water appeared very calm. It was a feeble green. On the sea bottom you could see the sand. The silence was interrupted only by the chirp of seagulls and the squawking of ducks.

"Where are we heading to?" asked Livia curiously.

"We are going to Pellestrina."

"Really?! Wow, I've never been there! What about you?"

"Yes, I've been there with my dad many times long ago." He started talking while sailing. "Here!" He pointed to the horizon "Here is my favourite lagoon."

"Wow!" Livia, more excited than him.

They got out of the inflatable. The little village was made of two rows of colorful houses, one on the right and another one on the left side of a single road. Behind them, the sea. Little kids were playing on the street.

"Let's stop here. This place is perfect for fishing!"

They began fishing freely, alone. Paolo was an expert at fishing, while Livia was extremely struggling. Her dad had tried to teach her something about fishing before passing away, but she never really liked it nor became good at it.

"Not bad" said Paolo, satisfied. A bunch of fish was not a bad result after only one hour. Giulia addressed her look away. The outline of a small hut appeared on the horizon. The sun behind was a perfectly round orange ball.

"Let's dive in and reach that small house." She suggested.

"Uhm...I don't know, we'll have to leave all our stuff here." He said uncertain.

"No one will take it. We'll just go for a swim."

The air was hot, almost sultry, and a bit of cold water was just what they needed. They swam closer to the hut.

"Look! It's a shack," said Paolo.

"Does anyone live here?" Asked Livia curiously.

"I don't think so. It must be one of those old fishermen sheds."

The "house" was a floating building on the sea supported by some canes. The main platform was made of wood and refuse. On the platform there was a tiny hut, made of metal and plastic taken from trash. On the roof there was a greenish flag and a lot of trinkets. Little decorations made from colourful fabrics decorated the external part of the hut. All the structure was tied by a rope. Some old faded puppets and crumple books were tied together to the hut with another rope.

The kids were fascinated by such a place.

"Let's take a better look inside!" Suggested Livia.

They climbed up the stairs and got up on the platform. They tried to open the door. It was very hard, but they could get inside: "There's a bed here!" uttered Paolo.

"And a stove! Someone lives there!" Uttered Livia with her eyes wide open.

The hut was full of colourful paintings with extravagant colours leaning against the walls. They conveyed joy and serenity. Livia felt as if she was in another mysterious world.

"Look at this one!"

"They have such amazing colours."

"And thousands of weird details."

They were so immersed that nothing would distract them when suddenly the noise coming from outside upset them. Someone coughing was nearby. They looked at each other full of fear. They peeked through a hole in the wood. The shape of a man was getting down from the stair in the roof.

"Somebody's coming! Quick, let's hide!"

Paolo hid behind a painting, while Livia hid quickly under the bed. They heard loud footsteps, a man coughing along.

"Back to my tiny little hut, in the middle of nowhere, alone, with no food. If only I had somebody keeping me company for the rest of the day! Maybe two young fellas that are seeking shelter..."

These words sounded a bit odd to the two little adventurers. Livia, fearing the man could have noticed their presence, moved backwards. Accidentally, she stomped a can of paint which made another can fall, causing a chain reaction that made a can of paint collapse on her head. She was now all covered in pinkish paint:

"Gotcha, little girl" said the man calmly.

"Now come out and I won't harm you. And you too, you, blonde guy! I've seen you behind that painting."

"We're sorry, we promise we won't destroy your art, we promise!" cried Livia.

"Yes sir, we'll do just like she said!" added the boy.

"Who are you?" asked the man frowning.

"I'm Livia, and I live in Chioggia."

"Chioggia!? You came here all the way from Chioggia!?"

"Yes we did, sir."

"Oh, stop calling me sir, call me Giorgio."

"Hi Giorgio, I'm Paolo, I'm also from Chioggia. Me and Livia are friends."

"What were you doing here?" he asked while twirling a wrench, which scared the two guys a little bit.

"We were just snooping around."

"You should watch where you stick your nose." Threatened the man.

"To apologize for bothering you, we will give you the fish we fished earlier today!" suggested Livia.

"Ehi! It's my fish, I should decide." Replied Paolo. Livia glared at him.

"We will be more than happy to give you our fish!" Paolo reformulated his sentence in a flash.

"Thank you, that would be very gentle of you." Answered the man. "Alright, first we should wash the paint off of you."

"You're right, do you have a shower?" asked the girl.

"Do I look like I have a shower?" questioned the man. "Go and wash yourself in the sea, we won't watch."

Livia didn't seem sure about washing herself in the water.

"Just kidding. There is a curtain and a bucket with water in that corner, and there is some soap on the shelf too. I'm not a caveman!" laughed the man.

"Oh, thank God!" Replied the girl with a shy smile.

While Livia was trying to get the paint off her, Paolo and Giorgio began to talk.

"How long have you been to Pellestrina?"

"For a couple of years, but I prefer not to talk about this."

"Are foreigners looked down here?" asked the boy.

“Well, if you live on a hut like me, you are.”

“Did you make any friends?” asked Paolo more and more curious. Meanwhile Livia overheard their them talking: she wouldn’t miss one word.

“I have a few friends”, continued the man “one of them is Carlo, the baker, the other is Mario, the barber. They are always polite and kind with me. Some others are rude, they say I cannot be part of this village.”

“Well, even if I don’t know you, you seem a good man!” chipped Livia in.

The man laughed. “Don’t worry, little girl. I don’t mind about that. There’s no place I really belong to.” The two friends were sad for him. Having no one around to love and take care of you was just unbearable. “I know what you’re thinking – said the man – I’m used to it. I’ve got the sea, my paintings, my fish.” His tone was calm and resigned.

Livia immediately thought about her enemy, Nora. Didn’t anyone want to be looked with kindness and affection? She was trapped in her thoughts.

“Livia, are you ready to go?” asked Paolo. “Giorgio will show us around!”

“Yeah, let’s go!”

“Are you a famous painter?” asked Livia while walking along the narrow street.

“I used to. I was the illustrator of popular Italian newspaper. That was a long time ago.”

“Wow, you are a celebrity!” uttered Paolo “They should treat you with respect instead of looking down on you” he added in an angry tone, while addressing the people who were staring at them.

“You don’t deserve respect just because you’re a celebrity, do you?” Paolo bent his head. After all, the man was right. Some elderly, sitting in the shadow on old straw chairs outside their houses, frowned and whispered to each other. The real preoccupation of those people was actually another: could that man hurt the little foreigners? The two friends felt a bit uncomfortable.

“Let’s move to more friendly faces” said Giorgio entering a bakery. “Hi there!”

“Hi Giorgio, who are your two new friends?”

“Just two curious tourists from Chioggia!”

“Oh! Chioggiotti are bad guys” laughed the man, handing out a small olive baguette to the kids.

“Thank you” thanked them together.

They visited some other shops, including a small restaurant right on the pier. “Look! There’s one of your paintings there! I can recognize the colours and the details!” uttered Livia, peeking over the window of the greengrocer.

“Yes, Gino asked for a painting for his shop. And I made it, in exchange for...a stockpile of bananas for three years!” said Giorgio amused.

“Banana for three years?!” asked Paolo astonished.

“Well, a man has to feed himself, doesn’t he?” replied the painter.

“Fair enough!” They kept on walking, while the man started telling them about his paintings and his adventures. The kids listened to him in religious silence.

“I’d stay here for hours.” Thought Livia. Then she remembered that someone would notice her absence very soon. Well, she had to think of a believable excuse for her mom. What an anguish.

“Paolo, we’d better go, shall we?”

“Um... yeah, yeah.”

“Mr. Foresto, if you agree we would come and see you tomorrow.”

“If I don’t change my mind, you’ll always find me here.”

The kids greeted the man, quickly got on the inflatable and left, leaving the long narrow strip of land behind them. Their hearts were full of wonder.

It was late when they arrived. Time had flown while they were on the island and they didn’t think about the consequences of their “day off” until that moment. Paolo sneaked home, greeting Livia silently, while thinking about a good excuse his mother could buy. At the very worst, he would get away with it

being scolded and told off. Livia was walking home, sucked into the shadow of darkness, which made her feel more scared. She just could think of lame excuses her mother would NEVER buy.

"That's the end." She thought.

"Now I can say goodbye to any future day out. Oh!" She tried to get rid of the anger and disappointment that were taking over. "Think, Livia, think!" She kept saying.

When all seemed lost, a flash of genius hit her.

She snuck into the house silently.

"Where have you been!?" she asked angrily.

"Uhm...I can explain!"

"I'm disappointed! You won't leave the house for a while! Now, go to your room!"

"But Mum!"

"What I did just say?!"

"Do you remember my lucky necklace? The one Nona gave me? I couldn't find it anywhere! Paolo and I were playing near Paolo's house when I lost it. I was in panic, I thought I wouldn't find the necklace anymore and so we went to find it but we were lost! Here, look, I found it." She showed her the necklace.

"I'm not sure about that, but I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. It's not going to happen again, alright? Otherwise, you will be grounded for a month!"

"Okay mum, I'm sorry. I love you."

"Alright, now just go to sleep. It's late." She would have said a more tender word, but her strictness forbade it. Livia knew that. She was just like her grandma used to be. Nevertheless, a tear ran down her cheek.

She was lying in her bed. She could still smell the scent of salt, hear the sound of the waves, see the orange sun mirroring on the water, feel the peace of that island. Most of all, she could picture the people and animals in Giorgio's paintings coming to life.

The next day Livia felt a kind of nostalgia. She kept thinking of that lonely man in his hut.

"Muuuum! I'm oooff!" she shouted.

"Ok, take these pancakes I've just made."

"Yummy! Don't wait for me for lunch today, I will stay at school for...extracurricular activities."

"Extracurricular activities? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Hmmm...I forgot to tell you."

"Oook..." replied the woman I bit suspicious.

"See you then!"

Right after school Livia and Paolo left for Pellestrina. This time they took the *vaporetto*. They immediately went to Giorgio's shelter.

"Hi guys!" Said Giorgio happily "I haven't had so many guests in my house since forever!"

"Hi Giorgio!" uttered the two friends together.

"I need to buy some new paint. Do you want to come?"

"Sure! Let's go!"

The old man introduced the kids to Mario the barber. Here they found another painting by Giorgio hanging on the barber shop's wall. "Oh, so you *are* a famous painter!" uttered Paolo.

"I had to beg him for having that painting!" Replied Mario.

It was market day and the streets were full of tourists. All of a sudden, they heard a woman screaming.

"Hey, help me!! Somebody stole my bag! Help, Help!"

A tall thin man wearing a cap started to make his way through the crowd. He ran toward Giorgio holding looking back. He accidentally bumped against him, dropping the woman's bag. Then, he disappeared. The woman saw Giorgio on the ground, holding her bag.

"Hey! You sir! Drop that bag?" Ordered the police officer who had just arrived.

"No, there's a mistake. It wasn't me. A guy dropped it in front of me!" replied the painter.

"Then why is the woman's purse in your hands, you beggar!" replied the officer.

He wasn't listening to Giorgio's alibi, neither to Livia and Paolo's confused explanations. Mario rushed to Giorgio's aid, but he was in his shop and didn't witness anything. The judgmental gazes of the people in the street were set on the "foreigner". *The thief has to be him*, they seemed to say.

Giorgio was arrested. He was alone. The trial was set in a week. Livia and Paolo were shocked about the situation, and couldn't do anything but returning to their house.

The following days Paolo and Livia avoided talking about what had happened. They knew that if they wanted to testify, they needed their parents' permission. Who had the guts to tell them they had played hooky? Again? Livia not for sure.

The day before the trial they met during the recess.

"Livia, tomorrow is *the* day. I thought it over: we need to testify! We cannot leave Giorgio alone and let he rots in prison! He's our friend!"

"I can't tell my mom! She'd kill me!"

"You can, if you want. Listen, I'll talk to my dad right after school. I don't care if he scolds me, I'm sure he'll understand."

Livia knew it was up to her now. She had to decide. Letting her mom down again or doing what her heart told her to do.

On her way home anxiety increased. *Stick to the truth*. Giorgio's blue eyes were engraved in her mind. She decided to enter:

"Hi mom. I have to ask you something. I have to...testify in a trial." Livia explained her everything.

"WHAT?! I can't believe you lied to me! A-g-a-i-n."

"I'm sorry mom. Now I need your help. Please, help me, help my friend! Open your mind, it's very important for me!"

Her mom was torn between being strict and punishing her daughter or...deciding to be different. She had to decide, too. Her daughter's eyes were in front of her, speaking the *truth*.

"Where do we have to go?" she said firmly. Livia smiled tenderly and hugged her tight.

The following day Livia and Paolo arrived at the Venice courthouse with their parents.

The trial started. Giorgio had a public defender, while the woman had hired a real lawyer. The two friends witnessed, and were able to identify the real thief. He was a well-known inhabitant of Pellestrina. The police found several stolen goods in his house. The victim was really sorry, and Giorgio accepted her excuses. Giorgio was over the moon when he heard that the court, for ruining his public figure, would give him a thousand euros.

"Giorgio, let me introduce you our parents," said Livia relieved. Now that the trial had ended, and Giorgio was lifted from his charges. Livia began questioning about her future. Would she and Paolo have ever come back to Pellestrina? Maybe the people of the village would treat Giorgio better, now that he was proved innocent.

"Can we have a trip to Pellestrina, mom? You MUST see it!"

"We'll see, darling." Smiled the lady.

"Mrs, let me insist – chipped Giorgio in - I'll take you all out to dinner *Da Celeste*, as a thank you for what you did. It'll be on me."

Livia's mum nodded gently. Just a simple nodding. But it was the beginning of another, great adventure.