

Dentro (Inside). A True Story, If You Think So
by Giuliana Musso

Translated from Italian by Juliet Guzzetta

**In Search of a Human/e Logic: An Introduction to
Giuliana Musso's *Dentro (Inside)***

Life is full of infinite absurdities, which, in their flagrant way, do not even need to appear credible, because they are true.

—Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

These are the facts of the case. The truth is somewhat more elusive.

—John A. Guzzetta

Giuliana Musso's fearless play about the structures and cultures that hide sexual abuse is a Pirandellian spiral of truths that elude proof, presented through a theatrical framing that confounds reality with art. The most recent play of nine that she has written and performs in her preferred "theater of inquiry" style, *Dentro (Inside)*, dramatizes Musso's real-life encounter with an acquaintance who shared an impossible story of incest. In the opening minutes, Roberta discloses the horrifying experience of slowly learning that her ex-husband molested their daughter Chiara for years when they still lived together. Over a series of "chapters," or scenes, it becomes apparent how every system in place to help vulnerable members of society—from the hospitals to private psychologists, the police and law enforcement, eventually the lawyers, the whole legal system, and even language itself—was unable to support Roberta and her daughter. To the contrary, given that the case was dismissed, they have gag orders; they cannot even speak of what happened so as not to slander the reputation of the ex-husband/father. In a last-ditch effort, Roberta turns to Giuliana, who she knows as a celebrated actor-author, to devise a play that speaks to these issues. The actual play is ultimately a dramatized account of their real-life conversations.

The framework of the “theater of inquiry,” (*teatro d’indagine*) or investigative theater, a style popularized by Musso and other actor-authors such as Marco Paolini and Ascanio Celestini, prioritizes archival research, oral histories, and the synthesizing of those materials as the basis for a play. In this case, Musso’s readings of several psychology and legal texts, her documenting the account of the survivor’s mother, and her interviews with various specialists in law enforcement and the courts, shape the play to create awareness surrounding the complexities of accountability in cases of sexual violence. That she was invited in 2020 to the Venice Biennale by the prominent director Antonio Latella, who curated the theater program that year, to create a play around the theme of “censorship” was a crucial coincidence, as Musso acknowledges in the play. Thematically, it encouraged her to devise a script that highlights an oft-overlooked aspect in the discovery and prosecution of sexual offenders, which is the extent to which survivors are censored. Censorship is not only the humiliation of submitting evidence, but the incomplete medical examinations that render themselves insufficient in the eyes of the law or sit on shelves in storage facilities for decades. It is not just when the law silences someone through orders, but the narrowness of police questioning that does not create space for the narrative. It is not only the trauma of having to recite that narrative countless times, including in court, knowing it will be manipulated by defense attorneys who will also attempt to discredit and destabilize the survivor, but the societal revulsion that surrounds a topic such as incest so that no one actually wants to learn about it. Such cultural disgust, conveyed as “taboo” in the script, censors both the mother’s ability to see what is happening in her own home, and the daughter’s ability to articulate the circumstances of her father’s visits to her bed at night. It was Musso’s practice of investigative theater and meeting with representatives from these various institutions that enabled her to conceive of censorship with such breadth.

Related to this practice of suppression and forbidding is the question of truth, signaled by the subtitle to Musso’s play, *A True Story, If You Think So*. Given what the audience learns about Chiara’s behaviors and Roberta’s dawning ability to reinterpret her own past through Chiara’s lived experience, there is likely little doubt as to whether Andrew sexually abused Chiara as a child. It is a fact, almost uninteresting in its blatancy. As Musso filters the narrative that she was told in real life, she reorients the notion of truth by destabilizing the importance of the relationship between truth and fact. The road that leads to any sort of “she said / he said” dialog is a trap. Rather, Musso establishes the importance of understanding truth as a

competency, a skill. Facts are simply what happens, but truth must be learned, like most proficiencies. It is not that Roberta was unwilling to see the abuse in her home; it is that she could not fathom it, could not conceive of it. It was beyond her logic, her interpretation of reason, and despite the many societal resources available to her, it turns out that this truth was also beyond the comprehension of many of those as well. One of the most devastating revelations in the play is hardly Roberta's own confrontation with what the Judge character frames as "taboo," but rather the way in which a confounding portion of society is unable to hold Chiara's truth, even as many believe her. The veracity of her account is not in question. There is an incredible number of resources and many dynamic teams that attempt to support Chiara and Roberta, but they are largely unable to do so. The female police officers, the compassionate judge who has his own experiences with sexual abuse, the many lawyers, social workers, hospital staff—very few individuals and institutions can provide solace or guidance. Even language itself cannot contain Chiara's truth as she is unable to articulate the abuse. Rather than approaching an investigation with the goal of proving or disproving a narrative, Musso invites her audience more simply, and more vulnerably, to confront, not their willingness, but their very ability to witness.

That so much of the society depicted in this play lacks the ability to practice a logic or reasoning that leads to supporting Chiara, is where the theater as a framework and as a structural tool gathers importance. In a small but relevant way, Latella's invitation to the Venice Biennale also served a purpose here. While Musso is a leading master in the theater of inquiry genre, and while some of her other plays involve music or character switches as can be common in soloist or monologue shows, the experimental, even edgy tone of such an important festival, with its pressure for originality and barrier breaking, inspired Musso to take new risks in her writing. The resulting play becomes a site of experimentation, a challenge to itself as a play, wondering out loud whether or not its own structure serves as a blueprint that leads to offstage confrontations about the handling of sexual assault, particularly with minors. As Musso walks the audience through her conversations with Roberta and her research to better understand these situations more broadly, she also accompanies her audience on a journey of theater-making, of the steps that she herself took to devise the script, including her initial disinterest, and how it began to shift into an actual play. Suspended between such mirroring realities that reflect across the audience and into the layers of Musso's story, emerge important questions

about what kind of structures do in fact create language for experiences of sexual violence? What does it mean that art and specifically theater can offer a space of listening, of debating, of—perhaps—healing? Lingering behind the narrative themes in the play, there is an inherent, if subtle, argument for the importance of art, of theater, as a crucial site of intellectual and emotional growth for society.

There are a few other themes that surface throughout the play that offer commentary on class and society. In considering her past, Roberta provides some exciting challenges for the actor who plays her. She occasionally references a chaotic violence that defined her childhood as one where “everything flew” around her house: “Plates, books, shoes, words.” Her mother is reminiscent of the sketches that many of Elena Ferrante’s protagonists design of their mothers as deeply unhappy, capable of explosive anger, and the normalization of this behavior. Roberta learned to ignore violence, and maybe not even to see it, because of its casual presence in her youth. There are provocative references to class as well. She notes that Andrew was easy to marry as someone who was “handsome, kind, cultured, and rich.” The actor would have to decide if wealth was something new or old for Roberta, but there are clues in the vulgarity of her speech and her relationship to figures of authority, who she has trouble challenging. The audience learns that she sought out many people for advice, from “fancy lawyers” to random pseudo-social workers, from private psychiatrists to ones who work in the public system, available specifically for people with lower incomes. In fact, the two people who really shift the trajectory of the story for her are the community-oriented ones. As the Italian national health system continues to cut expenses in favor of privatization, there is a subtle urging in Musso’s text to take stock of the ways in which the public system can bring different perspectives, even to those who have access to the privatized world like Roberta. It is also noteworthy that Roberta is, to an extent, betrayed by her “rich” class. Of course, sexual violence occurs in all corners of society, but it has surprised her that wealth does so little to deter the presence of such acts, and offers so little to the healing process. To the contrary, status and wealth can make it even harder to see what should be obvious truths as demonstrated recently in the cases of Jeffrey Epstein and Lawrence Nassar.

Musso was born and raised in the northeast of Italy, namely near Vicenza, and lived for a long period in Udine, thus very much at home in both Venetian and Friulian cultures. The area sometimes features prominently in her plays, including her first solo show *Born at Home* (*Nati in*

casa), which debuted in 2001, and reflects upon the history of midwives in the region and the “business” of childbirth that evolved in the late twentieth century. Themes of authority and social services take a surprising centrality in that first piece in ways that reverberate later in *Dentro (Inside)*, even while the earlier play is much more comedic and lighter in tone. Musso’s training, while formally at the Civica Scuola d’Arte Drammatica “Paolo Grassi” di Milano, follows the trajectory of popular arts and the physical embodied mode of performance in line with Dario Fo and Franca Rame, as opposed to the more intellectual practices of traditional drama or even the avant-garde such as the theater of the absurd, which artists such as Fo and Rame criticized for being too bourgeois and exclusive for ordinary people. Her own professional formation, then, considers this democratic spirit of publics that she subtly promotes in *Dentro (Inside)* via her indirect class references.

Beginning around 2000, as Musso developed her dramaturgy through oral histories, interviews, and archival research, one of the subjects that she studied from a variety of perspectives was prostitution, resulting in her second solo show, *Sexmachine*, which she performs with a musician on stage. Switching registers, in what she came to call her life-cycle trilogy, her third play consists of three actors, neutrally dressed as clowns (with the red squishy noses) who are all in some ways Death. Typical to her work grounded in a politics of relations, *Best wishes (Tanti saluti)* is as much about society’s relationship to death, as it is about dying. In her work that follows, she largely turns back to a character-infused theater of narration until *Dentro (Inside)*, working through some familiar themes of structural oppression and in different contexts: the sacrifices of young seminarians who became priests in *The Priest Factory (La fabbrica dei preti)*; the war machine that favors a monstrous logic of reason that three mourning mothers of soldiers challenge in *My Hero (Mio eroe)*; and finally, her penultimate play *The Monkey (La scimmia)*, which is an adaptation of Franz Kafka’s 1917 short story “A Report to the Academy.” Layered upon the more technical apparatus of investigative theater, Musso has begun to conceive of her theater in a different register, referring to her work as a “theater of compassion.” Her new framing signals the human centering across her plays, and across the art of theater as a site of human-to-human encounters. An attentive audience member or reader of this script will catch the moment when Roberta mocks her for this notion of compassion, but Musso’s intention is genuine, proven in the record of her oeuvre.



Maria Ariis (in back) and Giuliana Musso. Photograph by Federico Sigillo, 2020. Courtesy of Giuliana Musso.

Author's Note

The first time was when we were thirteen years old. A summer buddy. That year, at the beach, she stops being my friend. She avoids me. She's always alone.

One day I get angry and tell her: I want to know the truth. The truth is, that year, in her family home, an old man raped her. I was supposed to keep this a secret. I did.

The second time we were twenty years old. A friend from college. We studied a bit, and talked a lot. It was a gentleman who lived in her building and had a son her age. Her mother didn't notice, even though she was all disheveled. And bloody.

The third time it happened was with an American friend. She told me the secret in English. Her adoptive father always told her she was too pretty. Indeed, she was.

The fourth time was a friend who was a boy.
Few words: an uncle, very painful, very scary.
I remember we were camping in a tent, and it was raining.

The fifth time was a colleague.
She told a bunch of us the truth as though she were talking about sports.
In that way, it didn't make much of an impression. Not even on me.

The sixth I can't remember when it was that she told me.
Maybe she didn't even say it, she just led me to understand.
She was very young. It was her father.

The seventh friend told me about it over the phone, half-laughing.
In the chicken coop, during the summer, her grandfather lowered his underwear and grabbed her small hands.
He was a jovial and generous grandpa, loved by all his grandkids, including her.
I laughed about it too.

The eighth time I'm not going to tell you who it was.
She rang my doorbell a couple of months ago.
The first thing she said was that I shouldn't talk to anyone about it.
The investigation was ongoing.

Udine. December 2019

Dentro (Inside). A True Story, If You Think So

Characters:

GIULIANA	The author
ROBERTA	The mother
JUDGE	
ANTONIA	A lawyer

The chapter titles are integral to the play and should be announced by the actors.

The actor who plays GIULIANA should also play the JUDGE and ANTONIA.

ROBERTA's name should be substituted by the name of the actor who plays her in the final chapter, as indicated.

GIULIANA

Good evening.

I am not a character.

My name is Giuliana. I'm 50 years old. I live in Udine.

I am myself.

A year ago, I met a woman.

Her name is Roberta.

She is the same age as me. She lives in Milan. She has three children.

She is not a character either.

She is herself.

CHAPTER 1. Inside a bar

GIULIANA

She asked to meet because she had something to tell me.

We hugged like old friends, but we weren't old friends. We ordered a drink and immediately started talking about work, children, Milan, our age. Laughing. Eventually I asked her what she wanted to talk to me about and she told me. First, though, she warned me it was a highly confidential matter and that I needed to be discreet. "All right." Not satisfied, she came closer, lowered her voice, and told me that there had even been a criminal investigation into this, but that the case was dismissed and sealed, and because of that, she wasn't supposed to tell anyone about it.

I told her that I'd rather not have all that responsibility, that maybe it was better if she didn't tell me this thing.

She told me anyway.

Her story begins at the end of her marriage when her husband left, out of the blue. She thinks it's a midlife crisis, or problems at work. I think, "Maybe he had a lover."

ROBERTA

No, he didn't have a lover.

GIULIANA

She tells me about her kids: David, the first, Chiara, the second, and Samuel, the third.

She says that Chiara has always been a difficult child, that after her parents separated, she became even more unmanageable. She's an angry teenager, extreme at times: she swears, screams.

When she lashes out at Roberta, she talks about her father in ambiguous terms. "You don't know who Dad really is." Until the day she says he did something to her.

At night.

In the bed.

Inside their house.

I immediately ask Roberta to be more explicit. What exactly did he do to her?

ROBERTA

No one knows, she never said, and there wasn't any proof; no one in the family ever saw anything. I mean, I had seen strange marks on her face, when she was little, several times, redness on her cheeks, around her chin.

I asked her how she got them, and she said, "At night."

"What does that mean 'at night?' You mean you dreamt about it at night . . ."

Then I went to her older brother and said, "You have to stop wrestling with your sister. She's little and you're leaving bruises all over her."

At night I was working. At least twice a week I wasn't home. When I was, I was so tired that he'd be the one to go in if the kids woke up. He didn't mind at all. He said that, at night, he would sleepwalk to the kids. He didn't even wake up, didn't even remember what he did at night.

That's what he always said, in front of everyone.

Oh! He slept in only a t-shirt, like some men do, but then he'd go to the children like that, at night, not wearing any underwear.

GIULIANA

And then she tells me that no one wants to hear about this stuff anymore, not even her daughter. But she wants to tell the whole story to me.

ROBERTA

The case was sealed. If I even talk about it with anyone, he can sue me. That means it's over, forever. We have to pretend that nothing ever happened. I didn't know how to help my daughter and now it's too late for me, but there must be something I can do, or I'll go crazy. Maybe I can help someone else. So I thought of you. I've seen your theater pieces. You can create a play where you say these things really happen. There's a crapload of these people out there. You can talk about it.

So, I'll tell you my story and you create a show.

GIULIANA

So that's what she wants from me: a play about intra-family sexual abuse. Let's say the word: incest. It's hard even to utter.

I can see how it could comfort her, but no, it's not possible, not for me. I explain to her that theater is no different from the rest of the world: certain things cannot be said. So-called "documentary theater" is no longer fashionable, it bores people, and political theater, forget about it.

Meanwhile, the bar empties out. The bartender tells me we can stay while she cleans up.

Shall we?

ROBERTA

It's a nightmare. Part of me still hopes it's not real, that Chiara made it all up. How can you think that your husband, the father of your children, for all these years, inside your home, has abused your daughter? It makes you want to jump out the window. Some days I say to myself, alright, okay, that's enough, drop it. She doesn't want to talk about it anymore? Fine. So, I too need to stop thinking about it and wrestling with it. I file it away, pretend nothing ever happened, and that way everyone's happy. Right?

GIULIANA

Are you asking me?

ROBERTA

Yes. You.

GIULIANA

I want to tell her what I've been telling myself for years: that only the truth can save us. I want to say to her, "Either you believe her or you don't believe her. Make up your mind. But if you believe her then who cares about lawsuits? Put your body in front of your daughter's, speak, scream the truth to everyone and drag that piece of shit to court."

I want to tell her like that.

I tell her.

She's speechless.

Me too.

I breathe. I think of my daughter, when she was little, and want to cry.

She's embarrassed, blushes, apologizes. She realizes she's asked me an absurd favor. Meanwhile I keep imagining myself in her shoes and I wonder how she hasn't gone crazy.

ROBERTA

I don't know. I'm always thinking about it, you know. I torture myself. I let it consume me. What can I do now? I have a gag order. I can't say anything. He'll take away my kids! I could have appealed the dismissal but this bigshot lawyer in Milan advised me against it. He looked at the paperwork and you know what he said to me? "Ma'am, this is a classic, you just have to deal with it. Let me give you some advice: find yourself a good therapist and swallow the pill."

GIULIANA

I don't understand . . . what did he say?

ROBERTA

“Ma’am, you have to deal with it. Find yourself a good therapist and swallow the pill.”

GIULIANA

As far as I’m concerned, the bigshot lawyer and the good therapist can go fuck themselves.

ROBERTA

Could we see each other again?

GIULIANA

(Pause)

Sure.

CHAPTER 2. Inside the beautiful home

GIULIANA

We planned to meet in Milan, where I had to go for work anyway.

I walk into her beautiful home. It’s like a dream, with a huge living room, many other rooms, balconies everywhere. Tons of sunlight. A yellow sofa. The children aren’t around.

ROBERTA

This house disgusts me. I can’t wait to move.

Take a look at all the bookshelves . . . all that culture, right? It’s all for looks.

GIULIANA

Did you marry for love?

ROBERTA

Oh! Yes! In my eyes he was perfect: handsome, kind, cultured, and rich.

GIULIANA

Did he love you?

ROBERTA

He showered me with compliments, especially in front of others. “You’re a wonderful woman, the best wife, the best mother.” Gimme a break. I grew up in a family where “you’re an idiot” was a compliment.

GIULIANA

What about your intimate moments? Did he have problems?

ROBERTA

No, no particular problems, but he was mechanical, detached, emotionless.

GIULIANA

Even in the beginning?

ROBERTA

Yes.

GIULIANA

And you were okay with that?

ROBERTA

No, not at all.

GIULIANA

So why did you marry him?

ROBERTA

Sex wasn't the priority, at least not for me.

I wanted a lot of kids.

He wanted a lot of kids too. We had said that we would share the responsibility of the children, but then in practice . . .

One year I almost had a nervous breakdown: my father had a stroke, David broke his pelvis, Chiara was freaking out and, in the midst of all this, he enters an Ironman competition that requires him to train every damn weekend. And I would say to him: "Good job, love, with all the stress at home, at least you can release some tension." Nice, right?

Do you remember Pollyanna? That loser who always looked on the bright side? That was me. If she fell into a lake of shit, she would say, "How lucky there are no crocodiles." You could write a comedy: *Pollyanna and Ironman*.

GIULIANA

I tell her if there were something to laugh about, I'd happily write it.

She asks me if I've reconsidered her proposition to do a play.

She insists. I'm firm: yes, I've thought about it, but it's not for me.

I'm sorry.

ROBERTA

I understand. It's my fault. Did I give you the wrong impression when I told you that sometimes I don't believe it myself?

That's not exactly how it is. I believe Chiara. I know he did something to her. But what I think isn't enough. Everyone says this is the result of a messy separation for a daughter with a bad temper who couldn't handle the end of such a picture-perfect family, so she made up a story of abuse. If the whole world is telling you . . .

I believe her but what do I do with my truth?

GIULIANA

"What do I do with my truth?"

What kind of question is that?

We're not talking about some subjective experience here. We're talking about establishing whether or not there was abuse. If there was, it's not about your truth but about reality, about facts.

If I, as an adult, commit a sexual act with a minor, a child or a teenager, that is always abuse. It's a crime. And also, I don't really understand . . . has anyone asked Chiara to say exactly what her father did to her?

ROBERTA

I have, a million times, even just a few days ago.

GIULIANA

And what did she say?

ROBERTA

The other day she said she would never tell me. She doesn't want to talk about it anymore.

GIULIANA

And the police? Who did she talk to?

ROBERTA

A police officer, along with a therapist, both women.

GIULIANA

But did she know them? Had she spoken to them already?

ROBERTA

No, she had never seen them before.

GIULIANA

And what did she say?

ROBERTA

I read the report. There are transcripts of the interrogations.

GIULIANA

And what did she say?

ROBERTA

She said she doesn't remember—that she remembers the before and the after, and that after, when she woke, she had pain.

GIULIANA

Pain. Where? What kind of pain?

ROBERTA

They asked her, "in your pelvic area?" And she said "yes, in my pelvic area."

GIULIANA

Well so she said it. She said it! She said, "in my pelvic area."

ROBERTA

She did. But it wasn't enough.

GIULIANA

But why? What else did she have to say? To two strangers, she'd never seen before . . .

What else was a kid supposed to say?

ROBERTA

Oh, sorry! The two doctors in child neuropsychiatry had also asked her that.

(Pause)

She told them to fuck off right away.

GIULIANA

Hang on, why child neuropsychiatry?

ROBERTA

Because she was in such a state of agitation that I checked her in.

GIULIANA

Into the hospital?

ROBERTA

Yes.

GIULIANA

And in the hospital, they didn't do a gynecological exam?

ROBERTA

No.

GIULIANA

But did you ask for one?

ROBERTA

I had already taken her to my gynecologist, but she didn't do a full exam. She told me it wasn't necessary.

GIULIANA

And when she was little? Did she ever have these kinds of problems?

ROBERTA

Yes. At eight or nine years old . . . she often had discomfort down there, itching. An infection.

GIULIANA

At eight years old?

ROBERTA

Yes, the doctor told me it was related to the intestine.

GIULIANA

And that was the end of it?

ROBERTA

And that was the end of it.

GIULIANA

And the police? They didn't send her for a medical exam, a check-up?

ROBERTA

They asked me if I had sent her for one and I brought them my doctor's file.

GIULIANA

Who hadn't performed a full exam though?

ROBERTA

Exactly.

(Pause)

GIULIANA

Let's have another coffee. I want to know more about your life in this beautiful house . . .

ROBERTA

To you it's beautiful. To me it's sickening. It's not like when your house is crumbling, but you still have nice memories. Here it's the opposite: the house is intact, but the memories are shattered.

GIULIANA

So I want to know when this shattering began.

ROBERTA

About six years ago. At Christmas he went to Austria for an Ironman competition. From then on, he started to find a million excuses to be away from home, from us, and I couldn't understand why. I asked him if there was another woman, he swore there was not. Problems at work, debts? No. Basically, this difficult situation goes on for almost a year. One day I come home and say, "Andrew, enough. We're all suffering here. It would be better if you had some time on your own for a bit. Take a week, think about it, and decide what you want to do." A week later he returns and says, "I've decided that I'm not coming back." I say, "But why?" And I even thought, "Shit, what have I done?" I was desperate. That very night he calls the kids into the study and says, "Your Mom and I aren't getting along anymore, so I'm going to go live somewhere else, but for you all, nothing will change." But what do you mean nothing will change?

You know in films when the main character dies in the middle of the story? It seems like a mistake; you can't accept it. David gets up, stands behind him and makes a gesture that says, he's crazy. Chiara changes the subject, says, "Dad, this phone sucks." Sam says, "But, Dad, when will you come back?"

The next day he came to get some clothes and I helped him load the car. I even gave him some food I had in the fridge so he'd have some meals ready. I kept telling him, "Come back whenever you want. This will always be your home."

I was in shock. I didn't understand the reason. There was no reason.

No. The reason was that Chiara was growing up, she was beginning to understand, and he needed to get away from her, not from me, from her.

But I only figured that out later.
I figured it all out later.

GIULIANA

I leave the house with a strange feeling of uneasiness. I get in my car and go to Rubiera. In two days I'm supposed to meet with the artistic director of a theater festival, the Venice Biennale. The upcoming theme is censorship, concealment. An important subject, but I'd have no idea how to tackle it. I drive my car and try to stop thinking about all this.

CHAPTER 3. Inside a play

GIULIANA

The day after my meeting I call Roberta. I tell her I'm on my way back to her place in Milan because I need to speak with her. She warns me that her kids are also home.

Chiara answers the door.

She's very beautiful. She's 17, but she looks much older. She has a small piercing on her eyebrow and a garish one on her upper lip. I don't know why but when I introduce myself, I say, "pleased to meet you," and offer my hand. She has a firm grip, like an adult. She takes me to her mom, then leaves. I also meet David and Samuel, then Roberta and I are alone.

I tell her that I've thought about it . . . that there has been an incredible coincidence. I tell her about the festival, the themes of censorship and concealment . . .

Seriously, Roberta, this is really an incredible coincidence.

I tell her I've changed my mind.

I think trying to do this show is the right thing.

I don't know how, I have no idea, but I'd like to try.

ROBERTA

No . . . Really? Thank you.

What can I do?

GIULIANA

You can't give up on me. Let's make a pact: we'll start together, and we'll end together.

And you have to tell me everything. We have to understand, make sense of things.

And I'm going to record every time we talk.

ROBERTA

I'm in. I'll do it all.

At least all this will have some purpose, right?

Thank you, you don't know how happy I am.

Because you see this house? It looks normal, but it's not.

Some mornings I wake up and I feel like I'm raising the curtain at the beginning of a play. Places, everyone! Have breakfast, get ready, the kids go off to school, you go to work, then you take them to sports practices, to parties. . . . We seem so perfect, so normal, but it's all pretend. We're all playing a part. You understand why I said to myself, "No, enough. I have to do something!?"

You understand why I called you?

GIULIANA

This feeling of playing a part . . . you didn't have that before?

ROBERTA

No. Never. But I was.

GIULIANA

It's a long road from here to a play and there's a lot to do. I spring into action. I look for research on the topic: it is as scary as it is generic. The quantity of people this has happened to, isn't something that one can grasp. I can't start from there. The written testimonies I find are too embellished. They're not useful to me.

I contact a few people who I know were abused in their childhood. All abuses that went unpunished. I listen to them, then turn to books.

I reread Carol Gilligan. I also reread studies by Alice Miller on childhood trauma. Continuing in that direction, I discover Jeffrey Masson, and through his work I come to Freud. Well, that wasn't a surprise. Sooner or later everyone gets to Freud. But here I slow down because I find something that disturbs me.

On the evening of April 21, 1896, in front of his colleagues of the Society of Psychiatry and Neurology in Vienna, Freud presents a paper entitled "The Etiology of Hysteria." It's a revolutionary theory on the origin of mental illness, according to which its origin lies in traumas of a sexual nature suffered in childhood. The words that Freud uses that day to describe these traumas are: rape, abuse, attack, outrage, aggression, trauma, seduction. The term chosen to define this theory will be the only one with an inherent ambiguity: seduction. Theory of seduction. His paper received an icy response from colleagues: "It seems like a scientific fairytale" was one of the reported comments. I venture down this path, though it seems to lead me away from the play, so I refocus.

CHAPTER 4. A question

GIULIANA

I contact a judge. He agrees right away to meet with me. He's a handsome man in his sixties, polite, kind, generous. We're on a first-name basis right away. He works in the appeals court in the department that deals with these

types of crimes. I start recording. I tell him that my guiding belief in this research is that only the truth can save us. If the truth does not emerge, there can be no relief for the victim.

Do you agree?

JUDGE

Of course. There's no doubt about it. What would be the point of my work otherwise? To punish? No way! It's exactly to break this endless chain of silence. It has been proven that intra-family abuse repeats over generations. My mission, as a judge, and also for personal reasons, is to unlock this stuff, because otherwise, it's a life wasted. For the person who does not have a chance to confront what happened, life is then wasted because this kind of crime threatens the possibility for real love. And what could be worse in life? I once loved such a woman and unfortunately my love was not enough.

But I don't want you to record my business. I'll tell you later.

So, how I can help you?

GIULIANA

I'm gathering the testimony of a woman who, after separating from her husband, discovers that her daughter, who's now a teenager, has gone through some type of sexual abuse by the father. The investigation that was completed is now sealed, and the mother says that nothing further can be done. Is it true that really nothing can be done?

JUDGE

The procedure is: accusation, investigation, then the case is either closed or goes to trial. Even sealed cases can be appealed and potentially reopened, but there needs to be new evidence, otherwise, that's it.

GIULIANA

For now there's no new evidence. And not even the mother seems to be absolutely certain that the abuse took place. . . . There's no record of physical evidence, and the daughter said something without saying something.

JUDGE

That's normal. The minor isn't able to say everything. It's very rare for them to give a specific and detailed testimony. Who did the daughter talk to?

GIULIANA

Her mother.

JUDGE

And the mother reported it?

GIULIANA

No. It was reported as a matter of course, by a social worker, or a doctor, I don't know.

JUDGE

Ah! But the mother . . . it's not clear to me . . . whose side is she on, this mother? How come she never noticed anything? She doesn't even believe it happened, and she didn't report it herself.

GIULIANA

No, no. The mother is on the daughter's side, I assure you. She's actually overwhelmed with guilt for not having realized what was going on.

JUDGE

Ah, ok. So that's taboo.

The mother is the "taboo figure" par excellence. She doesn't see or hear such a thing because she can't even conceive of its existence. Even if she saw it, she wouldn't believe it. You have no idea how often taboo comes up in these situations. It can even slip out from under the judge's pen when signing the sentence.

Not secrecy, not censorship, taboo.

It's like this.

A secret silences something specific for a positive purpose. For instance, the confidentiality of an investigation is necessary for a fair outcome. Grand juries, industrial secrets, state secrets. . . . We're talking about specific elements that if disclosed could undermine their own purpose. Secrecy is therefore a tool that gives value to something that is silenced.

Censorship is its opposite. Censorship takes away value from what is silenced because it starts from a negative opinion of an ethical, moral, normative—call it what you will—position, which is nonetheless of a specific nature. Something that exists, has come to life, has been produced, has expressed itself, but then gets classified for a moralistic or punitive purpose.

Taboo is a more interesting concept because it has no precise content: just thinking about it creates a block, so you don't recognize it. It's not something specific that you're not supposed to know, but something vague that you don't want to know. It's not a silence that covers up the material, it's a silence that *becomes* the material. . . . Nice. It has neither a useful purpose nor a punitive one. I don't know what its purpose is . . . perhaps to preserve our own mental structure, because its content would jeopardize the maintenance of an essential framework. In your case this is the protective function of the parent, which is essential for the survival of the species.

I'll give you an easy example: there was a time when saying that God does not exist was taboo because such a reality was inconceivable. It would have caused the entire social structure to collapse.

So taboo is a cultural product. Right? It's culture.

CHAPTER 5. Inside Chiara's childhood

ROBERTA

When her father left home, she was 13. She had just begun her period. She still studied piano and played tennis. She had her group of girlfriends. And she hated me. She began hating me when she was four, and from that point on, never stopped. Before then she was a normal, cheerful and loving little girl, and then she changed. When I woke her up in the morning she would slap and kick me, screaming. Everything was no, no, always no. Once, when she was a bit older, I went to wake her up and she slapped me so hard I froze from the shock and just started crying in front of her. She didn't want to be kissed by anyone anymore, not even me. Bickering, tantrums, grumpy faces. With her father, she was more normal. She was afraid of him. She held back. At home she was like that, outside she was an angel. One day a teacher told me, "Chiara is just lovely. How lucky you are to have a little girl like that." Chiara was there next to me. We looked at each other with this strange understanding, like we shared a secret. Then I said, "Yes, it's true, she's a very good girl."

I remember another episode like that. She must have been nine or ten. I wanted to spend some time with just her—without her brothers—so we went to the beach, just the two of us. We looked like a normal pair, mother and daughter on holiday, walking down the street holding hands. Magazines, ice cream, swimming. . . . We were perfect. No screaming, no tantrums. . . . But there was something off, as if we were both playing a part. I was basically scared of her by then and she was trying so hard to play the happy girl. We were alone, why pretend? Long afterwards I realized that she and I were never really alone. It wasn't possible. There was always this secret between us. . . . You know "a skeleton in your closet?" That one.

Then there's the story of the camper.

One summer we rented this huge campervan and went to Puglia. The second to last night before we came home, Sam and I slept in the double bed above the driver's seat, because he had a toothache, while Chiara and Andrew slept at the back of the camper on two twin beds next to each other. David, who was a big boy, slept in a little tent outside. That night there were no issues. But the next night Chiara, who was only seven, suddenly had a total breakdown. She was crying and screaming that she didn't want to sleep in the camper and that she wanted to go with David in the tent. I try to calm her down. I come near her, and she yells, "Don't touch me!" She was completely out of her mind, kicking the camper, totally lost it. I did my best to understand what the problem could be, what could have caused such an outburst. There had to be a reason. "What is so wrong?" I was saying. She screamed like we were

murdering her, “I don’t want to! I don’t want to!” Sam started crying. David was begging me, “Mom, make her stop!” And amidst this whole chaotic scene, Andrew was in a corner, completely silent and still, looking at me like he was in a trance. Why didn’t he intervene? He usually did.

In the end I had her sleep in the tent with David and she calmed down. She slept all curled up like a little puppy on a pile of blankets.

I remember the first time she said I made her sick. Sick . . .

She said it and then she also wrote it. She picked up a piece of paper, a thick marker and in all caps, wrote, “YOU MAKE ME SICK” and she hung it outside the door to her room.

I asked everyone for help. You have no idea how many psychologists, social workers, therapists I saw. And everyone told me that I was the problem because I didn’t know how to handle her rage. Once a psychologist even told me that when the child attacked me, I should imagine that I was behind a glass door so as not to upset myself. I even tried it.

Family members told me, “You have to make her respect you, because Chiara’s clever. She’s spoiled, she’s the only girl, and she knows how to make you do what she wants.” I never saw it that way. I replied, “No, if a child throws a tantrum, there’s a reason. We need to understand what it is.” But I couldn’t understand. The only thing I was able to do, and only when she was calmer, was talk. I would say to her, “I wish I knew what was going on. I don’t understand why you’re always so angry. Why?” And the poor thing would say, “I don’t know, Mom, I don’t know. That’s the way I am. . . .” One time she said to me, “Mom, let’s make a pact: if I’m treating you badly, then you have to warn me, gently. Say it to me twice, and if I can’t stop, then you say, ‘no more TV,’ okay?” No pact ever worked. It always goes the same way: she attacks me, I defend myself and the insults begin. “You’re a shit, you disgust me, I hate you.” Which is what she still does today.

And she’s right, I really have been a shitty mother. I didn’t protect her. And even later, after it all blew up, I said to her, “Tell me what he did to you,” but inside I was thinking, “don’t tell me . . . please, don’t tell me.” I acted super cool. I told her, “Chiara, I’ll take care of it from here on out: I’ll find someone who will help you.” But I should have found someone to help me, to help me help her. I did everything wrong.

CHAPTER 6. Inside the story

GIULIANA

Now let’s get into the story step by step. Let’s take it from when Andrew left home . . .

ROBERTA

If these recordings end up in his hands, he'll sue me. . . . I'm sorry, but I'm terrified. In a way he's already won. There's nothing more we can do.

GIULIANA

Well, not necessarily. We're not at the end of the story, we're still inside the story, and we're moving through the story. Together, you and me.

ROBERTA

Okay, sorry, right. I contradict myself in everything I do. All right, I need to not care if everyone doubts what Chiara said. Okay, let's get into it. But these recordings . . .

GIULIANA

No one will ever hear them, trust me.

ROBERTA

Okay. Where do we start?

GIULIANA

From when he left home, let's take it from there.

Chiara didn't want to see him anymore and you insisted she see him.

ROBERTA

Right. When he came home, I would go out to leave them alone. Chiara wanted to come with me, but I made her stay. Every time he was there, though, she would throw a fit. She wanted to fight, she would provoke him, it was almost like she was trying to get him to hit her. But he never hit her. That, he never did.

GIULIANA

Why did she act like that? Was she trying to demonstrate that he was physically violent without having to say anything more?

ROBERTA

Yeah, maybe . . .

GIULIANA

Ok, sorry, I interrupted you. Let's go back to Chiara.

ROBERTA

She was increasingly restless. She dropped out of tennis, piano, everything. She also started to act out at school too. Her grades began to slip. She was in eighth grade and one day the principal called me: Chiara had spit on a younger girl, everyone saw her do it. So I called Andrew and told him, "This is a serious situation. Chiara needs help." And he says, "No, you're the one who's a pain in the ass and creating problems. You want to turn her against me." Where did he come up with that story? Me? If anything, I wanted her to calm down and go back to seeing her father with her brothers. "I'm turning her against

you? I, who went to the lawyer's on my own and signed everything you wanted for the separation?"

Basically, Andrew refused to let Chiara see a psychologist. Ah, then there was her birthday, July 2nd. At a certain point he shows up at the door and like an idiot I tell him to come up. When Chiara sees him she freezes. She looks at me and says, "You're a whore, you ruined my birthday."

The whole summer was like that. Chiara kept saying to me, "You're a piece of shit, a shit, a shit . . . you have no idea who he is. You know nothing."

GIULIANA

And you didn't ask her, "But Chiara, what are you talking about?"

ROBERTA

Yes, I did and she would say, "Oh, please. . . . You wouldn't understand anyway. Everything's right in front of your face and you don't see anything." I thought she was referring to a lover, another woman. I thought she was saying it to hurt me because she was also very good at manipulating me, always told me a bunch of crap. She had the same mechanisms as her father. And then talking had become impossible. She'd throw stuff at me, hit me.

(Brief pause)

GIULIANA

And after the summer? Chiara went to high school, at the same school as David, right?

ROBERTA

Yeah. I knew there was a teacher at that school who was particularly good with the kids. I asked her for a meeting. I explained the situation to her and left her my phone number. One day she calls me and tells me that Chiara wrote a short story about a girl like her, who is tortured and killed by her father. The teacher uses these exact words, "I think the problem is with her father."

GIULIANA

Did you read this short story?

ROBERTA

Yeah, but it seemed like a dream. There was no logic. I didn't understand anything . . . but I was also really out of it. I was taking medicine to sleep. I was falling apart. I went to see a psychiatrist and he was the one who told me that—seeing how her father wouldn't give me permission to have her treated—if Chiara was in a crisis, I could take her to the emergency room. I had never thought about that . . .

GIULIANA

So you took her to the ER?

ROBERTA

No, no, I'm just saying I had never thought about that option. No, first what happened was that I found out that Chiara was using her phone at night. Her life was completely upside down. At night she was up texting and during the day she was a zombie. When I checked on her she'd freak out.

One day I locked myself in my car because she was chasing me. She was on a rampage. I called Andrew and said to him, "You have to come now." I wanted him to see the seriousness of her state, to help me, to stop saying I was exaggerating. Then, when she realized that I was talking to her father on the phone, she takes a rock and starts banging the roof of the car, shouting at me, "Fucking bitch," like that, in the middle of the street.

GIULIANA

When she went after you like that, how did you feel?

ROBERTA

I was scared, not that she would hit me, I was just scared. I froze. Like in front of my mother when she would throw dishes across the room, I would just look at her and . . . and that was it.

GIULIANA

Let's move on. After that episode, what did you do?

ROBERTA

I called the teacher because, I don't know, I trusted her, and she had an idea. She tells me about this amazing lady who's some sort of expert on messed-up kids, kind of like a social worker for teenagers. She's not a doctor, so I don't need permission from the other parent, right? Her name is Alida. She's the one who unlocked the whole thing. She's a badass, you should see her: dreads, tattoos, she looks like she just walked out of some anarcho-community center. She knows how to talk to kids. She came here three times. She and Chiara would take the dog for a walk and talk. One day Alida came to me and told me that Chiara . . .

(ROBERTA freezes. She can't breathe.)

GIULIANA

Do you want us to take a break?

ROBERTA

Yes. Turn it off.

CHAPTER 7. Inside words

GIULIANA

Shall we resume?

ROBERTA

Yes.

GIULIANA

You were telling me about the lady with the dreadlocks, the teenage expert. . . . She talked with your daughter a few times and then came to you and . . .

ROBERTA

And she tells me that I have to listen more to Chiara, that I have to listen closely, listen to her words.

GIULIANA

How did you react to that?

ROBERTA

I got pissed off. I told her I was fed up with everyone telling me the same thing, that it's my fault, my fault. What the hell does that mean "listen to her words?" Her whole life I've been listening to her!

And Alida says to me, "Look, you're not getting it. Chiara told me her father is a bad person. You're not the problem. It's her father." The same words as the teacher.

Of course it's her father! He completely ditched us. He left without looking back!

And she goes, "No. You don't get it. Her problem goes back to when he was at home, not when he left. She said he was violent."

Bullshit! That's bullshit! Andrew is a moron, but he was never violent.

And then Alida told me about that . . .

She said that Chiara told her about one of her friends. She said that this friend of hers has a shit for a father as well, and that this friend of hers . . . when she was little, on holiday with her family, they had rented a camper . . . and at night, her father . . . touched her . . . in the camper . . . her father, put his hands . . . he put his hands inside her . . . while everyone was sleeping . . . in this camper.

And I . . . I couldn't breathe. I froze. I didn't say anything to Alida. I didn't tell her that when Chiara was little she had a hysterical episode so she didn't have to sleep in the camper. You see what a shit I was?

Then I tried to find a moment to talk with Chiara, but she kept pushing me away, until one day she says, in this fuck-all casual tone, "You know, mom, you should have been an actress. You always pretend you don't understand when you've understood perfectly well." We were in the parking garage with people around, so I held back. When we got up to the apartment, I closed the door and yelled at her, "You tell me right now what that bastard did to you!" And calm as can be she says, "In any event, mom, you won't believe me. Nobody will."

"Tell me what he did to you."

"He hurt me. And you knew because you saw the marks."

Giuliana, the bruises on her mouth . . . I had seen them. You know?

I say, "Yes, Chiara, I remember the marks. . . . But when, where?"

"At night, mom."

She had told me.

"In the night, mom."

I said to her, "You must have dreamt it in the night . . ."

"In the night . . ."

Words. Words, Giuli, words.

CHAPTER 8. The others

GIULIANA

I make a list.

Local police, state police, lawyers, judges.

Another one.

Nurses, psychologists, doctors, social workers, case managers.

The truth, whatever it may be, slips through the hands of dozens of people.

No one can hold it. No one sits with it.

Everyone, sooner or later, leaves.

I think how I'll do the same: Eventually, after having heard enough, I'll disappear.

What am I doing here?

Let's go back to the list.

The state police are the ones who pick up Chiara in the park one night, because she ran away from home.

The local police are the ones who enter Chiara's house. She's the one who called them. She locked herself in her room. A few minutes earlier, she had taken a painting off the wall and hurled it at her mother. Her little brother had let their father into the house. Chiara sees him and freaks out, throws the painting. He tries to stop her. She locks herself in her room and calls the police. At this point, the father tells the other children, "Come on, let's go down to the lake and get some trout." When the police arrive, Chiara comes out of the room and says, "My father put his hands on me." The police ask Roberta, "Ma'am, is this true?" She tells the truth, "That's not exactly what happened."

"Well, where's your husband?"

"At the lake, eating trout."

There are lots of lawyers. The first is Roberta's lawyer. He advises her to talk to a psychologist who advises the court, because he trusts her unquestioningly. Roberta obeys and here's what she's told, "Ma'am, you have no idea how many of these stories I hear! What's your husband like? Handsome man? And your

daughter is the only girl? Well then . . . daughters fall in love with their fathers. Now he's gone, he has another life, and she wants revenge. Rest assured, ma'am, nothing happened in your house. If you want, to put your mind at rest, bring me the girl, I'll give her a test and in two hours we'll know if she's bs-ing."

More psychologists. Roberta asks at least seven to take on her daughter even without her father's permission. Impossible. Both parents need to authorize a private psychological intervention.

The only one who says yes is from a nonprofit clinic but it's too late now anyway. Chiara is already at a rehabilitation center. To go to the nonprofit counselor, they needed to have requested authorization from child protective services, who would have asked the pediatric neuropsychiatry unit, who would have called the rehab center. And someone along the way said it wasn't worth it.

Roberta spends almost two years going to see the nonprofit counselor.

The nurses are the ones who come get her with an ambulance to take her to the hospital. She's not being involuntarily committed. Chiara wants to go. She knows she's not well. Forty days locked in a hospital room, doing nothing, and Roberta always outside her door, alone, sitting on a chair.

The doctors are the ones from the hospital. They ask her, "Why don't you want to be with your mom?" She yells, "Have you seen my mother?! Look at her! She's a piece of shit! She's a shit, my mother."

As far as I know they don't ask anything about her father.

The social workers are the ones who come to the hospital and suggest sending Chiara to the rehab center. Chiara doesn't want to see her father. She doesn't want to go back to her mother. She asks to be placed in foster care, but she can't be. The center is a solution. Psychosocial Rehab Center. It's in a small village, 120 km from Milan.

The case managers are the ones from the center. They are the ones who went with Chiara to the house to pack all her clothes, and books, and things while Roberta watches the scene from the kitchen door because she's not supposed to go near her daughter. They are the ones who answer Roberta's daily phone calls when she asks how Chiara is, if she's eating, if she's sleeping, if she's seeing the psychologist, if she talks about her father, if she needs something, if she can talk to her, if she can visit her.

They are the ones who, finally, after a year, bring her home.

CHAPTER 9. Evidence

GIULIANA

I go and talk to a police officer. She's an inspector in the force for the district attorney's office. She works on crimes against vulnerable individuals,

so-called “code reds.” Her name isn’t on the doorbell. There isn’t even an apartment number. She says it’s a precaution given the work she does.

She explains to me what a confidential preliminary inquiry is, how investigations and interrogations are carried out. Generally, kids are afraid to talk. They know that the accusation will destroy the whole family and she only has 45 minutes per interview, not 6 hours. She tells me that the circle of people who can be of interest to the court can extend beyond the household, to the best friend, for example, a teacher, a coach. She tells me that when it comes to physical violence it is easier to find witnesses that will stand up in court, but if we’re talking about sexual abuse, “a dense fog rises.”

I ask her to talk about false accusations. She says that there are people who make up threats and mistreatment, but that she personally has no experience of any false sexual abuse cases involving a child. She says she thinks you can see real suffering. She puts it like this, “you can see if it’s there or not, less so in the words, but in the silences. You can see it even after many years. It never goes away.”

She also tells me, “Careful, though: suffering is not evidence.”

After the conversation with the officer, Chiara’s best friend comes to mind as someone in whom she confided. Where did that friend end up?

Roberta told me that Chiara wrote in a journal . . . that too, where did that end up?

Then Freud comes back to me, with his paper on hysteria, the theory of seduction.

He too, in the beginning, as an investigator, was working through the fog.

It was 1896. While all his esteemed colleagues are looking for the cause of hysteria in hereditary factors or in physical defects, he’s looking into the lived experiences of his patients. He’s treating eighteen people, six men and twelve women, all suffering from pure hysteria or hysteria combined with obsessive representations.

Thanks to his analytical technique, he follows the chain of memories until he arrives at what he calls “the source of the Nile,” the trauma of sexual abuse, discovering that the source of the Nile is the same for eighteen cases out of eighteen. That day in Vienna, during his presentation, he knows he’s dropping a bomb, and spends half the time making a list of objections he expects to receive from the scientific community. The most obvious is that these memories may only be fantasies, invented scenarios, imaginary facts that didn’t really happen.

Freud’s response to this opposition is similar to what the officer told me: “The sick person, when calling forth these childhood abuses, suffers from violent feelings of which they are ashamed and wishes to hide.”

CHAPTER 10. Outside

ROBERTA

Yes, she had a friend, a lovely girl. They played tennis together, studied together. She knew everything.

GIULIANA

Are you sure about that?

ROBERTA

Yeah, I'm sure. This girl . . .

GIULIANA

What's her name?

ROBERTA

Silvia. She confided in another friend who talked to her mother who, in turn, told a dear friend of mine. Chiara had said that her dad did things to her. That's how I found out.

GIULIANA

And the police didn't interview this girl, they didn't question her?

ROBERTA

No.

GIULIANA

Nor this other mother?

ROBERTA

No.

GIULIANA

And you?

ROBERTA

No.

GIULIANA

Why?

ROBERTA

I don't know, I didn't want to involve this other mother, I was ashamed and Silvia . . .

I was an idiot. I should have done it.

GIULIANA

You can do it now.

ROBERTA

I don't know . . .

GIULIANA

Why not? If you can figure out what Chiara told her, find her, and make her tell you.

ROBERTA

I don't know. . . . You're the only one who's telling me to go back to the past.

GIULIANA

You have to. How else can you go forward?

ROBERTA

What do you mean?

GIULIANA

You're the one who says your truth is not enough.

(Brief pause.)

And the diary?

ROBERTA

What?

GIULIANA

You told me Chiara wrote in a diary, that you saw it.

ROBERTA

Yes. It was a red diary, closed with a lock that would open if you sneezed on it.

Can you believe I kept it in my bag the whole time she was in the hospital?

Alida would say to me, "Read it."

I'd say, "But it's locked."

"Open it."

"But then she'll get angry."

"Open it!"

GIULIANA

You never opened it.

ROBERTA

No.

GIULIANA

And you didn't even give it to the police.

ROBERTA

It didn't occur to me.

GIULIANA

Where is it now?

ROBERTA

I don't know.

GIULIANA

Look for it.

ROBERTA

But why? You think if we find new pieces of evidence, they'll reopen the investigation?

GIULIANA

No. I think *you* need to do these things now.

(Pause.)

ROBERTA

Last night I woke up in the middle of the night, thinking about him and I felt such disgust . . . disgust. . . . He makes me sick, nauseous. I could run him over with a car.

It's the first time I've ever felt this strong feeling of repugnance. And you know why? Because I used to repress hateful thoughts like that. "He's sick," I'd say to myself. Like with my mother. I've spent my whole life reading books about forgiveness, acceptance, understanding others. Fucking hell!

GIULIANA

What does your mom have to do with this?

ROBERTA

My mother always had a rage inside . . . and when it emerged it was explosive: shouting insults, smashing everything. Once at dinner she grabbed a whole plate of mozzarella and squished every single one in her hands right in front of my eyes. Every time I open a mozzarella package, I always see it smushed in front of me. Plates, books, shoes, words . . . everything flew in my house. But I never cried! Not one tear! Why? Well eventually she'd turn back to normal, and no one said a word. Not even my dad. They all turned back to normal, indifferent, but not me. I was just pretending.

GIULIANA

You did what you do with Chiara. When she insults you and throws things at you.

ROBERTA

Chiara has the right to kick me in the face.

How could I have married someone like that?

There's something else that's important that I didn't tell you.

The only person who really made an effort was the psychologist at the non-profit clinic. When we couldn't have Chiara come to her, she asked to speak with Andrew. She also asked for someone from social services to be there, so he had to come. Then she said to him, "Listen, your daughter says that you used to hurt her at night. This hurt can be understood in two ways: physical violence or sexual violence. What do you have to say?"

He made a concentrated face and said, "Well, physical violence, no, never. Sexual violence . . . sexual violence . . . no . . . hmmm . . . no, I don't think so . . . no."

GIULIANA

As if he was evaluating a scene from the outside.

ROBERTA

Exactly. Outside of himself.

Then we left the office together. He stopped on the sidewalk, looked me in the eye and said, "I'm so sorry."

I'd never seen him like that . . . he was upset. He was being honest.

GIULIANA

And what did you say to him?

ROBERTA

I felt my blood curdle. I just said, "Go fuck yourself," and walked away.

GIULIANA

But why? Why did you walk away?

ROBERTA

What was I supposed to say?

GIULIANA

You were supposed to say, "So speak! If you're sorry, speak up Andrew! What did you do to her? What? Say it! Take this mortal burden from her, free her. She can't say it. She's trapped. Don't you see that no one's able to help her? Can't you see where she is? She's in a horrible place with keys in the doors, with psychotic kids frothing at the mouth." You two have put her in some kind of madhouse, for fuck's sake! Like a crazy person! That's where you two have put her. You should have gotten on your knees and said "Please, I'm begging you, talk!"

CHAPTER 11. A verdict

GIULIANA

I need to talk to a lawyer. I look for an expert in these types of cases.

Her name is Antonia. She's an energetic woman who says what she means. I start by telling her about the advice from the bigshot lawyer in Milan.

"You have to deal with it. Find yourself a good therapist and swallow the pill."

ANTONIA

The famous lawyer from Milan gave her good advice.

She was right not to appeal.

She didn't describe harassment. She described a feeling.

Legal proceedings are based on facts and evidence, not on feelings.

She said she was hurt but she doesn't know why.

Being hurt is not evidence.
Even the story of her childhood is meaningless in court.
A little girl who wakes up every morning anxious and pissed off, is not evidence.

GIULIANA

Well what if she had described the harassment?

ANTONIA

Yes, the injured party witness counts. But in trials like this, the defense attorneys would have worked to discredit her testimony. The survivor becomes the subject of the trial. You said she ran away from home, that she was into all sorts of mischief, that she's violent. They would have made her look unreliable. They would have destroyed her.

Remember the notorious Circeo case from the 70s? Some things haven't changed much over the years, you know?

So the famous lawyer from Milan gave her good advice.

That's the system.

GIULIANA

The system is us. It's made up of people. You, for instance, if the girl came to you to be represented in court, couldn't you do anything for her?

ANTONIA

I would traumatize her even more.

Can I tell you something? I'll say this and deny saying it.

Justice, if you find it, is no solution.

A conviction doesn't ease the pain.

Legal action is the right move if it can stop a crime in progress. In that case, yes, you should intervene.

GIULIANA

Exactly. He could molest other children, which is something we can't possibly know . . .

ANTONIA

So you're saying, "I'm doing this to protect others."

GIULIANA

I'm doing this because it's a crime. Otherwise, what's the point of the law?

What if this girl listened to you and said, "Alright, Antonia, I'll hear you out and not ask for the case to be reopened. But. I'm going to tell everyone what my father did to me . . . so that they know."

ANTONIA

She can't. If she can't prove it, it's defamation, slander. There's no way out.

GIULIANA

So she can't report it and she can't even talk about it.

ANTONIA

No, I didn't say that. She can take him to court, but no one can guarantee the outcome. Whereas it's a certainty that the trial would be devastating for her.

(Brief pause)

GIULIANA

If I say the word truth, what do you say?

ANTONIA

There is no truth.

GIULIANA

What does that mean?

ANTONIA

We do not see the truth, we see what we want to see according to our culture, education, and personal affinities. There are many variables . . .

GIULIANA

What about reality . . . ?

ANTONIA

Justice has little to do with reality.

GIULIANA

Why do you do this work?

ANTONIA

In the beginning I sought justice for my clients at all costs. It was also a matter of professional pride, I think. Now the first thing I ask my client is, "What's going to help you feel better? Is the judgment that you're looking for going to make you feel better?"

And don't think that I do this to back out.

I'm 60 years old and have grey hair. I say what I mean now, always, even to judges, colleagues . . . politely, of course. They don't frighten me anymore. On the contrary, sometimes I feel sorry for them. They derive authority from their jobs for the state, but as people, they are very small.

GIULIANA

So what do I tell this girl's mother?

ANTONIA

The first objective in the story that you brought me is to help this girl overcome the trauma, to be reborn, and to live, because she's young, she has her whole life ahead of her.

That means helping people. It's more than doing justice.

CHAPTER 12. Straight talk

GIULIANA

I'm beginning to wonder if Chiara isn't actually able to remember what happened to her. Is that possible?

I ask for help from two psychologists.

The first psychologist warns me that we must be careful with these accusations and tells me about the case of a boy who reported his father: exemplary conviction, family destroyed. After 10 years the boy confessed to having lied, invented everything. She tells me this and not much else.

The second psychologist tells me that sometimes, when it comes to adults who have worked hard to survive abuse, they just can't bring themselves to report it. Talking about it, revealing the truth, is so painful that it can plummet them into an even more severe depression. The secret protects them. We're on the phone for two hours and at the end, before saying goodbye, in passing he says to me that he too, as a child, was repeatedly molested by an adult in his family. He only eventually told one of his sisters, years later. He told me just like that, in passing. Him too . . .

ROBERTA

Him too?

I mean how many of these stories are out there?

There's a crapload of these people.

And now everyone's telling me that I have to stop tormenting myself, that Chiara needs to go her own way. "Turn the page. Don't stress her out. When she wants to resolve it, she will." And that's why I came to you because on the other side of that page I felt like I was dying.

And now you come to me saying the same thing, you too. You too?

And the lawyer telling you to let it go . . . and the psychologist telling you to let it go . . .

It's like you used to say: the real taboo here is not the abuse, it's the pain, the pain of these children, of these people. We avoid it like the plague. Of course they don't talk! If you don't help these people get it out, the truth will never come out.

What I see now in our story is that everyone had the same problem I had. No one wanted anything to do with this horror and they pushed it on to others just like I did when I was looking for someone to take her on, to talk to Chiara. Everyone around me did the same, they dumped it on someone else. Including my friends and relatives.

Damn! She might have even spoken up if I had exclaimed, "Chiara, I'm going to kill that bastard. Come with me. Get behind me. I'll protect you.

We're going to get to the bottom of this!" But I didn't do that and nobody helped me in the slightest to do that. To do what was right I should have told them all to fuck off: the lawyer, the social worker, the doctors, everybody, and said, "Bullshit! This is all bullshit! Not one of you has understood a thing. You're not capable."

And in the end, we all dumped it on her, on Chiara, who was 14 years old! She was 14 years old, for fuck's sake!

And what was she supposed to do, poor thing? Accuse her father in front of a world of adults who doubted her, who didn't take any responsibility even to be on her side?

No one stood up to Andrew. No one! Not even the police.

Only the counselor at the nonprofit clinic, only her. She was the only one who had the guts.

And Chiara must have thought, "Right, not one of you will put the screws to that criminal so I'm supposed to do it? So that the one shred of identity that I have left goes to hell and then I can hang myself?"

She was right not to speak!

Actually you know what?

My daughter is an extraordinary person, and she's right to be furious.

I just wish she understood that I'm not the same as before, that I'm as furious as she is and that I'm not afraid of anything anymore. I'm no longer afraid of her father, of the law, of the world, and not even of her.

So I'm going to be straight with you. If my testimony in your play ends up contributing to this shit theory that it's better to be silent, that the truth is of no use to the survivor, then I'm done. Count me out right now. Your play needs to say the opposite, or else I squandered my story for nothing!

You're pissing me off too.

You always talk to me about compassion, but where have you ever seen this compassion? What are you talking about?

People go and visit their dogs at the hospital, but no one went to see her. Did anyone, by any chance, go to her and say, "Chiara, your mom's an idiot, and she can't handle it, but I'm here. Talk with me. What the fuck did your father do to you?" No. Everyone thought, "And if she actually tells us, then what do we do?"

You too!

Why don't you go to her? Why don't you tell her, "I know everything, Chiara. If you want, I'm here. I have *compassion* for you?"

GIULIANA

You're the one who never wanted me to talk to her.

ROBERTA

Because I'm protecting her.

GIULIANA

From what?

ROBERTA

I don't want you to put her in the play.

GIULIANA

What's that got to do with it? I told you, I don't care about the play.

ROBERTA

I'm protecting her, and that's the end of it. She doesn't want to talk.

GIULIANA

No, you're scared of her finding out what you're doing with me.

You're still protecting yourself.

ROBERTA

Then don't listen to me. Go find her and do what you have to do.

Or are you using me as an alibi too?

Then you're also protecting yourself.

(Long pause)

GIULIANA

Did you find the diary?

ROBERTA

No.

GIULIANA

And the girl? Chiara's friend. . . . Weren't you supposed to meet? Did you see her?

ROBERTA

Yes, yesterday. I wanted to tell you.

GIULIANA

How did it go?

ROBERTA

First I apologized for not having talked to her before.

I told her that at the time I didn't have it in me, but now I do. I told her that I know everything and that she was a very good friend to Chiara, that she was always there for her and respected her secret.

GIULIANA

And did she say anything?

ROBERTA

Initially, she didn't want to talk about it, but then she understood that I wasn't looking for evidence. And, you know, it was true. I just wanted her to

free herself of this burden too. I just wanted to tell her that she wasn't alone anymore and thank her and that was all. . . . Then she started crying. And then she said it, she said. "I didn't even know that there were dads in the world who did certain things, who touch their daughters . . . people should talk about it."

That's how she put it. And then she hugged me. I thought of you, and I breathed.

FINAL CHAPTER

GIULIANA

Vienna, May 4th, 1896.

Letter from Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess.

"Dear Wilhelm,

My paper given at the Psychiatric Society had an icy reception. I am ostracized. Word has spread to abandon me, and an emptiness is forming around me. And this is after I gave them the solution, the source of the Nile. They can all go to hell."

A year later.

Vienna, September 21, 1897.

"Dear Wilhelm,

I want to confide in you the great secret that has started to become clear to me over the last few months. I no longer believe my theory. Such widespread perversions towards children are unlikely."

Nine years later, in 1905, Freud publicly retracts his theory of seduction.

". . . In the end I had to acknowledge that these scenes of child seduction had never happened. They were just fantasies crafted by my patients."

ROBERTA

Saturday is perfect.

GIULIANA

I can't wait. I have so many things to tell you. I've made some decisions and I'd like to talk to you about them.

ROBERTA

About what?

GIULIANA

I decided to do the play with another actor, so, it will be the two of us on stage. But I want to talk to you about it when we have time . . .

ROBERTA

And who is this actor?

GIULIANA

Her name is [*insert name of real actress playing ROBERTA*].

She's great and she's perfect for . . . well, I sort of had this idea for the play . . . but I'll tell you everything Saturday.

ROBERTA

Tell me now, come on . . .

GIULIANA

No, no, Saturday. If I haven't changed my mind in the meantime.

ROBERTA

No, come on, tell me . . .

GIULIANA

I thought I would write a play about our meetings. It would be you and me.

ROBERTA

Really! You and me?

GIULIANA

Yeah. I thought that if this show is going to say something about the truth . . . well, what truth do we have to offer? Only this one. The two of us. So, I'll play myself and [*name of real actress playing ROBERTA*] will play you.

ROBERTA

She'll play me?

(Pause)

I don't know. . . . Can you imagine what they'll say about a mother like me?

GIULIANA

They'll say you're a shitty mother. If a father abuses his daughter and the mother doesn't notice, it's still the mother's fault.

ROBERTA

All right, fuck it. Do what you have to do.

GIULIANA

Exactly. Fuck it.

How's it going with Chiara?

ROBERTA

Yesterday, when she was heading out, she touched me on the shoulder. Here. Almost with kindness.

She hadn't touched me in ages. It made me shiver.

It's not a hug, I know, but who knows . . . maybe one day it will happen.

GIULIANA

(*Not very convinced*)

Yes, I can feel it; it will happen.

(*Brief pause, then to the audience*)

The end.



Maria Ariis and Giuliana Musso. Photograph by Federico Sigillo, 2020.
Courtesy of Giuliana Musso.

Conclusion: Translation Reflections¹

As with many great plays, the story that *Dentro (Inside)* tells is universal. In rendering this text available to anglophone readers and audiences, my priority was maintaining that relatability. And yet. The author is Italian, and she mentions Italian places, historical events, and, in a word (like *consultorio*), she can load a scene with societal references that are not completely universal. I wanted to remove any potential to interpret the events in the play as unique to Italy, but I also wanted to preserve some of the *italianità* or Italian-ness of the play since the story of the artist's formation seeps through in subtle ways such as her ear for popular language as discussed in the introduction, and that formation is deeply rooted in a national territory, language, culture and history. Any production team that decides to stage this play will work with a dramaturg to understand the references that I left in, such as the horrific events in San Felice Circeo in 1975 that still haunt the country today as any vicious and complicated crime would, and resonate not only in continued violence against women as widely publicized in the summer of 2023 in Palermo and Caivano, but also in the cultural and judicial failures to support girls and women who have withstood misogynist crimes. On a lighter note, during a reading of my translation, there were questions about the names of the characters. It is a coincidence that the women on stage and mentioned (Giuliana, Roberta, and Chiara) maintain their Italian names whereas I translated the names of all the men (from Andrea to Andrew, Davide to David, and Samuele to Samuel). There is a whole body of theory behind the concept of "difference," worthy of analysis in a different essay, but for here, let it suffice that this subtle choice signals the undeniable reality of the different ways in which men and women are treated, both socially, and in the eyes of the law, in many, many countries.

Related to these cultural translation questions, one of the greatest challenges for me was the title, which in Italian is: *Dentro. Una storia vera se volete*. I could not be convinced that *Inside* alone did justice to the depth of this play. "Did you see that new Italian play everyone's talking about, *Inside*?" It did not bring enough gravitas for me, and yet when I tinkered with it, any alteration too quickly narrowed down the way in which the preposition works hard

1 For their advice on both technical and natural-sounding language, my sincere gratitude to Amélie Baudot, Elissa Crum, Tom Simpson, Franny Sullivan, and Josh Yumibe. I am especially thankful to Monja McKay and Jessica Martenson for their fantastic reading. I extend my appreciation to the anonymous reviewer, and Benjamin Hebblethwaite as well.

to accompany the audience *inside* many structural, systemic, and cultural failures, and at the same time directly references the violence of the central assault. The subtitle as “a true story if you want” worried me because it could too easily suggest that Chiara was not telling the truth of her abuse, and also could frame the play in this question of whether or not the audience should believe that it happened. I discuss in the introduction, however, how that is not at all the case. In fact, Chiara never even says what happened. The truth is unutterable. Her father cannot say it either. This brought me back to *Dentro*, a phonetically pronounceable word for anglophones, and yet awkward, maybe even uncomfortable. Keeping the Italian performs some of the many feelings that arise around the difficulty of voicing the word “incest,” as Giuliana herself notes in the first scene, and thus remains loyal to an embodied logic that convinced me to keep it. The difficulty in pronouncing *dentro* and “incest” have little in common in terms of why both are difficult to pronounce, and yet they share some physical reactions such as embarrassment, hesitation, even shame. At the risk of a hipster postmodern look, I did feel it was important to provide the English as well, and so “inside” is whispered in parentheses, where it also performs its own inside-existence. With that part settled, I turned back to the subtitle, and tweaked the suggestion of truth with a Pirandellian inflection by invoking a common translation to his *Così è (se vi pare)*, which also deploys parentheses, as *Right You Are (If You Think So)* or *So It Is (If You Think So)*. I hope that this signals the questions about truth itself that the play explores, rather than, what feels incredibly outdated in 2024 even as it remains central to almost all cases tried in court, which is whether or not the survivor is telling the truth.

These questions surrounding truth, reality, actual versus imagined events, were with me throughout the process of working on this play. Perhaps because of that, in the middle of translating one of the dialog scenes, it occurred to me that certain portions of this play practiced the style of verbatim theater. In this genre, most famously employed by Anna Deavere Smith in plays such as *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, the artist (typically both actor and author as in many of Musso’s works) takes the script of an interview and uses it as a performance text without altering it. The actor still interprets the character—it is not an impersonation—but she observes the rhythms of everyday speech with the precise analysis of prosody. Breaths, coughs, and stutters become part of a physical vocabulary that communicates tone and meaning in similar ways to the words the characters actually utter. Popularized in the early 1990s with Smith’s work, it continues to be a style of interest and intrigue. Tina Satter’s recent *Is This a Room* (2019)—first a play that ran on Broadway and later a

film with critical accolades (retitled as *Reality*, 2023)—takes the transcript for the FBI interview of whistleblower Reality Winner as its script, meanwhile Lucas Hnath's *Dana H* runs a voiceover of the interview that the solo actor lip-synchs for the entirety of the show. Both point to the interplay between real life and dramatic art and, like Musso's play, demonstrate the societal utility of theater as an artistic practice that has a unique potential to create a site of encountering that can process conflict in real time.

I wanted to share these reflections with Giuliana and so I told her about the connections I was making. She seemed interested, but also uncertain. Perhaps verbatim has not gained much traction in Italy, I thought. She didn't totally seem to follow. "Juliet . . ." she almost sounded incredulous. "Everything is completely made up." The words landed hard. "Everything? All of the dialog? You didn't lift anything from your interviews?" She explained how she had hours and hours of interviews. "Perhaps a line or two." Some rhythm. If one listened to the files, there would certainly be patterns. Somewhere. But they would be difficult to find. She further clarified the importance of not being able to recognize the person who came to her, or even many of the other characters they talk about including the others who Musso also plays. Some of those scenes were invented from several interviews with several different people and condensed into a conversation with one person, such as the Judge. All the details that make her characters more human—the ironman races; Chiara's tennis friend; the specifics of the camping trip—were all invented. There was no conflict between Musso and the real Roberta either. "I needed that dramatic height in the play, but it never happened." At one point in our conversation, she referenced a source of inspiration in Mark Twain's famous reflections on the necessity for fiction to make sense, whereas for reality, there is no such need. I do not totally agree with that. Reality does make sense, whether it needs to or not, but one must face it to change its course. In Musso's fiction, the substance of Roberta's story concerning Chiara is there. The truth is there. But everything is different.

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