

Can you hear me?

Elena Varvello

Translated by Alex Valente





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*In talking about the past we lie
with every breath we draw.*

William Maxwell

In the Woods

In the August of 1978, the summer I met Anna Trabuio, my father took a girl into the woods.

He stopped the van at the side of the road, just before sunset, asked her where she was going, and told her to get in.

She accepted the lift because she knew him.

They saw him drive towards town with his lights off, then he left the road, took a steep and difficult path and made her get out, he dragged her along with him.

My mother and I waited for him, worried he might've had an accident. While I stared into the darkness from the lounge window, she made a few phone calls.

'He's still not back.'

I found her leaning against the wall, in the hallway, the receiver clutched against her chest.

'Everything's fine, you'll see,' she said, trying to smile, as if she'd just heard his van, his footsteps in the yard.

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She phoned the nearest hospital: she sighed with relief when they told her he wasn't there.

She put some coffee on and we sat down at the kitchen table. She was wearing a blue dress, with long sleeves, dotted with small green palm trees that looked on the verge of being violently uprooted by an unstoppable wind.

'Don't worry,' she said.

I went back to the lounge, lay down on the sofa and dozed off, a confused sleep that didn't last long.

My mother was in the yard. 'Why don't you go to bed?' she asked.

'Not tired any more.'

She reached over to hug my shoulders and looked up to the sky: 'Look how clear it is.'

'Are you cold?' I asked.

It was a summer night, and she was shaking.

She went to lie down and I tried reading a comic.

Half an hour later she left her room. She was wearing a blanket over her shoulders. She shook her head: 'It's pointless, I can't rest.' She went to the bathroom, then went back into the kitchen and called me. 'Do you want to stay with me for a bit?' She pulled the blanket up to her chin.

Before dawn, through the silence, we heard his van.

She turned towards the door, straightened her back, shook off the blanket and ran her hand through her hair. 'Oh thank goodness. Thank God.' I watched as she got

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up, straightened her dress on her hips and headed outside: ‘Darling, what happened to you?’

I followed right behind her. I stayed on the porch, under the light, trying to make him out in the darkness. I was angry and relieved: I wanted to slap him and tell him I didn’t care – *you could’ve just stayed there*; I wanted to run over to him and make sure he wasn’t hurt.

They stepped into the light, slowly, and I watched them go inside.

I was sixteen.

He had been gone a long time already, but that was it – not even a year after he lost his job and that boy disappeared – that was when everything broke.

Truth (1)

Can you hear me?

I remember his voice, at night.

Waking up all of a sudden, that summer, I'd hear the water going in the bathroom, my father's steps in the corridor, him coughing. My mother kept calling him: 'Come to bed.' He'd reply: 'No time.'

He'd head down to the garage, or sit at the kitchen table.

I'd fall asleep again.

On one of those nights I heard my father's breathing from the other side of my bedroom door.

I stayed as still as possible, listening. He came inside.

'Elia?'

The light was on behind him.

'Elia, can you hear me?'

I opened my eyes very slightly. I wanted to ask him: *What is it, Dad? What's going on with you?* Instead, I