

I'm Matilda and I'm dead. Everyone else thinks it was an accident but I'm certain I was cursed.

Monza, 30 June 1918

Dear Cecilia,

It's been a while since we talked, sorry for not keeping in touch. Here in Italy it has been a very hard time. Mario has just come back from war and the situation here is very difficult: there were lots of deaths and the economy is in decline. It is really difficult to earn enough money to live. As if it were not enough, there are also political crises and 3 different totalitarian ideologies are spreading, such as communism, fascism and nazism.

Moreover, I feel so traumatized and really miserable, due to an event that occurred not so long ago.

Honestly I'm not just writing you this letter just to keep you updated, but I also wanted to give you really painful news, Matilda passed away in a terrible train accident. I don't know much about it but it was a very tragic event. Mario is investigating with his police colleagues, as there isn't any cause of this accident. I hope you'll be able to come to Matilda's funeral on 7 July. She did a very good job as a maid and was almost like a family member to us.

I know she was an important friend of yours and I'm so sorry for your loss.

Hope to see you soon,

your dear cousin

Carmela

After a few days the letter arrived in Turku. A postman rang the doorbell to deliver to Cecilia her everyday newspaper, but that day there was also an unusual letter. She unlocked the door and grabbed everything, not really noticing the letter. She saw the headline of an article that said "The civil war affects Finnish society in many ways" and it caught her attention. While she was reading the newspaper she felt miserable and lonely. She thought about her friends and family members who had died in the war. Everywhere she went she found damaged buildings and the atmosphere was depressing. The whole country was divided into two parts, so the situation in Finland was very complicated. After Cecilia was done reading the article she found a letter underneath the newspaper. Cecilia felt relieved and her mood lightened up when she noticed that the letter was from her friend Carmela. She didn't know yet what was written in the letter or what to expect. As soon as she started reading the letter, what she found was anything but happy. She didn't know how to feel. After Cecilia read the letter the realization of my death came to her mind.

So she didn't even hesitate and with trembling breath and shaking hands she started writing a letter.

Turku, 15 July 1918

Dear Carmela,

Thank you for your unexpected letter. It was nice to hear about you and how you are doing in your life. It was devastating to hear about Matilda and her death. She was a good friend of mine so it made me really miserable. I haven't heard much from her since she moved from Finland to Italy. We have written each other a few letters through these years but she was still my dearest friend.

About the funeral I will try my best to come there but the situation in Finland is also a bit difficult. The whole nation is still divided even though the civil war is over. It's really overwhelming and stressful living in this difficult time. The sorrow and pain in this country feels like never ending. The amount of victims is extremely high. I can feel that the anger between these two opposite sides, is going to last for a long time. In addition starvation and unemployment has caused a lot of disorder in this country. The war has affected my life in many different ways. For example, for me it's hard to write articles without being biased.

But it seems like your situation in Italy isn't any better. And I am happy to hear that Mario has come home safely even though he might have some injuries. However I'm sure that you will make it through this situation. After all, you are a very brave person.

Wish you all the best!

Love, Cecilia

As soon as Cecilia could, she traveled to Italy, in order to attend my funeral. At the same time in Italy Gigi, who had always worked with me in the maison as a waiter, was busy tidying up the attic that hadn't been cleaned for a long time. He found many photos of us together and so many old documents full of dust; he felt so overwhelmed. Suddenly he found something unexpected. In a wooden box there was a very old and ruined book and a map inside it. If it wasn't for the date written on the cover, he wouldn't have never paid attention to it. The date was my birthday. Scared and with shortness of breath due to the dust and the surprise, he didn't know what to do. The only thing he knew was that wasn't able to open it on his own. The first thing that came up to his mind was to reach Mario and Carmela, the owners of the mansion, and tell them about his discovery.

Gigi, Carmela and Mario were sitting around a dining table, with the mysterious box in front of them.

They were very curious about what was inside of it but something about the atmosphere around the box made them doubtful. Carmela said with a steady voice: "Let's just open the box, we don't want to sit here all day doing nothing", in which Gigi replied: "Are you sure? If it's something dangerous? We don't want any more accidents in this house!" with a doubt in his voice. Carmela acted as if she didn't hear what Gigi was saying and started opening the box.

When they opened the box, dust filled the air and blurred their visibility. As soon as the dust settled down they saw an ancient and yellowed paper. Carmela took the paper with a worry in her mind that the paper would fall into pieces in her hands. They waited in pending silence waiting for Carmela to fold the paper open. They all gasped deeply as they saw what was written in the paper.

Cecilia was on her way to Italy. She was on a train sitting and looking through the window. Her thoughts were going their own way with the landscape changing as the train ran through the country. She was pondering what was waiting for her in Monza. What she had to face as she arrived at the mansion: the death of mine. She had been avoiding this thought through these days. She really didn't know what to expect. She was just too stunned by the fact about my death. "How could that happen so suddenly?" she thought and exhaled deeply. "Matilda was a very kind human being. How could something this tragic happen to her? It's not fair." A fed up conductor interrupted her flow of thoughts. "We are arriving at the train station in Monza, we hope you enjoyed your journey", he said with a muttering voice. Cecilia stood up and dragged her belongings with her.

Outside the train station Mario was waiting for her with a warm smile on his face. He waved to her and started walking towards her. Mario greeted her with a welcoming hug. "I am deeply sorry for your loss, Mario", said Cecilia with a pain in her eyes, in which Mario replied: "Thank you for your sincereness but I know this is hard for you as well. So I should be saying sorry for your loss too." After this they started chatting about ordinary things but you could still notice the grief in their voices, under the brief conversation.

During their way to the mansion, views reminded Cecilia of her childhood summers, when she was visiting her relatives. She pictured herself as a child running through the forest to the fields, all the way to the river. She felt nostalgic with comforting warmth inside.

The ambience changed as they arrived at the house. Carmela and Gigi were waiting for them with a tense expression on their faces. They walked together to the hall, where Cecilia finally saw why they were so rigid. On the dining table there was an antique box which was opened and stuff was all over the table. The room was a bit gloomy and weak rays of light intermingled with dark shadows.

Cecilia walked closer to the table and gasped when she saw more specifically what was on the table; there were a lot of aged white pearl jewelry which mirrored the whole room. A broken mirror and ancient yellowed papers were lying next to the jewelry. On top of all that there was a crumpled map of Monza and an opened red wax covered notebook. Unclear calligraphy text was written on the books pages. She turned around quickly looking at the others with a strained look on her face.

The atmosphere was fraught, there was something ancient and magical in the air. It made them all stand in a better posture, like there would have been a dead body around, what wouldn't have been impossible in these circumstances. None of them had a desire to joke about the situation. Cecilia asked with a quiet voice "what are these?" pointing to the direction of the table. To which all of them replied with just blank stares. Carmela took the book in her hands, closing it and showing the book's cover to Cecilia. On the cover there was written my birthday in golden cursive numbers. "We were waiting for you to come and study what this is all about. We don't know everything yet but one thing's for sure: this has something to do with Matilda's death."

Cecilia was thinking about the mystery all night. She wasn't able to find a solution to the case but she had a desire to do something about it. Cecilia went downstairs to Mario's office. She had some kind of feeling that the answer could be found from there. She had studied the small notebook really carefully but hadn't found anything crucial. Just pages and pages of bitter diary-like text written by someone called Angelo Lombardi. Apparently his wife had died in some terrible accident but it wasn't clear how. He seemed to be really devastated and couldn't get over the pain. Cecilia was still sure that the answer could be found if she just knew how to look at the case. Many questions were running through her mind: "who is Angelo?", "what he has to do with Matilda's death?" "How are all these things connected?" She started looking at Mario's bookshelf with just a little light with her, coming from a candle that was almost burnt out. She spent many hours just looking and reading everything she found, hoping that she could find even a little hint. While she was going through folders full of Mario's old cases she found something interesting: a death report on a girl who had died all of a sudden, without any warning. The case had not been solved, investigators had given up without any explanation. But what really caught her attention was that the girl had the same birthday as me. She started looking up all the old death reports with some kind of madness. She was obsessed with finding the answer. She had to solve this case. She couldn't save me but she could get justice for my death. With this attitude she was surprisingly efficient. By the morning she was ready waiting for everyone to wake up with ten death reports that all had something in common: they were all girls that had died at the same age, they all had the same birthday, my birthday, and they all had been mysteriously forgotten, lost in the dust of the past without getting any justice for their deaths.

The hours flew by while she was trying to find the solution to the case. She had fallen asleep a while ago. Suddenly she heard a knock on the door interrupting her unintentional nap. Cecilia got up from her position and stood up as she saw Carmela with an abashed look on her face. "Have you been here all night? I heard some weird noises during the night but I just thought I was just hearing things" said Carmela in which Cecilia replied instantly with: "We don't have the time for explanations, we have to go and tell the others about the news that I have discovered!". Cecilia took Carmela by the wrist before she had time to respond and

took her to the dining hall. Gigi was serving breakfast for Mario while Mario was waiting at the dining table. Cecilia and Carmela ran into the room rapidly and Cecilia slammed the cases on the table. Gigi and Mario were looking at each other confused, glazing at the papers Cecilia had just thrown in front of them. Cecilia presented her discoveries which she had found during the night. Everybody was now thinking about how to combine all the clues together. Especially Mario who was disturbed by the fact that he hadn't found the clues which were in his office the whole time. Mario sighed and said with a sulky voice : "I have to think about this somewhere else", and started walking away. Carmela replied "Mario, where do you think you are going?" with an interrogative look on her face. "To my office. I need some time to be on my own". Carmela thought that considering the circumstances that it's better to let him have his time alone.

Mario went to his office to see if there was still something Cecilia hadn't noticed. He felt guilty for not finding the clues before. Not just Matilda's death but all the other girls he could have saved if he just had realized the hints. He was walking through the office with his absent mind when he noticed something on the floor. First he thought it was just a piece of trash that Cecilia had left behind her. He was still in his thoughts when he picked up the paper. He was about to throw it away when something caught his eyes. There was a stamp that felt familiar to him. He was sure he had seen it somewhere else before. He tried to remember where he had seen it when Cecilia rushed into the room holding the notebook in her hand. "You have to see this," she shouted. Cecilia handed the notebook to Mario and started to explain something quickly, gasping breath between the sentences. But Mario didn't hear any of it because he was too concentrated to something else. In the cover of the notebook there was the exact same ornamental stamp. He slowly lifted his hand up to quiet Cecilia down looking carefully through the similarities of the two stamps. He folded open the paper he had found on the floor. It was a map of Monza.

As they arrived at the well they knew exactly where the second clue was. They just had to use a rope to pull a bucket from the well. "The clue must be in the bucket! But how do we get it from the well since the rope is broken? "

In a short time they knew exactly what they had to do.

As fast as they could, they took the map and with all the courage they had in their body, they walked towards the first place marked on the map: the great salon. While Walking everybody was silent, but they were all thinking about the same thing: how could their house hide such a big mystery. After a few minutes they were at the center of the salon, looking in every corner for the piece of paper. Gigi was convinced that it was all a joke, as he had been cleaning the mansion so many times and he had never found anything. He was trying to explain his reasons, when Carmela turned around, bleached with a small and faded piece of paper with a crying middle-aged man painted that she had found in a corner of the salon. He was not very handsome, but fascinating. In the draw he was staring at something with a terrified expression.

All the tenants couldn't believe in what was happening, but they were also kind of relieved from the discovery. They looked at each other and remained in silence for some minutes without even being aware of it. They were traumatized.

Carmela, who usually was the most emotional, surprisingly was the clearest headed. Without worrying about the others, took the map from her husband's hand and went to the second place: Mario's office. She arrived and her mates reached her. Now they didn't want to find out whether the situation was real or not, they were just willing to complete the painting. This time the search took much more time as Mario had many documents and objects in his office. They found another missed piece of the draw in one of the ancient books that had always been in the villa's collection. "And now what Carmela. I told you these books would have served something." said Mario to his wife. And she replied " Shut up, you idiot, do you think it's the right moment to say something like that?!". Well I guess he wasn't so stupid; what if he had thrown them away?

In the second piece there was something unexpected. Even if they were prepared for everything, seeing their own house in a draw like that was quite disturbing. After they went to the third room: pool room. There they could find it easily as they had understood that the pieces were in the most unexpected places. In the draw they found a half painted horse. While glancing at the horse they couldn't find out the links between the pieces. Suddenly the paper dropped from Gigi's hand and while he was grabbing it back he noticed writings on the back. At first the written words themselves didn't make any sense, but once they put all the pieces they had together, they were sure they were close to the solution. They hurried to go to the last place marked on the map: the conversation room.

The last piece was the hardest to find, not so much for the hiding place, but more for the anxiety of not being able to solve the mystery; or maybe they were just afraid of finding out any truth about me. "Here it is!" said Mario, hanging in his hand the crucial piece. At this point they put together the four pieces and the paper was completed. They immediately looked at the writings on the back: to break the curse a death had happened, to break the curse a fire was needed. Now the paper should be burnt, if you the curse crave to stop.

In a hurry they lit the fire. Fortunately Gigi had followed my advice to always keep a stock of wood, otherwise they wouldn't be able to find it easily, as it was summer. Carmela, overwhelmed and with tears sliding down her face, threw the papers in the fireplace. None of them knew what was going to happen, but they all were relieved.

After a few days the shock passed, and they all felt like it was just a nightmare.

Cecilia was walking around in my old room. She wanted to feel my existence for one last time. While she was going through my old stuff she saw her own name. It was written in a white envelope with my handwriting she recognized very well. She opened it up with light curiosity but still with darkness in her mind.

20.5.1918 Monza

Dear Cecilia,

It's been a while since I wrote to you. It took me courage to write all this so I hope you don't hate me for this and for the things I say in this letter. I hope you don't think that I wrote this letter to beg for your forgiveness. I hope you don't think I'm pathetic. Or maybe I am. I just wanted to say these things to you.

A lot of things have changed. I have changed. Isn't it strange how day by day nothing changes but when you look back everything is different? Lately I been thinking a lot about our past. All the things that were never said. All the things we would have wanted to say. All the things that couldn't be said. I've been thinking about how different everything could have been, if we would've dared to. And if times would have been different. The more I think the more I want to go back in time. Back when we still believed that we could be something. Days when we were alive just for each other. Days when being together was all that mattered. Days when we tried so hard to find each others from the crowd and smiled so widely when our eyes met. Days when I wanted to be yours, all yours so desperately that I wanted to scream. Days when I would have died for you if you only had asked. And I want to preserve all this memories we share, keep them as close to me as I can. And I want to learn to live in the same way like we did back then. Just simply being alive, enjoying the world without the desire to be seen. When did everything become so difficult and complicated? Or maybe it never was. Maybe I just imagined it all as complicated. I know everything was left incomplete. That I left at the worst possible time. And I regret it so much. But I try to forgive myself. Because I know it's pointless being hard on myself over the past I can no longer change. But still. I did wrong to you. And I never apologized. I never stepped back and explained my decisions. And that's what I regret the most. How I felt you in the dark. So now I am. I'm apologizing all my mistakes and things I didn't do or what I should have done. Maybe it's too late now. Maybe too many years has passed and I'm hopelessly trying to change things you've already moved on. Maybe I am just dragging you to the past you don't want to see. Maybe I am just selfishly opening old wounds while trying to clear my own conscience.

But I also have something important I need to tell you. I will come back. I have made an agreement with Carmela and Mario that I can visit Finland during next summer. I don't know if you even want to see me. If it hurts too much. But it would be lovely to see you. You don't even know how much I want to spend time with you. See your face, hear your voice and laughter. I want to know how you are doing in life. How you have changed. But how your smile that I adore so much is still the same. I miss you so badly.

Always yours,

Matilda

Cecilia's teardrops irrigated the letter. All the feelings she had tried to hide and forgot were now trickling down her cheeks. All the memories that had come to her mind as she received Carmela's letter a month ago and what she had avoided since then filled her mind. "Of course I forgive you. I was never angry. We were both so confused and young and alone. How could you ever think that I hate you?" She was whispering these words to the emptiness. The pain inside her was unbearable. She wanted to scream and throw up. "I love you so fucking much. I have always loved and I always will." She was screaming now. "I miss you so damn much." She said without any voice just moving her lips. She was drowning in her own thoughts. Maybe. Maybe they would have had all the things they never had. Maybe they could have said all the things that they never said. Maybe they. Maybe they could have had each other. Like they always wanted to. "But now you are dead. Dead and buried. And I never got the chance to tell you how I feel. There's nothing I can do." Some part of her hoped that she never found the letter. But she knew that no matter how much it hurt right now, it was good that she found it. Because now she wasn't alone with her feelings and thoughts. And nobody, not a single soul could take my love away from her.