The Operation of Language, Understanding and Misunderstanding in Literature

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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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Contents

Abstract ......................................................................................................................... 5

Literary Representations of Language and Understanding within Mikhail Bakhtin’s Utterance .................................................................................................................. 7

Capire .......................................................................................................................... 34
Abstract

This thesis comprises an exegesis which examines the manifestation of understanding and its relationship with language through the literary theory of Mikhail Bakhtin’s utterance, primarily focusing on the ideas present in his work *The Dialogic Imagination*, and the creative works of Felicity Castagna and Luke Carman; and a creative work entitled *Capire*, a fiction detailing the adolescent struggle of a young boy navigating a series of relationships between family and friends, discovering the importance of language as a part of his life and as part of his understanding.

Bakhtin’s theory posits that the novel is a combination of artistically arranged languages, operating simultaneously to convey understanding and meaning. This is accomplished through a complex formation of stratified dialogue and discourse. Each example of these stratifications present in literature are able to be analysed as utterances, the smallest discernible unit of speech communication. From within these utterances, language takes its artistic form. The exegesis seeks to mobilise Bakhtin’s theory of the utterance within Castagna’s *No More Boats* and Carman’s *An Elegant Young Man*. These works present narratives which allow for the elucidation of the concept of language and the utterance. Castagna presents a story of loss and struggle, while Carman presents readers with a series of conflicting and contrasting voices. Each author constructs for their protagonist a unique language which will be analysed through Bakhtin’s dialogic concepts.

Within the creative work *Capire*, the life of Christian Baglio is traced from his first day of school at five years old to his final weeks of high school at the age of eighteen. Christian finds himself in a family who, while loving and supportive, are a point of difficulty when it comes to communication. The Baglio family are all bilingual, able to speak both
English and Italian, with the exception of Christian. As he grows older, Christian must navigate a relationship with his family which is inhibited by his inability to speak a language which he perceives as being an integral part of his family experience. His understanding of these relationships and the world around him will change drastically as he matures and begins to contemplate his understanding, and the understanding of those around him.
Literary Representations of Language and Understanding within Mikhail Bakhtin’s Utterance

‘Discourse itself taken in isolation, as a purely linguistic phenomenon, cannot of course be either true or false, bold or modest.’

– Voloshinov, Discourse in life and discourse in poetry

Works of literature, be they novelistic or otherwise, are always and permanently encoded in an artistic system which governs the operation of communication present in these works; this is the system of language. Language permeates all forms of human activity and interaction, though none so directly as in the construction of the novel.1 The novel is an artistic representation of language which holds particular significance when compared to other forms of literature. It grants access to a representation of stratified languages entirely unique to each individual novel, presenting literature in a form which closely mirrors the multifaceted phenomenon of language in everyday life. At the forefront of thinking and theory involving language and its relationship with the novel is the imperative linguistic and philosophical figure Mikhail Bakhtin.

Within his ‘The problem of Speech Genres’, Bakhtin posits that representations of speech communication can be distilled into its smallest measureable form when analysed in a series

1 Bakhtin, Speech Genres and Other Late Essays, 60.
of speech units known as *utterances*. Voloshinov, a contemporary of Bakhtin elucidates the idea of the utterance by refining it into a synthesis of three contextual factors: ‘1) a spatial purview common to the speakers (the unity of what is visible...), 2) the [communicator]’s *common knowledge and understanding* of the circumstances and finally 3) their *common evaluation* of these circumstances.’². These three aspects work at once to inform, colour and give meaning to language, producing the basis for communication and critically, for understanding. When applied in an analysis of literature, the utterance becomes an invaluable tool, capable of illuminating complex interactions between speakers, characters and readers alike. Bakhtin’s contextual construction of communication becomes especially important when used to inspect interactions between characters who appear to ‘misunderstand’ one another. Understanding and misunderstanding both originate within the context of the utterance, producing a single instance of communication. These instances of communication become so refined and iterated that, over time, they begin to form a discourse which revolves around their very operation. These discourses are what Bakhtin coins as speech genres.³

When engaged with literature, readers interact with a set of languages entirely unique to the construction of the work they are experiencing in tandem with their own external world. As an utterance has no clear or defined end, an individual reader’s relationship with any given work could vary wildly from another reader’s. The result of this variation is an infinitely vast array of potential understandings born from any work which seeks to communicate with its readers, in any sensory manner. As such, Bakhtin’s notion of the utterance has become a refined tool which, when implemented correctly, can shed light onto the operation of language in novels, and how it can be represented in boundlessly different ways.

³ Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, 60.
communicating and producing languages entirely distinct in style and artifice. In order to demonstrate this complex and specific working of language, close analysis of works which present utterances and languages in distinct ways are needed.

Firstly, Falicity Castagna’s ‘No More Boats’ explores the tribulations of the Parramatta based Martone family caught in an unexpected series of politically motivated affairs. These happenings lead to great discomfort, hostility, and breakdown for the Martones, culminating in a single, irredeemable rupture of communication and sanity. What is more important than the operation of the plot however, is the mode of communication between its characters. Specifically, the ‘protagonist’ of the narrative, Antonio, and the other characters who populate his day to day life. Antonio is a character who has had his entire concept of understanding turned on its head. The way in which he previously viewed the world, the language which he used to encode it, is left utterly inaccessible due to a near fatal incident and what is left is a fractured, shell of a man who once understood the world around him. In addition, the relationship Antonio shares with his son, Francis, further illuminates the complexity in grappling with an alienated language. Francis acts as Antonio’s most understanding companion, but simultaneously becomes caught up in misunderstandings with his father, leaving Antonio with nowhere to turn. Bakhtin’s idea of understanding in language being intimately tied to these connections one has with another will stand front and centre in a deconstruction of Antonio’s character. It will show how Antonio finds himself paradoxically isolated yet surrounded in a ‘chain’ of utterances, created by the inescapable, all encapsulating language which he uses to observe the world around him.

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4 Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, 93.
Accompanying this exploration of Castagna’s work, Luke Carman’s ‘An Elegant Young Man’ will provide an entirely different artistic representation of the construction of language and the utterances which engender those languages. Also taking place in Western Sydney, Carman compiles a series of short stories which focus on several different themes ranging from the importance of literature in environment and place to the cultural difference of Sydney’s suburbs. Critically, the stories flow from the first-person perspective of Carman’s fictive version of himself, Luke, manifesting in a narrative style which more closely resembles monologue than any kind of omniscient narration. This expression of narration opens up an entirely different field of analysis from the Bakhtinian perspective, allowing for an incorporation of the key concept of ‘heteroglossia’. The form of the utterance is anything but static, capable of emerging from any and all forms of communication. When analysed in Carman’s work, it will be made apparent that even in a piece of literature dominated by a single voice, multiple languages still manifest, producing utterances which are every part as complex and stratified as their multi-charactered counterparts.

What will be shown through the examination of these particular texts with the work of Bakhtin is that the communication of understanding in literature is astoundingly complex and multifaceted. The usefulness and limitless possibilities of the utterance will be made apparent through the study of their varied representations in Castagna’s and Carman’s literature, and the importance of multiple levels of context which produce the means by which language operates will be made apparent.

In literature and in life the nucleus of dialogue, of discourse, is communication. The notion that one is transmitting information to another is the core principle determining the myriad

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5 Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 301.
utterances which construct our interactions with others. Oriented towards this nucleus, all manner of contexts press forward: ‘social, historical, meteorological, physiological’ etc. Simultaneously, from within the nucleus, from inside the mind of the speaker or writer of the dialogue, internal influence, ideas, beliefs and understandings push out into the world, toward someone else whose mind tries to imagine, producing the uniqueness of the utterance.

Bakhtin describes the utterance as ‘a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear’\(^7\). It is a point which, as expanded upon in ‘The Problem of Speech Genres’, brings an active role of interpretation and understanding into the mind of the listener. Utterances ‘…of complex cultural communication are intended precisely for this kind of actively responsive understanding…’\(^8\). Between these compounding and intersecting contexts, the listener or reader must make sense of each and every utterance they find themselves presented with, a process which is far more active than passive\(^9\). What’s more, an utterance cannot exist in isolation, ‘utterances are not indifferent to one another, and are not self-sufficient; they are aware of and mutually reflect one another.’\(^10\)

The utterance exists within a continually shifting linguistic and artistic ecosystem, simultaneously vast enough to encompass entire spoken languages, and localised to a point of unique manifestation between individual speakers. Given this operation, it can be argued that in Felicity Castagna’s ‘No More Boats’, the protagonist Antonio Martone is experiencing an immense difficulty engaging in the active process of understanding the utterances which populate the discourse informing the ‘everyday language’\(^11\) he encounters. Antonio must, by necessity, interact with this discourse in order to operate as a communicator, he must find an understanding.

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\(^6\) Holquist, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 428.  
\(^7\) Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 272.  
\(^8\) Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, 69.  
\(^10\) Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, 91.  
From the earliest chapter of the work, Antonio is described by his son Francis as an aloof figure, one whose very existence agitates and follows his son during his daily interactions. The reader is even given an interesting set of contradictions through Francis’ introduction of Antonio. When asked about his father’s condition and actions, Francis responds with a distant: ‘He wasn’t trying to explain it to no one. He hardly understood it himself’\(^\text{12}\). The distance between Francis and Antonio is emphasised so as to isolate Antonio as something other, outside of the scope of Francis’ understanding, or most other peoples for that manner. This however is subverted later in the chapter, when the narrative voice becomes more direct and Francis’ words are transposed over the dialogue of the narration itself. Francis internally remarks: ‘No one understood about his father.’\(^\text{13}\). This statement is not one which is directly associated with the entirety of the world; rather, Castagna inhabits the position of Francis for this description of the discourse in order to demonstrate the connection between Francis and Antonio, one which will be critical for future analysis of these characters. Francis is truly reflecting in this statement that no one but himself understood his father. The nebulous ‘no one’ is actually pointed towards those outside of the scope of the discourse required to really communicate with Antonio. What can be seen here is that Castagna is positioning Antonio outside of the common discourse, she is representing him as a figure whose utterances are creating a schism in the understanding of others, before even giving him a ‘physical’ appearance in the narrative.

Antonio is built upon what appears at first as a solid foundation of traits and attributes which flesh out his character. The man is headstrong and forthright, he is equal parts conviction and

\(^{13}\) Castagna, *No More Boats*, 11.
constitution in spirit. These facets are embedded into Antonio’s character; however, they are undermined by the state in which Antonio finds himself. Castagna brings Antonio into the novel with: ‘Antonio still had one leg that moved properly (the right) and an arm that functioned (also the right)...’\(^{14}\). From the outset, the reader is perceiving Antonio as a character whose functionality is inherently limited. His physical disabilities are frontloaded and, as will be shown through more analysis of the character, become the focal point around which all other facets of Antonio’s personality and understanding must revolve. In order to deconstruct this orbit around disability, Bakhtin’s concept of ‘speech genres’ and in particular, ‘language’ is useful. A speech genre, for Bakhtin, emerges in an iterated, personal response to an utterance. An individual learns and understands, through exposure and time, that certain utterances beckon similar responses to particular contexts. A discourse evolves around these utterances, producing the speech genre.\(^{15}\) These genres grant to a speaker the ability to access heuristic responses to a perceived social language, which dictates the internalisation and understanding of an utterance. Of these two connected ideas, language is the core lens through which understanding is constructed. In Bakhtin’s construction, ‘language’ does not necessarily refer to the traditional linguistic concept of verbal communication. Rather, language for Bakhtin can denote any system of communication or conception. At once, multiple languages are present within any given utterance. Along with the common conceptions of language, National Language (English, Italian, French etc.) and Social Language (words embroidered with fashion, memetic value, demographic appeal, etc.)\(^{16}\), factors which are entirely unique to an individual may create a system through which information and context is sifted. In another sense, the individual creates a personal discourse, a speech genre relating to and accessible by only themselves; they create a

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\(^{15}\) Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, 60.

\(^{16}\) Holquist, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 430.
‘personal’ language. For Antonio, the lens through which he primarily observes the world, figures his place in society, and generates his personal value is through his ability to engage in, and produce the fruits of labour.

The presence, absence, and repercussions of labour dominate all aspects of Antonio’s psyche, body and understanding. Having immigrated to Australia from a war-torn Italy, Antonio sought to figuratively and literally build a new life for himself in Australia. What followed were years of hard work culminating in the construction of his own house. Antonio’s own reflection on this, his greatest accomplishment, is given considerable emphasis by Castagna. Thinking of his father and vicariously feeling pride for his home, Antonio reaffirms to himself in a moment of contradictive vulnerability masked in his aforementioned conviction that he ‘…built his home with his own bare hands. With his bare hands.’ Castagna beautifully emphasises the intimate proximity between Antonio and his house, the fruits of his labour, through her attention to the body and mind. The bareness here represents more than just a commitment to work: it calls attention to Antonio’s self-perceived understanding of his home, one which is masterful and total. He, having from the ground up built his own environment, is entirely within his own realm, one with parameters measured by the millimetre and understood entirely. Antonio, in his home, understands his world. Having worked countless difficult and long hours he produced his own, safe environment. The process and product of his labour therefore operates within a system by which Antonio can judge the world, by which he can understand the world. Antonio’s language is a language of labour.

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Given that Antonio filters his own sense of self-worth through his ability to carry out labour, his subsequent loss of bodily ability is therefore paramount to his character arc in the story. In the midst of an impending disaster, Antonio’s long-time friend, Nico, is lying unconscious after a hazardous fall from a roof on their construction job. In an effort to save Nico, Antonio attempts to move his body from under a falling construction scaffold, to no avail. The scaffold comes down on the pair, leaving Nico dead and Antonio with the injuries he has become associated with. The magnitude of the trauma caused by this incident cannot be understated. The traumatic experiences of Antonio’s past follow him constantly, but none reach a level of infiltration on the scale of Nico’s death. What is shattered here is more than just bone and dignity. The event creates a schism in Antonio’s understanding which will follow him until the very end of the narrative. This rupture becomes illuminated when considering Bakhtin’s system of languages and how Antonio now has had his primary system of understanding forcefully altered. Where he once thrived Antonio now lingers and haunts; his disability subjects him to long stretches of idleness. Castagna most predominantly presents this aimlessness in Antonio’s trips to construction sites during the evenings. He constantly returns to sites which he worked on, sometimes even houses which have been completed, and recollects about their construction and his hand in their development. Here, Castagna brings attention to Antonio’s inability to move on from his past. He is trapped in a body whose world is encoded by a language inaccessible to him. In the first trip to one of these sites, Nico appears as an apparition in Antonio’s mind, acting as a mirror for his thoughts. He remarks ‘Now, everything is different, what a waste. They laugh at me when I speak’\textsuperscript{18}. The ‘ghost’ of Nico is demonstrating not only an overtly negative perception of the world, but also signals the critical shift which has occurred in the world to lead to this negativity and hopelessness. Antonio has become something to be laughed at. His words and

\textsuperscript{18}Castagna, \textit{No More Boats}, 27.
expressions are, in his mind, nothing more than a comic expression to those around him. They no longer carry the weight and importance they once did. Without access to his language of labour, Antonio has become nothing more than a ‘waste’. In perhaps the most illuminating scene in the novel, Francis secretly follows his father on one of his trips to the work sites. After observing him casting stones and attempting to break objects of all sorts, he witnesses his father’s state in its most raw, aimless form. As referred to earlier, Francis is particularly perceptive in regard to his father’s emotional state and is able to see through his violent outbursts to something which is buried deeper: Antonio’s paralysing sadness and inability. Francis empathises with the emptiness Antonio feels, he is mournful not because his father is acting out, but because it flags the exhaustion of all other possibilities. Castagna eloquently enters a more direct discourse once again to have Francis internalise that it is ‘…not that his dad wanted to fuck things up, but that he couldn’t do it properly.’\textsuperscript{19} This is one of the only direct acknowledgements within the narrative dialogue which encapsulates the nuance built into Antonio’s loss of language. It calls in the totality of loss, inability, misunderstanding, and pain encapsulated in Antonio’s character.

There are, however, moments in which Antonio attempts to reclaim some of his lost pride, the most notable example being his party. Here, Antonio begins the chapter in a state which is mostly alien to his character. He sits in a circle of his friends, recounting tales of old times and past anecdotes, having the men in his company hooked on his every word. He is depicted as being the centre of attention, conversation that isn’t happening directly with Antonio is somehow involved with him. Yet his physical state remains unchanged. The key to Antonio’s uncharacteristic happiness in this chapter is his engagement with the world; and the primary lens through which Antonio is viewing the world here is that of nostalgia. For Antonio,

\textsuperscript{19} Castagna, \textit{No More Boats}, 69.
nostalgia represents more than just a fondness for the past; it presents the world as a place which is once again understandable. He recalls moments in which he was able to make something of himself, exuding an image of usefulness and a propensity to be wanted. Castagna also presents his audience as generally receptive, being sure to point out that the men Antonio is talking to ‘…smiled and nodded as they heard Antonio recount each anecdote…’

It is clear that Antonio is engaging with language in a radically different way than his usual reclusiveness, it is practically the opposite manifestation of reaction for Antonio to thrive in an environment which is populated by the very people who he would previously measure himself against and engage in dialogue with through the common ground of labour. The reason for this can be understood when applying Bakhtin’s conception of language orientation. That is, dialogue is ‘…oriented toward the listener and his answer.’ In another sense, it is within Bakhtin’s conception that the words which make up an utterance will be shaped by the speaker or writer in order to illicit or provoke a response, it anticipates an answer; the speaker ‘expects response, agreement, sympathy, objection, execution and so forth…’ In this way, each and every utterance is structured in part by its interaction with other anticipated utterances which precede and follow it: ‘Each individual utterance is a link in the chain of speech communication’. This is why in a regular situation Antonio finds difficulty expressing himself, because the future implies communication in a world which no longer understands him. In this instance however, through the filter of nostalgia, Antonio can guide his conversational partners to a point of acknowledging the past so as to revert their perception of the world to a time in which he thrived, to a time when he understood the world

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22 Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* 69.
23 Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, 93.
and the world understood him. He is deliberately restricting the scope of conversation to centre upon the past as a means of maintaining his relevance.

The sanctity of this environment, however, is short lived. Later on, before Antonio is about to begin a speech in front of the whole party, the rowdy crowd is quieting down when, as silence is beginning to set in, Antonio overhears a co-worker remark to another: ‘The man was too fat and too old to be climbing up scaffolds, couldn’t compete.’ In an instant, Antonio’s grip on the past is undone by the contemporary nature of this one sentence. Castagna transports all of the repressed trauma which had been absent from the chapter in its totality and centralises it in one utterance. The disruptive power of bringing back the ghost of Nico, or even an allusion to him is enough to sever Antonio’s temporary reprieve from the pain of the present. Antonio reverts back into himself, having again realised that he now inhabits a realm in which he is no longer useful, no longer necessary. This culminates in Antonio plainly and abruptly addressing the crowd at his party with nothing more than: ‘Fuck you.’ Once again, Antonio is confronted with a world in which he cannot produce a clear enough language to understand what is happening and again he acts in the only way he can: with rejection of the world. This incident is concluded with an observational insight from Francis. Upon seeing his father retreat from the crowd, watching his mother pursue him and standing in the awkward silence which ensues, he laments that the perception of his character from his family is that of stupidity and ignorance, when in actuality he, in this moment, feels deeply connected with his father’s difficulty. He perceptively remarks that ‘…his father only got angry when he was ashamed.’ Francis perfectly identifies Antonio’s grievance with the situation, he even goes a step further to describe his father’s actions as something out of the

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24 Castagna, No More Boats, 56.
25 Castagna, No More Boats, 57.
26 Castagna, No More Boats, 57.
ordinary due to him being ‘…too ashamed for any ordinary kind of anger.’\textsuperscript{27} Antonio lashes out because of his shame, which is rooted in his loss of language. This phantom occurrence between Francis and Antonio comes to a head when, finally, the two of them attempt to have a conversation.

After waking up in the middle of the night, Antonio heads to his backyard for a cigarette. There, he discovers Francis sitting in the garden also smoking, though Antonio rightfully suspects that his son is smoking marijuana. What follows is perhaps one of, if not the most crucial moments in the narrative for Antonio. Unlike the previous chapters where interactions between the pair are short and to the point, here, he wants to have a real talk with Francis. Castagna sets up the interaction with inherent difficulty from Antonio’s side: ‘He wanted to talk to Francis like men talk to men but it was hard to talk to him that way.’\textsuperscript{28} This way of approaching conversation puts Francis’s character in a precarious position for Antonio. Castagna is figuring Francis as on the borderline between child and adult. For Antonio his son is representative of two worlds at once. From the perspective of Bakhtin, Francis has become an avatar for two languages which Antonio has trouble with when interacting simultaneously. Firstly, Francis’ age and occupation working with Antonio firmly places him within the language of labour. If another person possessed said attributes, Antonio would address them as he did his friends at the party. However, Francis is also emblematic of family, something which Antonio equates with the success of his work. Having now lost his connection to his self-worth, Francis has gone from something familiar to entirely distant, he is almost a stranger to his father. Antonio does not understand his son. Moreover, Antonio does not understand his son’s responses. After asking Francis if he was, in fact, smoking

\textsuperscript{27} Castagna, \textit{No More Boats}, 57.
\textsuperscript{28} Castagna, \textit{No More Boats}, 106.
marijuana, he is met with mockery and dismissal. As per Voloshinov, the ‘special and semantic purview of the speakers’ are at odds with one another, rather than at harmony in a place of understanding. This brings about Antonio’s anger, though he attempts to repress the feeling, he ‘… does not understand what he has said wrong.’ The pressure from this utter lack of understanding is enough to finally have Antonio plainly say, almost plead, to his son that what he truly desires is to communicate and to have the ability to do so: ‘No, I want to talk to you. I want to be able to talk to you.’ Antonio is desperately searching for the language needed to communicate with his son, to be able to speak with him under the normal constraints of a conversation, to speak with him in a language he understands and to anticipate a response which he would find comfortable. Bakhtin details this connection by positing that ‘Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other.’ It is true then that Antonio lacks an ability to understand, and it is this inability that is interfering with his propensity to make sense of the responses of the world and people around him. By dialogising this drive to understand in Antonio’s internal desire: ‘That was all he was looking for, just the ability to connect with his son’ Castagna presents Antonio as wanting and searching to recapture the language he once had. Antonio is constantly navigating a world and relationships now foreign to him, the utterances which surround him are alien. It is ultimately Antonio’s deepest desire to once again understand, though tragically his physical and mental state have him trapped in a language which lacks the ability to truly understand.

31 Castagna, No More Boats, 107.
32 Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, 282.
33 Castagna, No More Boats, 107.
Castagna’s novel presents the reader with a character whose language is called into question by the contexts of the environment in which they find themselves, and while this may at first appear as the norm for all of literature, there are particular works which do not grant a reader direct access to a literary world, at least, through the language of a narrator, or authoritative voice. This is precisely the area in which Luke Carman positions his collection of short stories: ‘An Elegant Young Man’. The distinct difference between Castagna’s and Carman’s work exists in the incarnation of the narrative delivery, the former operating within a third person narration, and the latter within first person and monologue. Monologue presents an interesting and complex problem for Bakhtin’s theories of languages and utterances: how is it possible to weigh the significance and situatedness of one’s language and understanding against an external context which is always informed through the language of a ‘speaking’ character? Is it possible to formulate an accurate depiction of the world of the narrative outside of the character’s perception? The use of contextual understanding discussed in relation to Castagna’s work would inherently break down as the advantage of an objective authoritative voice becomes obfuscated in the transposed, character infused speech of the monologue. Bakhtin asserts that for the genuine operation of language and utterances to exist, it ‘essentially needs only a speaker – one speaker – and an object for [its] speech.’\textsuperscript{34} What is most critical here is the distinction between the speaker and languages which that speaker can produce. In fact, there is a concept which Bakhtin elucidates in order to access a comprehension of multiple languages and voices emerging from a singular speaker in the monologue: the idea of heteroglossia.

As described by Bakhtin, heteroglossia is ‘…another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type

\textsuperscript{34} Bakhtin, \textit{Speech Genres and Other Late Essays}, 67.
of double-voiced discourse.'\textsuperscript{35} It is another means through which the utterance and the languages which encode them become manifest. The main conceit of heteroglossia is that whenever an utterance is dialogised; that is, once represented in the novel, it is permanently and inseparably infused with the language and artistic representations present in the novel itself, and becomes an entirely new utterance, uniquely constructed by the combination of those particular contexts. The language of a novel can operate in a myriad of ways, reflecting the ‘everyday’ manifestation of the utterance in practical, non-artistic discourse. When an author goes about creating a novel, they give the work a particular language without necessarily lending it an authoritative voice. In order to unpack this doubled connection, analysis of Carman’s work is imperative: it will show that while the character of ‘Luke’ is presenting the reader with an image of his environment through his own language, there is another language which runs adjacent, always setting the parameters for the scope of understanding that is present in the narrative. This second language is observable when analysing particular scenes and characters which produce contrast, contradiction and misunderstanding when compared with Luke’s language. The tandem nature of these languages is described in Holquist’s conception of the hybrid utterance. That is ‘The mixing, within a single concrete utterance, of two or more different linguistic consciousnesses, often widely separated in time and social space. Along with dialogisation of languages and pure dialogues, this is a major device for creating language-images in the novel.’\textsuperscript{36} The entirety of An Elegant Young Man is, by Holquist’s definition, an example of hybrid utterance. Through Carman’s engineering of context, environment and contradictory expressions, the double-voicedness of heteroglossia is made apparent. Along with this, the complex idea of language-images will be made apparent through further inquiry.

\textsuperscript{35} Bakhtin, \textit{The Dialogic Imagination}, 321.

\textsuperscript{36} Holquist, \textit{The Dialogic Imagination}, 429.
Firstly, the environmental context of *An Elegant Young Man* holds significant importance in the construction of the world and where it situates its protagonist. Primarily located in and around the suburbs of Liverpool in Sydney’s South Western region, the surroundings of the narrative lie mere minutes away from Antonio’s house in Castagna’s work. However, the shape of the world is vastly different in Carman’s depiction. This is the case primarily due to the way in which Carman figures the world in relation to the speaking character of Luke; or more specifically in this case, how the speaking character figures the world around him.

Luke’s character voice is one which is confident, intelligent and acutely aware of his surroundings. The intimate connection between speaker and environment is portrayed at the inception of the work in ‘Whitman and the Whitlam Centre’. On a walk through Liverpool, a personified Walt Whitman asks Luke about his environment, and the lack of book stores: ‘There are no second-hand book stores in Liverpool…’ is Luke’s response. Liverpool, and by extension the world figured by Luke’s character voice, becomes a place desolate in relation to literature. The classic works of such poets and authors as Whitman are oddities, found under abandoned wreckage. From here, the reader is introduced to a myriad of locations, dropped into the prose almost haphazardly. From the heights of Cecil Hills to the parks of Bonnyrigg, Western Sydney is built through Luke’s character voice as familiar and known, giving the voice an air of knowledge beyond what is disclosed. With this implicit familiarity and the representation of the environment of Western Sydney as a scaffold for the narrative world, the functioning of Luke’s understanding can be explored.

Through the familiarity disclosed in the description of environment, this same proximity is allowed to permeate the narrative itself. In another sense, due in part to the past tense

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structure of the stories, Luke’s character voice proceeds to construct the events of the novel through his own particular language, through his own understanding. It could be said that Carman’s construction of language exists in an inverse form to Castagna’s representation. In the case of No More Boats, Antonio’s language is held up against the world in which he finds himself; his understanding exists in contrast to the world. Whereas in Carman’s stories, his protagonist’s language exists as one with the world; it is the basis for the existence of the narrative itself. Following the core of this idea, that An Elegant Young Man’s structure is simultaneously its protagonist’s language, is Bakhtin’s assertion that ‘…double-voicedness in prose is prefigured in language itself… as a social phenomenon that is becoming in history, socially stratified and weathered in this process of becoming.’ 39 Using Bakhtin’s idea of heteroglossia, it is possible to demonstrate that even in a narrative which is entirely encoded in a singular language, utterances still retain all of their stratified aspects and produce both understanding and misunderstanding; a particularly striking example of these utterances occur within chapters revolving around the interactions between Luke and his father, Joe.

From the introduction of Joe’s character as a father figure in the chapter ‘In Granville’, the reader is presented with an image of a man who is every bit as hostile as he is arrogant. ‘Jesus Christ! They’ve got young kids, and I think they’re Lebbos.’ 40 is Joe’s racially charged, self-centred reaction to new neighbours moving in next door. Joe aggressively throws himself into unnecessary situations, resulting in foreseeable, negative outcomes. He gives Luke a punching bag for Christmas, then in an overzealous display of cockiness, injures his hand while attempting to show Luke how to use it. 41 Despite Joe’s demeanour, and Carman’s deliberate selection of situations which present Joe in the worst possible light, he is never

39 Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, 326.
40 Carman, An Elegant Young Man, 20.
41 Carman, An Elegant Young Man, 27.
actually shown to be a truly antagonistic character. In perhaps the most frantic and outwardly violent of Joe’s encounters, after an argument with family friends, he walks down a street in the middle of the night with Luke and his dog. The trio encounter what appears to be a fight on the street, and without a moment’s hesitation, Joe sends Luke running back to their home. Luke, pausing his frantic run to look back and observe his father, describes Joe as well as his dog ‘…looking wild and erratic as a pair of lost wolves…’

In addition to obvious use of zoomorphism, Luke here is employing the authorial voice to call attention to something much more nuanced: the representation of a different language. Just as with Antonio in Castagna’s novel, Joe inhabits a particular language that he uses to understand the world, and critically, this language is one which outside of Luke’s understanding. From what the reader can parse from the narrative, this language is one of self-righteousness, a masculine call to protect and defend; a language that is constantly undermined and ironically mocked throughout the chapter. In this moment, Carman is doing more than imbuing Joe with animal-like features; he is reinforcing Joe’s understanding of his environment through a language alien to Luke as a character. Luke’s character voice presents Joe as a presence which is dominating and pompously ridiculous. However, the authorial voice presents Joe as a figure who is more so than anything else, understanding the world from within a different language. This is one of the primary modes through which Carman is able to insert multiple languages into what seems to be a monologue. Carman is using the character and authorial voice in tandem in this example to present a clash of language, an overlap of ideas and views of the world and contexts which surround his characters. Bakhtin elaborates by presenting the idea that the novel is a maelstrom of these multi-languaged utterances built upon one another, that what is represented in the novel isn’t necessarily the image of a person, but ‘… the image of

42 Carman, *An Elegant Young Man*, 34.
Carman’s stories are littered with these complex and interconnected images, weaving together in unison to form a world created by the character voice and the authorial voice simultaneously. Further illuminating the representation of these languages and images, Carman employs the use of a rhetorical tool which is constantly revisited throughout the course of the narrative: contradiction.

Contradiction within *An Elegant Young Man* represents more than a series of misunderstandings. It is, in some chapters, the primary method through which Carman figures the narrative, and socially positions Luke to communicate a difference in language, and subsequently, presents a difference in understanding. The chapter ‘2170’ is a compilation of stories directly related to Western Sydney as a region, the operations of its culture and the actions of its people. Within this section, Luke recalls the act of taking the train to Cronulla, a beach suburb squarely outside of Western Sydney. There are two distinct incarnations of this travel and both contain contradictory events. In the first outing, a teenage Luke travels by train with a large group of his friends. The scene is brimming with adolescent overconfidence as the boys call out to other passengers, making a general nuisance of themselves. However, when Luke attempts to become involved, and inadvertently insults a mother, he is met with a reaction of shame and dismissiveness from his peers: ‘That’s a mum bro, don’t disrespect.’ Though Luke’s reaction is short and simple: ‘And everyone was disappointed in me.’, it’s implications are far reaching. What Carman is doing through this singular line is positioning the voice and language of his protagonist outside of the language of his group. Through his attempt to fit in, and failure to do so, a distinct separation is created within a context which, by all other accounts, should be one of the most familiar to Luke. This familiarity becomes

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44 Carman, *An Elegant Young Man*, 43.
45 Carman, *An Elegant Young Man*, 43.
the very force which undermines Luke’s ability to fit in with his group, producing a misunderstanding, rather than understanding. As a result, the remainder of the interactions involving Luke’s friends are tinged with the lingering presence of misunderstanding. This doubling of languages, the representation of two understandings, is a primary example of a hybrid utterance, and heteroglossia in action. Bakhtin uses a metaphor of ‘unmasking’ to portray how heteroglossia is able to enter the discourse of the novel: ‘This act of authorial unmasking, which is openly accomplished within the boundaries of a single simple sentence, merges with the unmasking of another’s speech’. What is being unmasked here is a disconnection in understanding, a revelation that the familiarity expressed in Luke’s character voice is not necessarily always the predominating context for an utterance.

Mirroring this scene, Luke goes on to describe his experience of returning to Cronulla, this time with a different set of friends, and at an older age. His best friend at the time, Nikki, muses as they sit on the beach about how good it is ‘…to be close to the surf; like you’re a real Aussie again; an Aussie in your own space. Away from all that complexity and culture and shit.’ Here, Nikki is positioning Luke in a particular cultural group, she is figuring him within her own language and, as discussed earlier, is expecting him to produce particular responses. As such, she expects Luke to relate to her apparent distaste for cultural settings more common to their experience. Nikki is later revealed to also be from Luke’s area of Liverpool, and is contrasting the environments of Cronulla and Western Sydney. This signals a particular encoding of environment and identity. Liverpool and Western Sydney are presented as ‘complex’ in their cultural operations, filled with the interactions of multiple nationalities, cultures and languages. Cronulla, on the other hand, symbolises a more ‘simple’

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46 Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, 304.
47 Carman, An Elegant Young Man, 46.
language of Anglo-Australian culture: it exists as a foil to Liverpool and introduces yet another layer of heteroglossia within the environment itself. By making this distinction, Carman uses the authorial voice to dichotomise his environmental contexts, charging each utterance occurring in them with particular and defined languages.

Nikki is so convinced in Luke’s ability to internalise her language and sympathise with her that, before the pair head off from the beach to explore the promenade, she plainly remarks: ‘…You’re good at listening to shit. You understand things.’48. It is an assertion which becomes so drastically undermined that it almost serves as an omen of sorts. Luke does not even give a response to the remark, it simply washes over him, as though it were merely part of the noise of a rudimentary conversation. Voloshinov comments on the workings of these types of interactions, describing them as ‘implied evaluations’. When a group (social, cultural, etc.) develop a discourse in which language is allowed to flourish (the aforementioned speech genre) the evaluation of another’s language, which is presumed to operate within a similar genre, is assessed by what is implied, rather than what is actually communicated: ‘Particularly important significance is attached to implied evaluations. The point is that all the fundamental social evaluations which develop directly from the specific conditions of the… life of a given group are not usually uttered.’49 Nikki here relies entirely on the misunderstanding that she and Luke interpret meaning through a language within a similar discourse, further exacerbating the misunderstanding present in the chapter. The two navigate the packed streets when they’re approached by someone who Carman describes as a ‘…punk in a denim jacket and jeans with a mohawk dyed silver who was swigging a longneck’.50 He aggressively badgers the two of them, hurling insults through the deafening

48 Carman, An Elegant Young Man, 47.
50 Carman, An Elegant Young Man, 47.
crowd. Most notably though is the question the punk asks before anything else: ‘Where are youse from?’ To the punk the most important, and seemingly, the most obvious attribute of the pair is that they are not from Cronulla. Without any kind of engagement or questioning, the punk is able to pick them out, almost psychically sensing the difference between Luke, Nikki and the crowd. There is nothing directly addressing this difference apart from a fleeting scoff from Nikki prior to the engagement. This is perhaps the most effective incorporation of ‘the image of language’ within the entirety of the narrative. Carman is effectively using the image of the punk as an effigy for the language of Cronulla. Luke’s very presence is all that is needed to contrast his character against a context in which he is inherently alien. His language is one which does not match with the language of Cronulla, it is one which carries with it the contexts, interpretations and trappings of Western Sydney. If Luke’s language, as per Nikki’s assertion, truly fit within the context of Cronulla, Carman’s authorial voice would corroborate this assertion. Instead, the reader is left with the flawed contradiction between languages expressed by Nikki, undermined by the very context she wishes to revel in.

Each of these examples of hybrid utterances presenting different languages are precisely, for Bakhtin, not only the primary characteristic of the novel, but also the central problem of the construction of the novel itself. Using the Epic as a form of comparison to the dialogic novel, Bakhtin posits that the Epic contains ‘one unitary and singular belief system’, a particular language. The entire context of an Epic is shared throughout the entirety of the narrative, encoding the story with a singular language through which all utterances are filtered, disseminated and able to produce meaning and understanding. With the incorporation of heteroglossia into the novel, these belief systems, these languages, are able to populate

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narratives, stratifying the amount of understandings a character and reader can generate from any given utterance. When these multi-layered languages and understandings reveal themselves through the artistic construction of a character, the author is truly engaged in Bakhtin’s conception of what the novel truly is. In addition to the creation of the many languages which populate the novel, it is ‘the problem of artistically representing language, the problem of representing the image of language’\textsuperscript{54} which imbues the novel with its unique identity.

Carman’s work is an example of the epitome of Bakhtin’s idea of the novel. As an author, Carman strategically and meaningfully creates a world which is simultaneously informed by the language of its characters, and by the contexts which they inhabit. Furthermore, the languages which are represented within contexts which they are influenced by do not necessarily all echo identical ideas. Characters within An Elegant Young Man are both symbolic in a literary sense and human in their own right: Joe can be read as a literary representation of the overly-masculine, aggressive male father figure, but the reader is also able to observe his fear, his overcompensation and shame. Nikki’s character represents the everyday racist, surface level thinker of Western Sydney, but through her words can be read as someone in need of companionship, a person who seeks a sense of comfort more than anything else. Each and every one of these languages and representations are in themselves encapsulated within the larger, over-arching language of Luke’s language as the protagonist, contrasting and illuminating these other languages and contexts. The reader is given enough meaning to project on to Carman’s characters a sense of artistic value, and of legitimately relatable and believable realism. All of this is achieved through the artistic representation of

\textsuperscript{54} Bakhtin, \textit{The Dialogic Imagination}, 336.
language through the artistic composition of an extraordinarily nuanced, detailed and stratified heteroglossia, manifesting in the hybrid utterances of *An Elegant Young Man*.

From what has been shown in analysis of these two texts, the importance and relevance of Bakhtin’s utterance persists as a hallmark of critical literary theory. In summarising the totality of the utterance, its place in day to day life and discourse, Voloshinov calls attention once again to the importance an inseparability of context to the functioning of understanding:

‘What is called the ‘understanding’ and ‘evaluation’ of the utterance… always includes the non-verbal real-life situation together with the word. Thus, life does not act upon the utterance from without, it permeates it from within…’

Understanding and misunderstanding are much more than mere products of language and the communication there of: they are concepts which are necessary for the very formation of language itself. They are the means by which an utterance is given life. Understanding and misunderstanding represent, above all else, the contemplation of another’s language in another’s mind. This active process of listening, followed by speaking is the force which drives the manifestation of communication. It is a ‘living’ process in which the participants must always mutually acknowledge the contexts of the environment which houses their discourse and together work to make sense and understanding of that discourse. It is a process which simultaneously must look toward a future of responses, while also appealing to a precedent set up countless years before it, through countless other contexts, ‘…sometimes close and sometimes – in areas of cultural communication – very distant…’

The expansiveness of understanding and what it asks of us as communicators is what directly leads to the development of discourses, the speech genres which populate those discourses, and the individual languages communicators

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57 Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, 93.
use to make sense of those genres. Further complicating this communication, literature presents both barriers and opportunities for specialised methods of communicating the operation of languages.

The complex, stratified system of languages which populate artistically curated texts allows readers and listeners alike to extrapolate from an infinitely vast array of meanings, producing their own understandings in the process. Readers are given the opportunity to view the world within the contexts of Antonio’s fractured psyche, feeling his pain and sorrow at the loss of his ability to adequately interact with his world. Castagna gives the reader this opportunity through her construction of Antonio coupled with the broken world he inhabits, in addition to figuring him as a spent individual through his futile attempts to converse with his son. Carman presents his protagonist as a young man who is simultaneously intimately familiar with his surroundings while at the same time is ostracized by the forces pushing out of those same contexts. Both of these authors construct characters which are not only unique in their own right: they live as active representations of the language which they use to understand the world around them. It is clear that, by Bakhtin’s formulation, Castagna and Carman truly succeed in creating and figuring characters which produce a true sense of understanding and misunderstanding, engage in the active process of communication and use their own, unique language. Castagna and Carman holistically and entirely address Bakhtin’s problem of ‘artistically representing language…’58 in their narratives with their masterful and deliberate construction of literary characters who mirror closely the utterances of their reader’s everyday life.

Works Cited


On an uncharacteristically cool morning in February 2001, Christian sat with his chin in his hands, legs crossed on a bright green carpet in the centre of his kindergarten class. Every student was packed in tightly together. Knees were touching knees, shoe laces were being pulled apart while their owners weren’t looking, and between those few kids who knew each other from before the bell rang, Christian heard excited whispers:

“My mum says I have to be good today and then when I come home I can have some cake.”

“My mum doesn’t let me have cake, she says it’s bad for you.”

“But… but… cake is yum. I think your mum needs some cake and she’ll feel better.”

Christian was hungry, and thought about gobbling down on a big piece of chocolate mud cake, one like his dad would make and sometimes bring home after work, but those thoughts entertained his mind for only a short while. There was so much to look at in his new classroom. Behind the condensed group, the work desks were arranged in five small islands with enough room to seat six of the students. These were arranged with miniature blue chairs, which looked awful against the carpet, but complemented the long purple curtains that stood drawn before a wall-length window at the back of the room, dimming an already soft morning sun.

Before he sat on the floor with the rest of the class, Christian had discovered in his perusal of the room that each desk had a small strip of laminated paper, and one had his name printed in big bold letters:
CHRISTIAN

He saw the name again in his mind as he sat on the floor, and decided that he liked how
the letters were round, and bendy. When he tried to write his name at home the letters would
look sharp, and jagged. His ‘I’ s would look too much like his ‘T’ s and he’d read his name
back to himself as ‘Chrstttn’.

“That’s really good Christin! Now you have to hold the pencil just a little looser, don’t
worry, it won’t run away from you!”

Christian’s mum was always very encouraging when Christian tried his hand at writing.
She’d rule lines on blank pieces of paper, sit him on her lap and guide the pencil in his hands
over the lines in smooth, round motions. His favourite was the ‘C’ because it was bigger than
all the other letters, and it was a simple curved line. Even though Christian’s Cs weren’t very
curved at all, and looked more like half a square, he was getting it, and it made him feel good
to hear how happy it made his mum. He would ask her constantly, especially in the months
leading up to his first day in school:

“Mum, am I gonna do this in school when I go?”

“I bet you will buddy, your teacher is going to help you and you’ll be better than me in
no time!”

He sat up a little, lifting his head out of his hands and straightening his back. If he could
show his mum he had improved at his writing, he’d make her happier than ever. Cutting
through the anxious murmurs of the kids, a loud but sweet voice filled the air:

“Alright everyone, I’ll just be another minute while I sort out the paperwork, then we’ll
all get our names called.”
It was Christian’s teacher, who’s name he definitely could not remember having only heard it spoken aloud once, not to mention it being longer than any other word he had heard before, was it Mrs Parpasporious? Mrs Palaporario? He wasn’t sure, and her over-the-top jolly demeanour, while endearing, did not do much to make her seem like an inviting figure, in fact, it made Christian feel a good deal more nervous than he had been that morning. She was a larger woman than his mum, or even his Nonna for that matter, in both height and width. Her hair was much shorter than his mum’s too, and only came down to her chin. It was just a bit longer than his own hair, though much more neat. As he watched her rummage through a stack of papers on her desk she looked over to the group and her eyes met his. He could tell that she was agitated immediately, she seemed flustered and bothered, like when his dad got home from work. Her eyebrows were squashed together and hung over her eyes. When Christian saw his dad like that, he’d run over to him and pull his eyebrows up towards his forehead.

“No more angry daddy!”

“Aww thanks there champion!” his dad would say, and if his back wasn’t too sore, he’d pick his young son up and drape him over his shoulder.

Christian was so lost in thought it took him much longer than necessary for him to realise he was still looking right at his teacher. When he finally did snap into it, he didn’t see a furrowed brow staring back at him, but rather a soft face with a big smile and one hand waving.

“Hello Christian!”

He was very startled hearing his name, the fright made him recoil back, so much so that he nudged a girl sitting next to him. She responded with a hefty shove.

“Hey be careful! Miss! He hit me!”
The girl had long brown hair which touched the floor even though it was tied into a pony tail. Her face was sour with offence, it reminded Christian of his cousins that were around his age. It seemed like every girl at five years old wore the same angry expression that Christian couldn’t understand. She even had the same brown eyes that appeared to go darker when they sunk into a grimace.

His teacher responded in a sterner and lower voice than before.

“It was just an accident Angela, and we don’t push people when accidents happen!”

The class had gone silent, patiently awaiting the verdict of the first dispute in their schooling history.

“Christian and Angela I want you to ask each other if you’re okay, and both say sorry.”

Christian felt a little confronted with the looks his class makes were giving him, and wanted nothing more of the situation.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt you.” He said, quickly and softly, running his finger in a tight circle on the carpet.

“Well, you should be.” Angela barked back, she felt properly affronted and there was a short pause before the teacher talked once more.

“Angela, can you please come over and help me with something over here at my desk.”

Angela’s eyes lit up, as though she had been called up to receive a blessing.

“Okay Miss!” She shot up off the floor and rushed over to her teacher’s desk with such excitement that she kneed Christian in the shoulder. Despite the pointedness of her motion, it was indeed an accident. The situation seemed to be defused. Christian looked over and saw that Mrs Parasapopolous was whispering something to Angela.

Christian felt a little overwhelmed at this point, he was in a new and weird place, he didn’t know any of the other kids in his class, he had just been shoved and his shoulder hurt,
and his mum and dad weren’t there and wouldn’t be there for so many more hours. He felt his eyes start to water, and that just made things worse. There was no way he would cry on his first day, and especially not only 20 minutes into his first class. He did what he would do at home when he wanted to stop himself from crying: he tilted his head back, so that the tears would go back into his eyes and never come out, it was his foolproof technique. Christian raised his head up toward the roof and opened his eyes wide. The room seemed to be a series of yellow streaks which reached from the ceiling to the floor. Of course, this was nothing more than the reflection of the classroom lights on Christian’s tears, but it seemed so different from the rest of the room, with it’s purples and greens and blues, that for a short moment, he felt he was somewhere else. He used the ends of his jumper sleeve, which he had rolled into his palm with his fingers to clean out the lingering tears from his now red eyes, his trick worked, like he knew it would.

When his class came back into focus with his head still tilted up, Christian spied a series of laminated sheets, like the ones on the desks, though these were full A4 sized papers, stuck all-round the perimeter of the upper classroom wall. In any regular room, these would have stood out imminently, but the business of the class had hidden them in the background. They were oriented in portrait and the one closest to Christian bore a capital ‘C’ which took up around half the page, next to which was its lowercase counterpart. Between the two letters, a cartoonish black cat had woven its tail as it sat beside the lowercase ‘c’ with a toothy grin and a cheeky expression while winking one of its big green eyes. Below the cat, there was a simple sentence Christian was attempting to make out, though he had to squint because it was in a much smaller font, and his vision was still partially impaired from the tears. Eventually, he made it out: ‘C is for Cat’.
C is for Cat. He said it back to himself in his head. C is for Cat. He remembered writing with his mum, when she guided his hand over the paper she ruled for him. C is for Christian. He let out a little laugh to himself though he wasn’t exactly sure why. Feeling much better now, Christian scanned the other pages stuck up on the wall. ‘D is for Dog’ was next in line, the picture for which looked exactly like the dog that his neighbours owned, a big brown dog that barked at him whenever we walked outside. Christian hated that stupid dog. ‘E is for Egg’. Egg was gross and runny, and made Christian fart all the time. ‘F is for Frog’. Thinking about it, Christian had never seen a frog that wasn’t behind glass. He loved to go to the reptile park and the zoo to see all the animals, and his dad told him that there were frogs in the creek, but he had never seen one. Christian was so enveloped in his discovery of the letters that if Angela hadn’t poked him, gently this time, he wouldn’t have noticed she had sat back down at all.

“Miss said you looked sad and that you might need a friend, so I’m sorry about before.” Her words were sharp, but Christian felt that she was being sincere.

“That’s okay.” Was all Christian said in return. Angela nodded in acknowledgement, and the pair looked away from each other, attempting to put the entire incident behind them.

“I’m sorry for the delay everyone!” Christian’s teacher said, as she took a seat at the front and centre of the room. “In the morning, when we come in from morning assembly tomorrow, we’re all going to put our bags down and sit on the floor just as we are now. After we’re all seated, I’ll say good morning class!...” she added a particular emphasis and spoke in a higher key, most of the more confident students laughed.

“...and you can all say ‘good morning Mrs Parapolious! Let’s try it now, Good morning class!’”.
All at once, and with a solid attempt by the majority of the kids, they repeated back
“Good morning Mrs Parapolopolopolopolopolopoliusos...” They mostly trailed off towards the end, but the
effort was endearing enough.

“It’s a tricky one I know but I’m sure you’ll all get it within the week. Right, the next
ting we’ll do in the morning is mark our attendance.”

She held up a piece of paper that had been significantly battered and ruffled to the
class, it had lines ruled across it, just as Christian’s practice paper had, though this one was
significantly neater.

“This is what I was looking for in my desk all that time, it has all your names on it. I’m
going to start reading from the list, when you hear me say your name, I want you in a big
loud voice to say either here or present and put your hand straight up in the air. Let’s see
who’s first on the list, Angela Alfonso?” Angela’s hand rocketed into the air as though she
had been waiting to hear her name for years. “Heeyaa miss!” she boomed. “Thank you
Angela, that was very good!”. Angela looked to her peers with an enormous smile, clearly
pleased with herself.

“Okay, next is Christian Baglio?”
Chapter 2

In the garage of his two-and-a-half story brown brick home, Christian stood on the first tier of a step ladder in front of a work bench. It was nested neatly into the corner of the garage, which was quite big, especially by Christian’s standards. A 1995 Ford Laser took up half the space of the concrete floor and the rest was occupied by cupboards. Christian stretched out across the bench, grasping at the wall, upon which a series of hooks had been affixed. Saws, screwdrivers, and all manner of hammers populated the hooks. Christian balanced on one set of toes and grabbed at the cracked, wooden handle of an old hand saw. With one final heave, he finally grasped his prize. Christian sprung out of his contorted position with such speed that his momentum rocked the ladder onto one set of legs. It snapped back down with a loud metallic clang on the concrete, which left Christian in a stance resembling a gymnast’s first attempt at a somersault landing. He looked over to the stairs which lead up to the door, connecting the garage to the rest of the house, expecting a bellowing shout of his name to come flooding through. Nothing of the sort followed. The saw was enormous in his small hands.

Christian stepped off the ladder onto the cold floor and began to tiptoe past the stairs into a narrow hallway in the back of the garage. At the end of the hallway was the laundry, though it was always so dim and moist, Christian seldom played in there, especially on his own. Today, however, he was feeling adventurous. Christian turned and slowly backed into the laundry, peering down the hallway until he knew he was entirely out of sight.
Upstairs, a humming Rangehood consumed the steam emerging from a stirring moka pot, filling the kitchen with a soft murmur. A set of worn hands struck through the steam as it became absorbed into the maw of the Rangehood.

“Maria, il caffè è fatto!”. Rosa, Christian’s Nonna, took the coffee pot over to the bench top. She was dressed remarkably well, wearing a smart grey suit, her fingers adorned with rings housing stones of deep greens and reds, which matched the pendant resting on her ironed blouse.

“Aye, Maria!”. Her husband yelled out with fervour from his seat at the kitchen table. He too was dressed quite well. His style was much more reserved than his wife, a plain white shirt was tucked into his black pants, which matched his suspenders, shoes, and the jacket he had draped over the back of his chair. Rosa shook her head at him.

“Va bene Cosimo, mi ha sentito.”

In his hands, Cosimo held three playing cards, one with a sword, one with two cups, and one with six coins. He threw the sword down onto a stack of other cards and leant in to scoop them all with the palms of his open hands.

“Scopa!” he said with a wide grin, shooting his partner a cheeky smile.

“You bastard, got me again.” Christian’s dad Roberto threw his own hand of cards onto the table in defeat. As he slouched back in his chair, he pushed the table away from himself, giving his gut enough room to rest on his upper thighs. The custard stains on his singlet matched those on his track suit pants, in combination with the lingering glow of food colouring stuck to his arms, he was awash with colour. Although he had just returned from a ten-hour work shift in his bakery, the man looked content. He ran his fingers across the gold chain which sat on his neck, untangling the chest hair that had become wrapped around its crucifix.
Cosimo spoke through still grinning teeth as he counted his cards.

“Dov’è tua moglie?”

Roberto rubbed his eyes as he replied, half sighing as he spoke as if he’d answered the question a thousand times before. “I don’t bloody know, she’s been upstairs all morning, probably getting ready to go somewhere I bet.”

Rosa placed a small cup of coffee on coasters in front of the two men and one before an empty seat, shaking her head. She pointed a finger to the sky and shook it wildly while addressing Roberto in her thick Italian accent.

“You can get ready for shops and everyting else, but no for church ah? One hour on a Sunday too much?”

Roberto was entirely unfazed by the scolding, in fact, he noticed that Rosa had put two sugars in his coffee instead of one.

“Ma, what has God done for you lately ah? Did he put some extra money in this week’s pension?”

Cosimo snickered to himself as he shuffled the deck of cards, Rosa snapped her finger over to him.

“You a shut up okay, no laugh at him! He lucky his boys baptised.”

As Rosa finished her rant, her daughter walked into the room, kissed Roberto on the cheek and sat down in the empty seat, reserved by the last coffee.

“Having your typical post-church argument, are you?”

“Nah love, just talking about old mate God, where are the boys? I reckon lunch will be soon.”
Maria picked up the spoon her mother had left in her cup. Ever since she was small she didn’t drink her coffee unless the mixing spoon had been left in. She swirled the coffee around gently, her fingers adorned with rings. Though unlike her mother the rings she wore were subtler, made of gold and silver, housing small diamonds. She tucked her hair behind her ear and blew the steam away from the coffee as she slipped slowly and with purpose.

“Antony is in his room, I told him to come down. Haven’t seen Christian though, he better not be in the garage or I’m sending you down.”

As Maria finished her thought, Rosa called for her grandsons so loudly, the kitchen windows shook.

“Antony, Christian, a mangiare!”

Emerging from the stairs that lead to the second story, Antony meandered into the kitchen. He rubbed his eyes as his father had been, but Antony knew that if his mother had seen the gunk still there from his sleep-in, he’d never hear the end of it. He was an exceptionally thin boy, six years older than Christian, and next to his father it seemed as though his legs were skinnier than Roberto’s arms.

“You sleeping mate?” Roberto asked as he sat next to his mother.

“Nah, I’ve been up for ages.” Antony replied unconvincingly with his head in his hands. Roberto leant over and knocked his son on the top of his head with the knuckle of his index finger, prompting a quick squeal of pain from Antony. Maria slapped Roberto on the arm in response.

“Rob leave him alone!”

“He’s gotta learn not to lie to his dad, alright son?”

Antony’s hands were now rubbing the top of his head, and his face wore a heavy grimace.
“Alright dad, geez.”

Cosimo, who was dealing cards during the entire altercation, looked over to his grandson.

“Non preoccuparti Antonio, lo fanno tutto perché ti amano.” He spoke with a slow calmness through a sincere smile as he placed his cards into piles without looking at them. Antony remained rubbing his head, this time in an effort to recollect his Italian lessons.

“Umm, love, worry, I don’t know what…”

Maria interrupted to help her struggling son.

“He said your father gives you a hard time because he loves you and wants you to be a nice young man.”

Rosa, unable to resist, chimed in.

“So you betta than you father.” She chuckled with a wheezing laugh, as Roberto laughed with her.

Maria furrowed her brow.

“Christian still isn’t here, he’s up to something for sure.”

“In the garage, I’m sure of it.” Roberto was halfway through his coffee, and Maria knew that he wouldn’t get up until he had polished the glass. She turned to Antony.

“Can you go find your brother please and tell him to come here right now?”

Antony had just about enough of his family and so decided not to argue. He got out of his chair. Just as he was about to head for the garage, his grandfather called after him.

“Antonio, vieni qui.” He knew exactly what his Nonno was saying this time. Cosimo rose slowly from his seat, lifted his jacket from the chair and threw it over his shoulders. He shuffled the deck of cards into a single pile and slid them into his breast pocket.

“Va bene, va 'a prenderlo.”
Maria responded in her usual manner of concern, her father’s health had become a more prominent fixture of thought in recent years.

“Dad, watch yourself on the stairs okay?”

“Le scale non sono niente per me, mia bella!” Cosmio called back, as he made his way to the garage door.

“He’s fine love.” Roberto said in his best attempt to sound comforting. He finished his coffee and stared into the empty cup.

“Did you have two sugars?”

Maria took another sip.

“I think there’s only one in here.”

In unison, they looked over to Rosa who had finally sat down with her own coffee.

“Next time you make it youself.”

Cosimo stood at the top of the stairs, surveying the garage, looking for the scruffy head of his grandson to pop out from behind the Ford.

In his strongest voice, which was relatively soft, he called out.

“Christian! Vieni qui!”

There was no response. Cosimo let out a laboured sigh and grasped a cane which was leant against the wall at the top of the stairs. He held the cane firmly, planting it one step down and placed his free hand on his knee. He brought his supported leg down the step as he leant on the cane. Slowly, he managed to descend the first step. Luckily for Cosmio, the entire flight was only about five steps total, and eventually he had made it to the ground. He paused, hunched over and breathed deeply. His fingers wrapped around the cane, pulling the wrinkled skin on his hand to into a smooth tightness. As he rose, he placed his free hand on his back, pushed inwards, and stretched himself out.
The stepladder Christian had used earlier stood alone in the free half of the garage. Cosimo, being familiar with his grandson’s antics, knew Christian was after something he shouldn’t have been. He turned toward the laundry. As he approached the hallway, Christian rounded the corner and bumped into Cosimo, almost knocking him over. The two took a moment to compose themselves before they realised what had happened. When they did, Christian looked up at his nonno with watering eyes and sat on the floor. He began to sob softly. Cosimo noticed that as Christian cried, he was holding his left index finger which had a bleeding cut at its tip.

Coming over to Christian, Cosimo slowly bent over to pick him up. As he did, the deck of cards in his breast pocket spilled from the interior of his jacket and littered the floor. Cosimo paid this no attention. He gripped onto one of Christian’s shoulders and stood him up, wrapping his arm around his shoulders. He leant his head on his hip and let him sob for a few moments.

“Va tutto bene, era solo un piccolo taglio!” Cosimo said as he rubbed Christian’s hair, trying to console him. He knew his grandson didn’t understand what he was saying to him. Christian continued to sob.

Cosimo thought for a moment, then put his hand on Christian’s back. With the other, he took Christian’s shaking hand into his and said in a whisper only just louder than Christina’s sobbing:

“Quando avremmo sanguinato, mamma ci avrebbe aiutato in questo modo.”

He pressed his lips against Christian’s finger and sucked the blood from the wound. Christian shuddered for a moment, reacting to the surprise and the pain. After some moments,
his finger grew more and more dull. Eventually, he could hardly feel any pain at all. Cosimo pulled away, and when he did, the blood had vanished. Christian could now see that the cut was indeed, tiny. Without the blood, it was only barely noticeable.

“Magia!” Cosimo exclaimed.

Cosimo put his hand on Christian’s head and smiled brightly.

“Sei un curioso bello. Un giorno ti portera lontano!”

Christian took in the sight of his nonno’s glowing face and wiped the remaining tears from his eyes. As he did, he looked down and noticed the cards that had spilled from Cosimo’s jacket.

Christian began collecting the cards which now littered the floor of the hallway, he knew Cosimo wouldn’t be able to reach all the way down to pick them up. He always enjoyed looking at the cards, even though he didn’t know what exactly they were used for. One had a giant cup with a face in its centre. Another showed a two-headed bird wrapped upon itself in a big figure ‘8’. His favourite was the big sword. It wasn’t like any other sword Christian had seen because of its distinctive blue blade. It was like something from another world. He held out his hand with the deck of cards neatly piled, with the sword sitting on top. Cosimo shook his head and pressed the deck back toward Christian, covering the sword with his own hand.

“Christian, sei come la spade. Acuto.”

He took the deck and slipped it into Christian’s pocket.

Cosimo held his grandsons hand and his cane as they walked back over to the stairs. They could hear Rosa’s voice from the kitchen as they approached.
“Cosimo! Where you go? The food get cold!”

The two slowly ascended the staircase together Christian stood one step above his grandfather, coaching him as he held on to his free hand.

“Two more Nonno, you’re almost there.”
Chapter 3

Christian’s face was so close to the glass panel of his year three classroom door that his breath left a lingering print of fog. He stood outside with his oversized bag on his back, gazing in at his class. His peers were sorted into three distinct groups, eagerly answering questions, throwing their hands into the air as his teacher asked for definitions and pointed at each bunch. He periodically looked back toward his desk, which sat vacant in the first row and was, in his absence, filled with worksheets waiting to be marked. The point of all the excitement and attentiveness was the blackboard. It, like the students, was divided into three columns, each written in a different colour and with a set of thematically connected words running down their length. He analysed the one with the longest, and most exciting collection:

Dinosaur
Triceratops
Jurassic
Extinct

As images of giant lizards and meteors hitting the earth filled his mind, he was interrupted by a voice that echoed down the hall he stood in.

“Christian! I’m ready for you!”

From the end of the hallway, Mrs Parapolious was calling out. He moved from the door and began to walk away from his class, listening to the fading exclamations of his peers as he did. He passed other classes and as he looked in, he caught glimpses of students with their heads down, pens scrawling across paper. Some sat in circles and sang songs about numbers
and letters, others drew art of their favourite animal. The end of the hall opened to an alcove which housed two desks, one for a student and another for a teacher which Mrs Parapolious was sitting in. Behind her, a window ran the length of the wall, exposing Christian’s playground. There was a fitness class in progress on the grass. Kids were yelling and throwing balls to each other, not playing any sport in particular, though they were being active just the same.

“How are you today Christian?”

Mrs Parapolious’ familiar voice had a calming effect on Christian. As he took his bag off of his back and sat down opposite her, he felt at ease.

“I’m alright Miss.”

“It’s been a while since we’ve had some class time together hasn’t it!”

“Yeah it has.” Christian’s replies were short as usual, but he did enjoy getting to talk with Mrs Parapolious again after almost two years.

“So you know what we’re going to be working on when we see each other?”

Christian’s teacher had told him earlier in the week that he was going to be part of a ‘special program’ for his spelling. Every week after the class spelling test, Christian would find a small note beside his results, something akin to:

5/20, Good Try! Or

4/20, Let’s have more practice next week!

Eventually, his teacher wrote:

3/20, See me after class for some great news!

That after-class meeting was the first time Christian was informed about the special program. He was told he needed a bit of extra help, and that it would be with someone who he knew and trusted.
Mrs Parapolious produced a cream folder and placed it on Christian’s desk. It had his name written across the front cover in large block letters, each in their own colour.

“All the work that we do while we’re here is going to be kept in this folder. Today, I’m going to ask you a little bit about your spelling and we’ll do some exercises as well.”

Christian opened the folder and fanned out the mass of worksheets that were housed inside. There was more there than he had ever seen at once. Some pages had jumbled letters with arrows pointing in all directions, some had words in columns like on the black board. Others were broken into pieces: ‘AN TE LOPE’ or written long-ways down the page next to dotted lines:

W….
I….
L….
D….
E….
R….
N….
E….
S….
S….

“Is that okay Christian?”

Mrs Parapolious interrupted Christian’s perusal.

“Yup… that’s alright miss.”

She was picking up on Christian’s uneasiness and took the folder back to her side of the desk.
“We don’t have to worry about these right now Christian, for the moment, I want you to tell me how you feel about doing some extra work for your spelling?”

Christian looked past Mrs Parapolious through the window and out into the playground.

“I feel good I think.” He sounded absent, and his eyes looked vacant.

Mrs Parapolious wheeled her chair around to Christian’s side of the desk and sat next to him. “Are you feeling okay Christian? You can tell me, it’ll be alright.” She asked him softly and delicately.

“Why can’t I do my spelling with everyone else miss?”

“You absolutely can do your spelling with everyone else! Every time you write in a work book or on the board or on a painting you’re going to get to use your spelling, and when we’re working on it here, we’re going to make sure it’s perfect! Does that sound good?”

Her reassuring words brought Christian back into the room. He looked back at his teacher, finally bringing his eyes away from the window.

“It does, Miss.” He smiled slightly, acknowledging Mrs Parapolious’ reassurance.

“Fantastic! You’re going to do great Christian I know it, and you don’t even have to worry about the work today, I just want to ask you a few things for our first meeting. Those exercises can wait.”

Knowing that he wouldn’t have to do any work gave Christian a much-needed boost of confidence. He brought his chair closer to the desk and straightened himself out as Mrs Parapolious wheeled herself back to her original position across from him. She brought out a pen and clipboard.

“This is just for me so I can remember what we talk about here today.” She began to take a few notes before she looked over to Christian.

“Can you tell me Christian, what language you speak at home?”
Christian was slow to respond, and when he did, he sounded unsure of himself.

“English.”

“I see, does everyone in your house speak English?”

“No, my Nonno…” Christian paused for a moment, seemingly catching himself in a mistake.

“My grandpa only speaks Italian and my grandma speaks both. My mum and dad only speak English when I’m there, or my brother.” Mrs Parapolious put her pen down and looked over to Christian with a sterner face than he was used to.

“Christian, you don’t have to change what you say, I know what Nonno means. Make sure you use nonno and nonna from now on okay? I’d call my grandma Yaya, and I know if she heard me call her anything else she’d not be happy!” She added a smile and a soft laugh, almost catching herself in her own mistake, but Christian could still sense the seriousness in her words. Even so, it made him comfortable to know she understood him, and somehow he was happy she was as stern as she had been. Mrs Parapolious picked up the clipboard again and composed herself with a subtle shaking of her shoulders. She began again.

“Alrighty, when you’re at home Christian, who do you spend the most time with?”

“My Nonno and Nonna. They help me get ready for school and they pick me up as well.”

“Do you live with your mum and dad?”

“Yeah, my dad goes to work very early, and he’s sleeping when I get home from school, I get to see him when he wakes up for dinner.”

“And your Mum?”

“Mum works in the city so she’s already gone to work when I get up, and she only gets back a bit before dad wakes up because the trains take so long.”

“I see, can you speak Italian Christian? You say nonno and nonna very well!”
Christian looked down at the desk, thinking very hard to himself.

“No, not really. My Nonna speaks to me in English, and my Nonno speaks in Italian, but I understand what he’s saying.”

“So you understand Italian?”

Again, Christian thought hard to himself. He started running his finger in a tight circle on the top of the desk. His eyes shifted focus from the ceiling to the window to the floor. Mrs Parapolious could see Christian was having a difficult time with the question.

“That’s alright Christian, I think it’s wonderful that you can talk with your nonna and nonno!”

“I haven’t talked with Nonno in a bit, he’s in bed a lot of the time, and when he gets up he’s using his mask a lot now.”

Mrs Parapolious replied a little too quickly, unable to stop her curiosity before it manifested into question.

“What kind of mask does he have?”

Christian paused for thought, then he brought his hand to his face. He placed his middle finger on the bridge of his nose and spread the others across his cheeks and chin.

“It looks like this.” His voice was muffled behind his hand.

“It helps him breath.”

He brought his hand away. They sat in silence for a moment. Mrs Parapolious had not been taking notes and this realisation seemed to take her by surprise as she shook her head, trying to get back to her duty.

“I’m sure he’s going to be alright and talking with you again soon Christian.”

Again, Christian looked out the window.
“Let’s talk about something else that’s very important, and I think you’ll be very glad to hear this! Usually, reading and spelling go hand in hand. If someone is finding it hard to read, they also find it hard to spell, but you’re reading at the highest level in your class Christian! That’s very good!”

Christian flushed a mild red, not expecting such a compliment.

“Thanks miss.”

“It’s something to be proud of! Your writing is also very good, it’s just your spelling that needs a bit of help. It isn’t often that a student has that combination. So you’re very special.” She produced a piece of paper from the cream folder that had an assortment of paragraphs of various lengths.

“This isn’t an exercise; I just want you to give this one a read.”

She pointed to a paragraph and handed Christian the paper.

In a confident voice, he read:

“A savanna is a collection of grasslands and plains that are homes for animals such as zebras, lions and gazelles. They can be found in many countries across Africa.”

He did not falter or pause. His pronunciation was perfect.

“That was exceptional Christian.”

She took the page away from him.

“Now can I ask you, and you don’t have to write this anywhere, just let me know how you would spell gazelle?”

Christian, not expecting to be asked such a question, took a while to attempt the first letter.

“G… a… z… l.”

“I see, is it hard to think of the word in your head Christian?”

He nodded in response, still trying to create the word in his mind.
“My Nonna says it’s hard in English, because the words aren’t written as they sound.”

“Really? Well I’d say she’s right with that one! English is definitely tricky to work out...”

Mrs Parapolious trailed off, a thought caught her mind as she spoke.

“Christian, do you know any Italian words?”

“A few, from my Nonna and Nonno, and I hear my mum and dad say some.”

She brought back the paper with the reading paragraphs, flipped it over to its blank side, and held out her pen for Christian.

“This still isn’t work so don’t worry about getting anything correct Christian, I just want you to write down some Italian words you know. Is that alright?”

Christian didn’t speak, he simply reached out and took the pen. As he wrote, he’d stop every few moments to refer to his memory. Images of playing cards, coffee and beautiful food flooded into his consciousness. He wasn’t even sure if he would stop until Mrs Parapolious interrupted him.

“Thanks Christian that’s enough! You were really going for it!”

Christian smiled and nodded as he passed the paper back. He had scrawled over as much of the paper as he could. Many of the words were shoved into corners to make room for others. As Mrs Parapolious analysed the paper, she realised there were sets of words which related directly to each other:

Caffe, Mangiare, Salami, Pasta

Nonna, Nonno, Roberto, Maria, Antony, Baglio
Along with many others. In addition, there was a set of words Mrs Parapolious knew, but couldn’t see how they were related.

Spade, Denari, Coppe, Bastoni

“Christian, these are very well spelt! Very good!”
She could tell that Christian was having an easier time spelling in Italian than in English.

“Do you go to Italian school Christian?”
“No miss.”
“Have you had Italian tutoring? Like at a Saturday school or from your parents?”
“No, I haven’t miss, my brother used to go.”
“Oh I see.” She paused for a moment, scanning over the page again.
“Did you not want to learn with your brother?”
Christian looked back at her with returned confusion.
“No one miss, my brother went so that he could talk with my nonno. Now my nonno can’t talk so I don’t know if I should go.”

It took Mrs Parapolious a moment to think of an appropriate response, and when she did she only managed to get half of it out.

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that Christian. I think everything will be…”

From the entrance to the alcove, a small girl walked in holding her hands behind her back. Mrs Parapolious trailed off.

“Hello there Angela! What can I help you with?” Christian turned to face Angela, who planted her feet in the ground and began to recite a message that she had committed to
memory in the thirty seconds it took for her to walk down the hall. She spoke in a high pitch and with care not to get any part of the sentences incorrect.

“Miss says that it’s time for Christian to come back to class and thank you for helping him with his first meeting. I have to bring him back.” She concluded her message with a big grin, waiting for instruction. Mrs Parapolious drew back her sleeve to examine her wrist watch.

“Where did the time go! Well it looks like Angela’s right, thank you very much Angela.”

Angela smiled even wider and brought her small hands into fists, trying to contain her excitement.

“We’ve made a lot of progress here today Christian, would you like to come back later in the week for another lesson? I think next time we should start on some of the worksheets!”

Christian didn’t at all feel like there was progress made, he didn’t even do any work.

“Okay miss, I think it’ll be good.”

He got up from his desk and threw his massive bag onto his back.

“Bye miss!” Angela said, still beaming with excitement.

“See you soon miss.” Christian said as he began to follow Angela down the hall.

“I’ll see you soon Christian, have a good day Angela!”

Mrs Parapolious waved as the two children turned the corner into the hallway. She took out the cream folder, and slipped the page Christian had written on inside its cover.
Chapter 4

Christian sat on a weathered plastic lawn chair, watching his shadow grow long over
the grass of his backyard lawn. He gazed across the yard to his family, his entire family, who
were congregated under the veranda around a series of tables covered with food. His mum
and dad were lined up behind an assortment of his cousins, zias, zios and family friends.
They shuffled around with plastic plates and cutlery in their hands, yelling, shouting and
chatting while waiting to get at the feast that was placed on a green and red table cloth,
adorned with Christmas trees. Some of the family nibbled on rolled pieces of salami and
prosciutto as they waited in line, others had already filled their plates and sat on other tables
distributed throughout the backyard. The gentle afternoon breeze lifted the cloth off the tables
they covered, which had people using their filled plates as anchors, keeping everything in
place. His grandparents ate at the head of the largest table, one that Christian and Antony had
painstakingly moved to the backyard that morning. His father’s parents, Franko and
Giovanna, sat with Rosa as they ate a combination of lasagne, salad and oiled bread
accompanied with plastic cups filled with red wine.

On Christian’s left was an identical, though empty lawn chair. On his right, his cousin,
Marco, sat sideways with his legs dangling over one of his armrests. As he kicked out his feet
the shadows his legs cast grew long and short, melding with Christian’s. Marco was
essentially a smaller, wider version of Christian. They were cousins on their Dad’s side, and
with their faces losing some of their childish roundness, they could have easily passed for
brothers. Now that the boys were both twelve years old, their bodies filled the seats entirely,
and as Marco swung his feet back and forth, Christian could hear the plastic creek and crack.

“You’ll break the chair Marco.”
Marco was playing his GameBoy and was barely paying attention. He waved a hand dismissively and quickly changed the subject.

“Did you get any good presents this year?” He asked with eyes still glued to the screen.

“I got some clothes and games, and my Nonna got me shoes for school.”

“Your brother told me if you don’t wear the right shoes in high school, they make you walk home bare foot.”

Christian grimaced at his cousin.

“Don’t listen to him, he’s just being an idiot.” His voice housed an uncharacteristically agitated edge, it was more of a snap than a response. Marco was surprised at the seriousness in Christian’s response and finally shut off his game and slid it into his pocket.

“Yeah I know, but he’s gonna be in year twelve when we get there, so won’t he know a bit about high school?”

Christian didn’t respond. He brought his knees up to his chest and planted himself firmly in the seat, arching his neck toward the sky. Marco sighed and threw his head back over the edge of the armrest looking up just as Christian was.

“Aren’t yous eating?”

The pair were knocked out of their distraction by the voice of their cousin Franky, the second cousin named after his Nonno Franko. He was only a year older, but towered over both Christian and Marco by nearly a foot and a half. He held a plate heaped with salad and pasta in one hand, the other clutched a chicken drumstick as he took massive bites.

“We’re just waiting ‘till everyone has theirs, don’t wanna wait in line.” Marco spoke without raising his head. Franky shrugged his shoulders and nodded with a mouth full of chicken. He sat in the empty seat next to Christian.
The line began to diminish as more and more of the family found their seats. The three boys sat in silence, with the exception of Franky’s chewing. He plunged his fork into the mound of pasta as he turned to Christian.

“Your Nonna looks better this year.”

Christian glanced back to his Nonna’s table, which was now packed with people. Maria and Roberto sat next to Rosa, Giovanna and Franko. The rest of the seats were occupied by Christian’s Zias and Zios. Despite the noise of over fifty Italians eating and talking, he could hear Rosa from his set. She was raising her cup to the sky, talking in Italian while she held Giovanna’s hand. She was so animated in her conversation that it wouldn’t have been a stretch to think she was in the thick of some kind of argument, but Christian could tell she was having a good time. Everyone was. Rosa slammed the table with a free hand every now and again, simply to add emphasis to whatever it was she was saying. She’d periodically reach over and put her arm around Roberto’s shoulders and point to his face, saying words he could only barely make out like “Proprio come il suo papa!”.

Christian turned back to Franky.

“Yeah, she said Christmas reminded her of Nonno too much last year. She didn’t even come out of her room the whole day I think.”

The boys remained silent until Franky stood up.

“I’m gonna go for seconds, you should get some food before it’s gone.”

Christian and Marco knew better than to wait any longer, Franky would finish everything else off by himself if he had the chance. The trio made their way over to the veranda, and as they did, Rosa called out from behind a sip of wine.

“Christian, Marco! Veni qui!”
The two were greeted with a loud reception from each of their grandparents. Giovanna grabbed onto Marco’s arm while Rosa gripped onto Christian. The two Nonnas exchanged some words between each other.

“Guarda quanto sono grandi!”

“Cosi presto!”

Roberto leanted over from his seat.

“Did you like the lasagne boys?”

Marco was the more confident of the two, and his thoughts were now devoted to getting out of the grip of his Nonna. He replied quickly and truthfully before Christian could interject with a white lie that would get them away quicker.

“We didn’t have any yet…”

Christian shook his head in anticipation of the ensuing scolding.

“Aye, wassa matta?” Franko said in frustration. Rosa was particularly confused, she scolded and turned to Christian. “You no like a the food? I make the lasagne because it you favourite.”

“I know Nonna, I was gonna go and get some now.”

“You a wait so long it’s a gonna be all gone! You see Franky a good boy, he likes Nonna cooking.”

Franky turned from the table where he was balancing some bread and chicken thigh on his plate and gave a smile and a wave. Rosa yanked Christian closer to herself, he wasn’t going to be let go until she was happy.

“Listen, now you big boys now ahh?”

Christian and Marco didn’t know what Rosa was expecting them to say.

“Yea Nonna, we are.”

“Good, now because you big I let you have a little try of dis one.”
She reached over and grabbed the neck of a label-less wine bottle, gripping it with the same intensity as Christian’s arm. She poured only a very small amount into two cups and offered one to Christian, Giovanna did the same for Marco.

“Dis one I make with Nonno many years ago. He want you to have some when you a big boy okay?” She looked directly at Christian as she spoke slowly and softly. He could tell that his Nonna was being serious, she only spoke slowly when she wanted Christian to understand every word. He looked over to his parents for confirmation.

“It’s alright darling, a little bit won’t hurt. Give it a try,” Maria said with an expectant smile.

“But don’t get used to it aye?” Roberto interjected cheekily, and with accompaniment by some laughter from his nearby Zios and Zias.

Christian had become uncomfortable being the centre of attention for so long. By then, almost everyone at the table was finished and without the distraction of food, Christian was the most entertaining thing happening. He closed his eyes, raised the cup to his mouth and tipped the wine in, all at once.

He remembered the taste. Once, during his first holy communion, Christian had wine at church. He recalled the warmth of it, how it wasn’t like water or coke or anything from the fridge. It was the temperature of the air, of the breeze that lifted the cloth on the table. Now though, he tasted more. Unlike in the church, where the wine was supposed to taste like blood, he could taste grapes. A strong, thick taste of grapes, as though he had sunk his teeth into an entire bunch. It swirled around in his mouth, warming every inch of the inside of his cheeks. He felt the warmth begin to hit the back of his throat, and as it did he impulsively swallowed. It crept all the way down, down into his chest where Christian felt it land in his empty belly, heating him up as though a meteor had landed inside his stomach. He opened his
eyes and let out a breath that he could feel rise above his nose. The smell of the grapes floated away with the afternoon wind.

Rosa reached over and took the cup from Christian. As she did he realised the table was yelling and cheering for him.

“Ayyee!”

“Look at these big boys!”

“Did you like it Christian?” Maria asked.

“It was alright, it tasted like grapes.”

“Mmhmm, that’s your nonno’s grapes he grew in the garden, they’re the best in the world.”

Next to him, Marco coughed and spluttered after he had finished his mouthful.

“Eww, that’s yuck!” He held out the cup to Giovanna pinched between two fingers as though it was radioactive. The table collectively laughed at Marco’s disgust.

“Maybe when you older you like.” Giovanna said as she refilled the cup for herself.

Rosa let go of her grandson and pointed to the food behind him.

“Now go eat. The food a get cold!”

As they walked away, Christian ran his tongue over the roof of his mouth while Marco wiped his lips with his sleeve.

“Why do they drink that, it’s so bad.” Marco complained as he scooped some lasagne onto his plate.”

“I don’t know, I think it was okay.”

“You’re crazy.”
The two returned to their spot on the lawn with full plates finally in hand. Franky was already halfway through his food and next to him, in Christian’s chair, Antony sat eating. At seventeen, Antony had become a spitting image of his father, that is, if Roberto had spent his teenage years playing soccer and footy instead of in a kitchen learning how to bake. As when he was younger, Antony remained a slim boy, though now he had a lean, muscular look about him. Christian stood in front of him and waited for a moment. He could see the sharpness of his jaw bone as he ate, every part of him was looking more jagged by the day. Antony looked up and saw his brother standing before him in some kind of slack jawed stupor.

“What’re you looking at mate? Aren’t you gonna eat?”

Antony had adopted his father’s taste for teasing.

“You’re in my seat Antony, I was just about to…”

As Christian made his case, Antony produced a wine bottle from behind one of the legs of the lawn chair. It was the same label-less kind Rosa had poured from only minutes before. He held the bottle up and chugged a mouthful.

“What are you doing?” Christian asked worryingly as he turned back to see if his parents were watching. The table was back to their regular shouting and laughing, and with most of the family on their second plate, no one paid attention to anything more than two seats away. Antony finished his last gulp and wiped his lips with the back of his arm. He held out the bottle to Marco and Christian and rattled it about.

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“What are you doing?” Christian asked worryingly as he turned back to see if his parents were watching. The table was back to their regular shouting and laughing, and with most of the family on their second plate, no one paid attention to anything more than two seats away. Antony finished his last gulp and wiped his lips with the back of his arm. He held out the bottle to Marco and Christian and rattled it about.

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“What are you doing?”

Christian took the bottle and paused.
“Hurry up mate, I’m gonna finish it off if you don’t have any.”

“I don’t want any.” Christian said dryly. He shoved the bottle into his brother’s chest. Antony responded by pushing the bottle back to his brother, with considerably more force.

“Don’t be a little bitch.” The light heartedness of his voice had dropped completely.

“I don’t want any Antony.”

“Why do you always gotta listen to Nonna for? Just fucking have some!” Antony had pushed the bottle up to Christian’s face, and the open top forcibly filled his nostrils with the smell of grapes. He had enough. He reached past the bottle and began striking his brother in the chest with slaps and punches.

“Piss off!” Christian shouted as he continuously lashed out. It had little effect. Antony laughed as his brother continuously pounded at him. He grabbed his shoulder with his free hand and pushed him back into the lawn chair. Christian crashed through its weak frame, shattering the plastic as he fell to the ground.

Christian felt a warmness run down his chest. His shirt and pants were covered with red liquid, and for a moment, he thought the frame of the chair had pierced his chest and he was slowly bleeding out. It was the now familiar smell of grapes that made him realise the leftover wine had spilled over him in the scuffle. He could hear shouting as people began to rush from their seats.

“But what the hell’s the matter with you?”

“Ha iniziato a picchiarmi per primo!”

Marco and Franky each grabbed one of Christian’s arms and helped him to his feet.

“Are you okay?” Franky asked, as he practically lifted Christian onto his feet.
“Yeah I’m alright.” Christian had the wind knocked out of him and he spoke between deep breaths.

“You’re bleeding.” Marco held up Christians wrist. A graze ran from the base of his hand to the middle of his palm. It was indeed bleeding, but not profusely. Only a few layers of skin had been broken on some of the cracked plastic. As Maria, Roberto and Rosa approached the kids, Christian held his palm flat against his body.

Rosa was flustered and as she began to talk her hands moved frantically from Christian’s face to his shoulders and into the air.

“Cosa stai facendo? Cos’hai che non va!”

Antony responded with matched agitation.

“Ha iniziato a picchiarmi nonna, ho dovuto togliermelo!”

Maria and Roberto flanked Rosa and behind them the rest of the family were trying to see what was going on. Rosa put her hand on Christian’s head and leaned in close to him.

“Perche stavi colpendo tuo fratello Christian?”

He didn’t know what to do. He stood in a half daze, looking over to his parents who were talking with his brother. To Marco and Franky who were talking with Franko and Giovanna. To the rest of his family who were all trying to figure out what happened. Rosa pinched the collar of his shirt in both hands, examining the wine stain.

“Cose questo? Da dove viene questo? Christian?” She was asking herself more so than anyone. He grabbed his collar and yanked it from his Nonna. He moved around her so quickly her hands remained fixed in the spot where her grandson stood.

“Christian, ritorno!”

He pushed through his family, onto the veranda and went inside.
Chapter 5

It was an exceptionally hot day for the beginning of Spring. Christian sat next to Marco on a footpath under an awning outside their local Quix petrol station. They both held a slurpee in one hand, Marco had coke while Christian had raspberry. In the other was what the station called a ‘Grilla Dog’ although ‘hot dog slathered in grease and barbeque sauce’ would have been more precise. Across the road, through the fence of the RSL club, the two spied on a group of elderly people standing in white outfits, rolling a black ball slowly across fake grass. Marco nudged Christian on the shoulder. When he spoke, it was muffled by chunks of bread that stuffed his cheeks.

‘What’re they doing?’

‘Lawn bowls. All the oldies think it’s the shit.’

Christian’s voice had transformed considerably over the past year. Partially in tone, he was beginning to adopt the awkward pitch shifts which frequent the vocal chords of thirteen-year old boys. Mostly though, it was the way Christian spoke. He acquired a newfound confidence and spoke more directly. He pushed his voice out from his chest, rather than from his nose. Along with this, like all the other boys in his year seven class, he incorporated a colourful series of swears into his vocabulary. Marco was not exempt from this either.

‘Looks fucking stupid.’

Christian took a sip of his slurpee and smiled devilishly.

‘A lot like you.’

Marco shot Christian the filthiest look he could muster while draining his own slurpee.

‘Fuck off dickhead. What should we do after this?’

Christian surveyed the small yard of the Quix for inspiration and took his time before he responded. Days between school terms seemed to go on forever, and he was in no rush. A
man in a singlet and sunglasses leaned against his car while he filled it with petrol. In the station, the cashier rested her head on the register while she looked out the window. At the air station, a woman filled her tyres. Across the road, a family pushed a pram past the fence of the RSL and into the park beside it.

‘Wanna ride in the park? We can pump our tyres before we go.’

He nudged his head to the left where three bikes were stacked upon each other at the end of the footpath. Marco shrugged and half nodded.

‘If you know how then alright, we’ll just wait for Ange to get back.’

‘Wait for me to do what?’

Angela had emerged from the station and sat down next to Christian. She too had a slurpee and a hot dog. Now that she was thirteen like Marco and Christian, she had begun the process of social osmosis. Though, unlike her two friends, she never had to learn or acquire her confidence.

‘You two can’t do anything by yourselves, I’ve gotta watch the bikes, I have to show you the way here, you’re useless.’

Marco rolled his eyes during Angela’s rant that he had heard what felt like fifty times this year. He scoured the bottom of the slurpee cup with his straw, trying to get the last bits of unmelted ice. Christian, despite his new-found persona, retained his instinctual quickness in resolving a tense situation. Even when it wasn’t serious.

‘No, don’t worry, we’re just talking about pumping our tyres. After that we’ll ride around the park.’

Angela glanced over to the air station where the woman was just driving away, leaving the air hose in a heap on the ground.

‘Oh, okay that sounds good, do you know how to pump them properly?’

Christian shrugged. ‘We’ll figure it out.’
Marco had finished his food and was dragging his straw across the pavement beside his feet.

‘What language does your class have in term four?’

Angela and Christian were in the same class group. It was the fourth time it had happened in their schooling lives, a phenomenon that had led to an uncomfortable amount of teasing, and Marco made sure to keep the tradition going.

‘Italian, we got lucky.’ Angela said between hot dog bites, she was rushing to catch up with the boys.

‘Awwwww! That’s not fair! I have to do stupid Chinese.’ Marco stretched out his arms and leant back, spreading across the concrete in defeat. Christian tried his hand at consoling his cousin.

‘It’s not that bad Marco. Chinese is alright, and half our mates are Chinese anyway so they can help you.’

‘I know, but it’s just easy marks when it’s something you already speak at home, like with your brother.’

Christian didn’t respond. He began to twirl his own half-chewed straw around the base of his now empty slurpee cup in a tight circle. Angela covered her full mouth to probe at Marco.

‘What’re you talking about? Does Antony do Italian?’

Marco sat up in disbelief.

‘Oh yeah, you were away for the award assembly. They had Antony come up and accept some medal thing for Italian. Apparently he’s first in state or Australia or something. A bunch of fancy people were there.’

Angela turned to Christian with a look of confusion.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’
Christian didn’t look at Angela when he responded.

‘Why does it matter Ange?’

‘Because your brother can help us get good marks.’

When Christian spoke again, it was as though his voice had dropped down, even further into his chest.

‘I don’t think so.’

Angela looked over to Marco. He returned her questioning stare with a shrug.

‘Why not? Just ask him Christian?’

‘Why do we have to? He didn’t have any help when he was in year seven.’

‘Yeah, but he had lessons…’

Christian snapped at Angela before she could complete her thought.

‘Who cares! It doesn’t mean he has to teach us anything, I’ll just do it myself!’

The trio went silent for a while. Angela chomped down on the last bit of her hot dog with particular force. She looked out into the park but wasn’t focusing on anything. Christian kept his head down while he continued to play around with his now almost entirely chewed straw. Marco began to feel awkward in the quiet and decided to break the stalemate.

‘The pump’s free. Wanna go fix up the tyres?’

Without saying anything, Christian stood up, threw his slurpee cup in a bin behind them and walked over to the bikes. Angela did the same. As Marco lifted himself from the footpath, his cup rolled across the concrete where it bumped the foot of a man filling his car with petrol. He looked around confused, then kicked it away.

Christian walked his bike over to the pump. He started filling the tyres, still not saying a word. Angela could tell by his forced squints that the glare particularly bad. She moved
forward, positioning herself so that her shadow was cast over him. Realising what she was
doing, Marco accompanied her. Christian looked up at the two of them, opened his eyes
wider, and went back to his job.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ Angela asked, as she looked down upon Christian.

Christian didn’t look up.

‘Nothing, I’m filling the tyres aren’t I?

‘Why do you have to act so shitty for? Just because I say one thing about your brother
doesn’t mean it’s the end of the world.’

Christian looked up at the pair of them. Marco was watching Angela. Angela was
staring at him.

‘I know he’s a dickhead to you sometimes, but you don’t have to be one to us.’

Angela’s words made Christian stop. He had the hose plugged into the tyre and the
numbers on the gage were ticking up. ‘Sometimes’. The word stuck out to him. ‘Sometimes’.
How many times could he remember? The times his brother was a dickhead, or an asshole, or
any of the other words his classmates had taught him recently. Too many. Like last Christmas
with the wine, Christian still had a very faint scar on his hand from getting cut by the chair.
Since then they didn’t talk too much, especially at school. Having a brother in year twelve
was something any year seven would brag about if they could. Christian never brought it up.
Antony wouldn’t say hello at lunch. He wouldn’t even give Christian a ride home.
‘Sometimes’. Or even before that Christmas, way back, when Antony would talk with his
Nonna and Nonno while Christian tried to understand what was going on. Sitting at the table
at dinner, wanting to tell everyone about his day at school, or how he was writing Italian
words while he missed out on all the fun things his class was doing. ‘Sometimes’. Like when
they were in the hospital and his Nonno had the mask on and all the wires were attached to
him. When his Nonno talked and coughed and his eyes became tired, everyone was crying. He said something through the mask and his mum would cry, then his dad and nonna too.

Then his nonno spoke again and Antony cried. Christian didn’t understand. His nonno looked over to him from behind the mask and said something. Christian didn’t understand. He wanted to cry, but he didn’t understand. He looked over to his mum, and his dad, his nonna, and Antony, for someone to tell him what his nonno said. But no one did, they were all crying. When he looked back, his nonno’s eyes were closed.

‘I’m not being a dickhead.’ Christian kept his head down.

‘Yes you are! We just wanted to get some help and you have to start yelling! Isn’t he being a dickhead Marco?’

Angela looked expectantly at Marco who, not wanting to get involved, made a series of mumbles. Angela rolled her eyes.

‘If you don’t wanna ask him, I’m just gonna ask myself then.’ She crossed her arms and waited with her feet planted firmly in the ground. Angela was not one to back down from a disagreement. Christian, with his head still held down responded in a voice that was so weak and sincere, it took Angela by surprise.

‘Okay, I’m sorry Ange. I’ll ask him if you want.’

Angela unfolded her arms and stood for a moment.

‘Oh, um, cool then maybe when you get home…’

Angela could see small drops of water fall from Christian’s face and hit the ground, evaporating into the heat. She couldn’t tell if they were sweat or tears, but it didn’t matter.

Marco finally chimed in.

‘You okay cuz? I’ll do the bikes if you want.’

‘It’s all good, I got it.’
Marco leant down and began to help Christian anyway. They finished Christian’s bike, then they filled Marco’s tyres. Angela, who was acting as shade for the two, walked her bike over. She asked Marco to swap places with her and she squatted down next to Christian as they pumped her tyres up. It took her a while, but eventually she spoke.

‘I’m sorry, you’re not a dickhead.’

‘It’s alright Ange, I was being shit. I didn’t mean to go off at you like that, I promise.’

They glanced at each other and exchanged a quick smile before Angela spoke again.

‘We don’t need your brother’s help, if he can be that good we’ll just be better.’

‘It’s all good, I’ll ask him when I get home.’

‘Nah don’t! Now that you’ve brought it up, I want to do it myself. We don’t wanna be lazy shits like Marco over here.’

She smiled over at Marco through his shade.

‘Hey! Leave me alone!’ He mumbled to himself. ‘Bloody Chinese…’

The three of them shared a laugh as they completed their task. They hopped onto their bikes and rode out of the concrete lot of the Quix, leaving the hose in a mess on the floor. They crossed the road and took a moment to make fun of the old people still rolling their balls across the grass as they made their way to the park.
Chapter 6

Upstairs, Christian sat in the middle of his bed, shifting constantly to get comfortable. He wasn’t a particularly tall teenager, but he was big enough that he’d soon have to abandon bed study all together. Open exercise books were spread about his sheets, some of which were divided into columns, others had solid paragraphs. All of them though were written in a combination of Italian and English. He tapped his pen against the pages with one hand, the other was holding his still messy, slightly wavy hair.

‘Have you done page twenty-four Ange?’

Next to the bed, Angela sat at Christian’s desk with perfect posture. She had grown her hair out over the last three years, to the point where it almost touched the seat of her chair. Her books were stacked in the corner of the desk, except for the one she was writing in. She didn’t stop when she answered Christian.

‘Which one was that again?’

Christian held up his exercise book and read slowly.

‘Buonasera signorina, sono venuto di recente in città e ho bisogno di un posto dove stare. Sapresti di un hotel nelle vicinanze?’

‘Yeah, it’s a tricky one. I’m not the best with the longer sentences yet.’

‘Oh yeah? How long did it take you to do?’

‘About five-ish minutes?’

‘My god, I’ve been on this page for like half an hour! What did you write?’

‘If I tell you what I wrote, how is that gonna help? Since when do you ask for help anyway?’
Angela was a naturally gifted learner, a good work ethic compounded this into fantastic grades for the entirety of her schooling. Christian saw some success in particular subjects, when he applied himself. Math and science usually fell by the way side, but English and especially Italian saw him achieving his best results. Angela’s success made for a healthy rivalry between the two; Christian would make a big fuss when they tied in marks. Over a year prior, in one test in the middle of year nine, he topped his class and beat Angela. He never let it go.

‘It’s not help, I’m just getting ideas Ange. It’s you who should be asking me for help anyway, do I need to remind you?’

Angela rolled her eyes.

‘Do I need to remind you about any other test we’ve ever had mate? No, you can’t see my work, get your own “ideas”.’

As Angela finished, Maria knocked on the door and let herself in.

‘Alright, it’s break time kids! Dinner is going to be ready in a little bit. I want you helping Nonna with the table Christian.’

‘I’ll help too Maria.’

Angela instinctively got out of her seat.

‘You’re too nice Ange, but Christian can do it with his brother. You help him out enough at school already. Where is your brother Christian?’

‘No idea. You’re his mother, shouldn’t you know?’

‘Hey, that’s enough attitude from you young man. When you see him, tell him to come help as well.’

She left the door open and headed back to the kitchen. Angela turned to Christian with a look of curiosity.
‘Did your brother go somewhere?’

Christian kept his eyes on his book.

‘No clue, he comes and goes all the time. Doesn’t really tell anyone.’

Angela could tell Christian didn’t want to talk about it further, as was always the case with his brother. Since Antony graduated when they were at the end of their first year of high school, Christian had barely mentioned him.

‘Okay, we’ll keep an eye out for him. Let’s go help your Nonna. We need a break anyway, I can tell you’re going crazy.’

She nudged Christian on the shoulder and took his book from his hands, closing it and setting it down on the desk. Christian shuffled off the bed and the pair headed out into the second story landing.

They began towards the stairs when, out of the corner of her eye, Angela saw Antony enter a room and quickly close the door. She paused, but Christian continued for the stairs.

‘Hold up, that was Antony wasn’t it?’

Christian looked back and continued to walk away.

‘Yeah probably.’

‘You have to get him to help with the table, right?’

‘Nah, don’t worry about it Ange.’

‘What’re you talking about? Your mum said to get him.’

‘I know, just don’t worry I’ll do the table myself.’

Angela turned around and walked toward the door. Christian ran up the stairs after her.

‘Ange wait! I said don’t worry!’

As she grabbed on to the door handle she turned to Christian.

‘If you’re not going to talk to him I will!’
She turned the door handle and what she saw disoriented her. She expected to see Antony either at his desk, or playing games, something like that. When she opened the door though, she was met with the interior of Christian’s parents room. Antony was on his knees in front of an open wardrobe. On the floor were piles of twenty and fifty dollar bills, and Antony had another bundle in his hands. Christian caught up to Angela and peered over her shoulder. When he saw Antony, he was silent. Antony shot to his feet and ran over to the two, reached past and grabbed Christian by the shirt. He pulled them both into the room and closed the door behind them.

Antony’s eyes were wide and darting from the door to the wardrobe and back to Christian and Angela. He spoke in a half whisper as he began gathering up the money from the floor.

‘What the fuck are you doing? Why did you come in here?’

He asked the questions directly to Christian, even though Angela was the one who opened the door. Christian said nothing. He watched his brother dig through old blankets and rugs where he uncovered an old shoebox. Angela eventually spoke.

‘Your mum wanted us to get you to help with dinner.’

They could hear Antony making quiet grumbles to himself as he shifted the piles into the boxes. He was being incredibly meticulous. Eventually, he returned the box to the wardrobe, piling the rugs and blankets back on top of it before closing the door. He had a hand full of twenties and at least one fifty that they could see. He slid them into his pocket. Then he stood up and turned to face the two of them. He came in close so that they could hear him whispering. Christian couldn’t remember seeing his brother so close. Where there was once a clean jawline was now a well-trimmed beard. Once, his brother’s nose was split open
while playing soccer at school. It was only now Christian noticed the faint scar was still discernible, running from the bridge of his nose to his forehead.

‘Listen, I just need this for the time being. I’ve got shit I need to pay for at uni alright?’

Angela replied in a whisper that matched Antony’s.

‘Why don’t you just ask your mum and dad then?’

‘That’s none of your business. Just the both of you don’t say shit.’

He broke away from the two and opened the door, he lingered in the doorway for a moment.

‘Christian.’

He waited until his brother was looking directly at him.

‘Don’t say anything.’

He left the room and headed down the stairs. They could hear Antony entering the kitchen.

‘Lascia che lo prenda per te nonna! Preparerò il tavolo, va tutto bene!’

Angela turned to Christian.

‘What the hell was that? What a dickhead.’

Christian didn’t say anything.

‘What is he even taking from?’

‘It’s my mum and dad’s emergency savings…’

Before Christian could finish explaining, Angela stormed out of the room. Christian had only seen her genuinely angry a handful of times. She made no effort to hide it.

‘Ange, wait! Don’t tell my parents!’

Angela stopped. They stood in the middle of the second floor. Her eyes were like Antony’s when he saw them come in.
‘What the hell are you talking about Christian? He just stole from your parents and you want to defend him?’

Christian tried to lower the volume of the conversation.

‘I’m not defending him Ange.’

‘What the fuck, yes you are! Just tell them!’

‘I can’t Ange.’

Angela pressed her lips together tightly, trying to articulate the rage that was filling her. She looked at Christian, rolled her hands into fists and turned to walk down the stairs.

‘Ange wait! I’ll tell them!’

She stopped and turned to look at him.

‘Will you?’

‘Yes. I promise. Just let me do it.’

The pair would only speak when spoken to when they set the table. Angela would give Christian expectant looks as they placed the cutlery. Antony continued on as though nothing had happened. He was talking with Rosa the entire time, to the point where she asked Angela and Christian:

‘Wassa matta? You too hungry to talk?’

Eventually, the table was set and everyone was sitting down with a full plate of penne bolognese. Christian was next to Angela on one side of the table, facing Antony and his mum. Rosa sat at one head of the table while Roberto sat at the other. Maria could tell that the two of them were tense, but couldn’t quite understand why they were so quiet.

‘How did the study go? You two worked very hard today, I’m proud of you both.’

‘It was good, thanks mum.’

Christian prodded his pasta with his fork. Angela continued for him.
‘Yeah, there was a lot to do today Maria, I think we’re going to be fine for the exam...’

Rosa cut Angela off with an enthusiastic interjection.

‘Sei la ragazza più intelligente di questa casa!’

‘Oh, grazie Rosa, sei troppo carino!’

‘She speak so well, it’s beautiful! Betta than you.’

She peered across the table to Roberto who chuckled.

‘You’re right ma, I’m not gonna argue.’

Antony was quiet during the entire exchange; it was obvious he was trying to get through his pasta as fast as he could. Angela looked at Christian, pleading with her eyes for him to speak up. Christian acknowledged her with a small nod. He rested his fork against his plate and swallowed a mouthful of penne.

‘Mum...’

As soon as he spoke, Antony looked over from his plate and watched Christian as he chewed. When Christian locked eyes with him, he froze up.

It wasn’t a new feeling. For the last few years at least, it was the only real communication they would have. Antony would come home late at night after being gone for hours. He’d open the door to Christian’s room and look at him. Sometimes he’d ask.

‘Did mum and dad ask where I was?’

‘Yeah, they were asking me.’

‘What did you say to them?’

‘Nothing.’

Other times he wouldn’t say anything at all. He’d just look at Christian and go to his room. Before Antony was in his twenties, he made some effort. When he first got his license, he’d tell Christian he was going to be out late.
‘I’m going out, don’t say anything alright?’

Christian nodded in agreement, and wouldn’t see his brother until the next day. Antony would be sitting at the table in the morning, throwing cards on the table with his father while his nonna made them coffee. Christian would join them for a few games, and always lose. He remembered a few times when his brother would come home he’d ask:

‘Did you say anything Christian?’

‘No, nothing.’

Antony smiled, and said ‘Thanks bro.’

That was years ago. Now, Antony watched Christian as he chewed his pasta. He watched him like he would when he stood in his door way. Just like all those times, Christian could hear the same words in his head.

‘Don’t say anything.’

‘Don’t say anything.’

‘Thanks bro.’

Christian couldn’t bring the words out of his throat. He looked over to Roberto, trying to escape Antony’s eyes.

‘You alright son? What’s up?’

Roberto could sense Christian’s distress. Christian could feel Antony looking at him. He took a deep breath, but before he could speak, Angela erupted.

‘Maria, we saw Antony taking money from that box you have in your room! He’s got some in his pocket right now!’

The entire table looked over to Antony as he tried to remain composed.

‘What’re you talking about Angela?’
Roberto sat up in confusion. When he spoke, all the usual jolliness that he boasted was replaced with a low, stern tone.

‘How does she know about that Antony? What the hell are you doing son?’

‘Nothing dad, I don’t know what she’s on about.’

Maria turned to Christian.

‘Christian, did you see it too?’

Christian took a moment to speak. Maria and Rosa were sitting dumbfounded. Roberto had stood up and was walking around to Antony’s seat. Angela was watching Christian, silently pleading for him to say something. Antony was also watching Christian, but in his eyes, Christian could only find the same look he had for years.

Don’t say anything.

Don’t say anything.

‘I saw him, it’s in his pocket.’

As soon as Christian finished his sentence, Antony slammed his hands on the table and shot up out of his chair so fast it fell over behind him.

‘You dumb fuck!’

The next thirty seconds were a blur for Christian. Roberto approached Antony. Everyone except himself and Angela were screaming. There was some kind of scuffle between Antony and Roberto. Maria had come around to Angela. He could hear her saying something like:

‘It’s alright, it’s alright.’

Mixed in the screams was Rosa’s voice:

‘Cosa stai facendo? Non toccarlo!’
Roberto was yelling at Antony, who was yelling the loudest. He pointed to Christian. Christian looked down at table. Antony pushed Roberto and took the money from his pocket. He slammed it down on the table. With that he hurried away and made for the front door. As he did, Christian got out of his seat and followed. He could hear Maria shout from behind him.

‘Let him go Christian!’

He stood in the hall as Antony opened the front door. He stepped outside and turned. He looked at Christian. Christian looked back at Antony. Neither of them said anything.

Antony slammed the door.
Chapter 7

Christian slid a pile of books and loose papers into his bag as he packed up his belongings. Studying at Angela’s house was a common occurrence now that the two were close to taking their HSC exams. Angela’s parents had become more open to the idea of having Christian over to study since she had told them about Christian’s struggles with his brother. How Christian seemed to grow even more distant with Antony through their senior years. Angela would ask him every other week about Antony, but she would always be met with the same replies from Christian:

‘I don’t know what he’s up to.’

‘I don’t know how uni is going for him.’

‘I don’t care.’

So when Christian told Angela earlier in the evening that Antony was going to pick him up, she was beyond surprised. The two of them were still on their learner licences; It was always Maria or Roberto who came to pick up Christian after a night of study. Angela asked out of curiosity, thinking that without a doubt it must have been to the behest of Antony that he was coming to pick up his brother.

‘Did your parents have something on? Is that why he’s coming down?’
Christian responded as he threw his bag over his shoulder, making his way to the front
door.

‘Nope, well, not that I know of. He just messaged me and asked if he could pick me
up.’

The two stood at the front door. Through the fly screen, they could make out by the
car’s headlights that Antony was already parked and waiting. Before she opened the door for
him Angela asked:

‘Christian, stai bene con questo?’

The two of them had honed their Italian into a refined form. They weren’t quite fluent
in the language, and their vocabulary was still limited. They would sometimes spontaneously
talk to each other in Italian for entire conversations, mostly for fun, but also to test each
other. They wanted to stay sharp. Christian had picked up on Angela’s habit of slipping into
Italian when she was concentrating, or concerned. He never brought it up because he had felt
as though he knew something about Angela that no one else did; that he had a special
window through which he could see how she was feeling without asking. He’d think about
how many habits or slips he might have that Angela knew about, but never said. He was okay
with all of it.

‘Va bene, scommetto che non diremo nulla.’
The words came from Christian’s mouth in a clumsy, half accented cascade. Angela laughed at his attempt.

‘That was bloody awful! You have to work on your spoken delivery buddy. If you’re all good, then I’ll see you later!’

Christian returned her laugh.

‘Catch ya Ange.’

He yanked open the passenger side door of the 1995 Ford Laser, which had been half jammed for the last five years. Antony sat back in his chair, typing on his phone. The glow from the screen was the only light in the car apart from the neon red speedometer in the dash. The interior light had been broken since forever. Christian threw his bag into the back seat. His brother shut off his phone and sat up, putting his seatbelt on. As soon as Christian was buckled in, Antony began driving.

‘Hey.’

‘Hey.’

The two were used to quick conversations, so the fifteen-minute drive home they had in front of them would feel, as Christian thought, like an hour.
The suburbs around Christian’s place had changed slightly over the years. Not in a drastic way, just here and there, things were different. He remembered the foot paths were clear when he was younger, now the council had planted young trees all over in an effort to make the area look more natural. Christian thought it looked cluttered, and the way they were planted so systematically, exactly the same amount of space apart, made it look like a mockery of how trees actually grew. As he stared out the window and lost himself in thought, the sound of Antony’s voice was so unexpected, it took him by surprise.

‘How’s your study going? HSC is soon yeah?’

Christian answered how he always did when Antony asked something of him: quickly and to the point.

‘Yeah, the tests start in two weeks.’

Again there was silence. The car slowed as Antony tried to navigate a speedbump. Christian felt unease in Antony.

‘Oh that’s cool, do you have your speech ready for Italian? I remember when I had to do mine.’

‘It’s almost done, I have a few paragraphs left.’

‘Sweet, sweet.’
Christian was now as tense as Antony. He could feel that there was something he wasn’t understanding, an unease in Antony’s body that moved over to his own. It reminded him of the times Antony would talk to his Nonno. It was so long ago now that Christian had to focus to remember the sound of Cosimo’s voice before the cancer began to change it. Antony would ask his Nonno something, Cosimo would reply with a look filled with sadness and Antony would tense up. Then, Christian would too. Almost every time though, Cosimo would catch Christian and smile. He’d bring him to the kitchen to eat, or outside to play. He’d take him somewhere and his body would relax.

‘Aye?’

Christian was brought back to the passenger seat. He was gripping the seatbelt.

‘What?’

‘I said what’re you gonna do about your speech? And what’s wrong with you, think I’m gonna crash? You can let go of the seat belt mate.’

Christian released his grip on the belt.

‘I’m writing my own speech.’

‘Oh really? That’s brave, everyone in my grade just read translations, I did Shakespeare. They love it when you do non-Italian works translated into Italian by the way.’
Christian stared out of the passenger window as the world slowed to a stop. They were back in their own suburb at a pedestrian crossing waiting for a man walking his Doberman to get all the way across the road. Antony began to drive again, but very slowly. He remembered mornings when his mum would be driving and complained about all the school kids crossing at once. Or when he would walk to the park with his dad and they’d never cross where they were supposed to. Roberto would put Christian on his shoulders and hold Antony’s hand.

‘So what’s the speech about?’

Antony’s words were preceded by a light sigh. He was less tense now, and had sunken further into his seat. Christian answered quickly, as he watched the crossing disappear in the rear-view mirror.

‘Nonno.’

Antony opened his mouth to say something, but no particular word came out, just a quiet:

‘Ah.’ Accompanied by a nod. Then there was more silence for a while. Eventually, Antony spoke again.

‘I reckon that’s a good idea, you could say a lot. What have you got so far?’

For the first time in the trip, Christian looked over to Antony.
‘Why do you care?’

Antony returned Christian’s stare with a quick glance, before returning to the road.

‘I’m just curious bro, what’s the matter?’

‘You could’ve asked me this entire year and you wanna ask now?’

Antony fumbled over his response.

‘I… I don’t know, I didn’t think…’

‘Don’t worry about it then.’

Christian turned back to the window. He rested his head against the glass. When he did, he realised that Antony had stopped the car next to the park that they would play in when they were young, the one their dad took them to. The headlights lit up a school zone sign just up the road. Antony took his seatbelt off and cut the engine.

‘Christian, I don’t know what to tell you man. I just wanna know what you’re up to.’

Christian looked out to the park. The jungle gym in its centre cast a million shadows in the car’s headlights. They contorted over all the old trees that littered the park. Antony continued.
'I don’t know what to say to you bro.’

Christian didn’t respond, Antony tried again.

‘I know I’ve been a dickhead, for a long time…’

Still Christian didn’t respond.

‘Listen bro, I just, I don’t want you to hate me man.’

Christian looked back from the window.

‘I don’t hate you.’

‘It’s alright if you do.’

‘I don’t, I thought you hated me.’

Antony stopped himself as he was about to speak. Christian could tell by his face that he was about to make an objection, that he was going to try and make a case for himself; but he didn’t. Antony just waited for a moment.

‘That’s my bad bro, I get it though.’
Christian sank into the chair. He watched the light reflect off the school zone sign and meld with the lights from the streetlamps. Even though it was only ten o’clock, it was dead quiet outside.

‘Why’d you try to take the money that night?’

Antony rubbed both of his eyes and chuckled to himself.

‘Honestly, it took me a while to work it out bro. It was hard, around that time. I wanted shit, I wanted to get it myself. I was dumb, stupid.’

‘It was hard for me too.’

‘I get that now mate, I thought you’d be easier off because you were still in school, didn’t have too much to think about.’

Christian felt his throat tense up and his eyes water, he became so angry so quickly. Faster than he had ever been in his life. Antony continued before his brother could jump to conclusions.

‘Don’t worry mate, I know that’s a bunch of bullshit now. I guess when you’re feeling like shit you think everyone has it easier. When nonno went I wanted to do shit on my own so mum and dad didn’t have to worry. I was doing a shit job of it too. I know you think I’m talking shit but I was gonna try and pay them back.’
All at once, it was as though a year’s worth of pressure was lifted from Christian. He had no response, he didn’t ask questions. Antony waited to be called out, made fun of, screamed at. Nothing happened. They just sat in silence for a while. Christian thought to himself. He thought about what happened that night and what his brother would have felt. What he was feeling for years before then. He understood, but he couldn’t think of a sentence, a word to tell Antony he did, so he said nothing.

Eventually, Antony broke the silence.

‘What’re you gonna say about Nonno?’

Antony’s face was illuminated by the lights in the dash. Christian could just barely tell that his scar was still there. It had healed and faded into his face, leaving a faint indent on the middle of his nose. In that moment, perhaps it was the lighting that helped, Christian realised how similar his brother’s face was to his own. The bridge of their noses raised in the middle, then went in and out again at the tip. His mum would say that it looked like a little slippery dip when he was younger. It came from his Nonno. He remembered when he would wear the oxygen mask that it would stay on securely, because the bone kept it there, like it was designed for his face.

‘I don’t know… just talking about him. Some of the things he said. I don’t remember much so mum and dad are helping me.’

Antony stared out into the street as a faint smile appeared on his face. Christian could tell that he wasn’t focusing on anything in particular, he was just thinking.
‘You have to make sure you talk about his cards aye? He loved scopa so much.’

‘Yeah, that’s in there.’

‘And about how he’d make the wine with Nonna too.’

‘For sure, I don’t think I remember much of that.’

‘That was before he had the cane, you would’ve been like three or four…’

Antony realised that Christian wasn’t looking at him anymore.

‘Are you confident with your Italian? I know Nonna can’t stop talking about how good you are now.’

‘I’m better than before, but still shit compared to you at my age.’

The two laughed as Antony continued.

‘Of course you are mate, no one was as good as me. Only reason I even got into uni was because of my Italian marks. Era troppo facile.’

Christian gave his brother an inquisitive look and after a moment took a stab at the phrase:
‘It was too easy?’

Antony nodded slowly and gave his brother a light clap.

‘Bravo, bravo. You’re not too bad mate, nonno always did say you were sharp.’

‘He did?’

‘He sure did mate. I don’t know if you’d remember this, I think you were like five at the time. There was a Sunday, we were having lunch and you hurt yourself in the garage and nonno went to get you.’

‘Yeah, I think I remember. He gave me his old deck of cards.’

‘He did. He came to the table with you and was saying something like “He hurt himself playing with the tools. He’s gonna be a smart one. Acuto.” He said you were Acuto, like the sword on the cards. I told ya, he bloody loved those things.’

Christian paused for a moment. He tried to cast his mind back to that point. To hear the conversation in his head. To hear it in the voice of his nonno. He couldn’t remember. He thought of other times, so many times, when his nonno sat with his mum and dad or uncles and aunties. They’d throw the cards on the table, over and over for hours. Hundreds of times. He could remember Cosimo giving him the deck of cards. He could remember the sword. But he couldn’t remember the conversation, the voice.
‘How do you remember that? Nonno played cards all the time.’

Antony laughed to himself.

‘I remember because the swords were my favourite. Nonno was going on about how you were “acuto” and how you were the sword, I was so jealous bro.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah, I asked him “Aren’t I the sword nonno?” and he told me “tu sei il deanri”.’

‘You’re the coin?’

‘Yup, the bloody coin! I wanted to be the sword mate! I hated you for like a week.’

The two laughed together, then Christian continued.

‘Why were you the coin?’

‘I actually can’t remember; something about value or worth? I was too pissed, wasn’t paying attention. He had his reasons though, nonno was really switched on with that stuff ya know? Probably the smartest bloke I knew.’

‘Mum always said we got our smarts from him.’
‘Maybe me mate, I don’t know about your dumb ass.’

Christian punched Antony in the arm. After another few minutes, Christian received a worried text from Maria asking where he was. The two put on their seatbelts and set off home, it was only a few blocks away from the park they were stopped at. As they drove off, and the shadows of the jungle gym became enveloped in the darkness of the night, Christian asked Antony:

‘Does the area seem different to you? From when we were younger.’

‘Same shit different day to me mate. Trees and houses.’

Antony parked in the driveway and the two headed towards the front door. Before they entered, Antony stopped.

‘Look bro, about what I was saying earlier with how I’ve been acting and shit…’

Christian stopped Antony before he could finish.

‘It’s alright man, don’t worry about it. Do you reckon you could tell me more about nonno though? I don’t have long to do the speech but I think I could add way more stuff if you help me out.’

Antony smiled.
‘Grazie Christian.’

He held the door open for Christian as they both went inside.
Chapter 8

Christian closed his eyes as he leant his chair back against the wall. His hands clutched sheets of paper with scrawled annotations and highlighter covering every possible inch of the page. In his head, words passed and lingered. He mimed with his mouth:

‘Bongorno’ ‘Quello che mi ha insegnato’ ‘Non mi sento così’

Maria’s voice interrupted his exercise.

‘Don’t rock on your chair, you’ll fall over.’

Christian brought the front legs of his chair down to the ground. He was sitting outside his language classroom where a makeshift seating area was prepared for the HSC students. His classmates were all present, waiting their turn. Most of them were accompanied by their families. Christian was no exception. Maria and Rosa were seated on either side of him. Roberto was off talking to Angela’s parents, and Antony was trying to peer into the class where Angela was first up giving her speech.

‘Antony! Stop dat! Angela no wanna see you face!’

‘Alright! Sorry nonna.’ He turned his attention to Christian.

‘You good to go mate? I reckon she’ll be done in a little bit.’

Christian nodded.
‘Can’t believe they’re still using the same class from when I was here. You’d think they’d have changed it by now aye?’

Christian nodded again. His eyes darted from one line to another, his fingers ran over sentences and peeled back pages. He’d lower the pages and look away, reciting a phrase. Then he’d check again to see if he had made any mistakes in his mini-recital. Maria waved her hand at Antony.

‘Leave him. Let him cram while he can.’

‘He’d better go fast, here she comes.’

Angela emerged from the classroom and was met with an enormous hug from her parents. Roberto and Maria went over to congratulate her. Christian heard the commotion and without looking up knew that it was almost his time to go in. He folded his papers and slid them into his pocket. As he did, Angela made her way over to him.

“How’d it go?”

“It went really well! I didn’t stutter once and all three judges clapped after I was done. I thought one looked like a stuck-up dickhead but he was alright in the end. Are you feeling okay?”

“I should be alright Ange, I’ve gone over it a hundred times now.’
‘Centouno non possono far male.’

Christian could sense the concern enter Angela’s voice again. Even after the catharsis of completing her exam, her continued thought about Christian’s feelings was endearing. He felt his body grow less tense.

‘Lo leggerei un milione di volte se potessi.’

Angela smiled.

‘That was pretty sharp, make sure you’re like that in the class.’

‘I’m always acuto mate, don’t worry.’

As Christian finished his reassurance, a tall slender man with slicked back hair and a fancy suit called from the doorway of the classroom.

‘Christian Baglio! Christian Baglio we are ready for you now.’

Antony gave Christian a slap on the back as his family came over to speak to him one last time before he went in.

‘You got this bro, feeling good?’

Christian paused for a moment, looking over to the door of the classroom.
‘Yeah, I think so.’

Rosa shuffled in front of Christian and pinched his cheek.

‘Remember what I say to you? If you forget how to say something…’

‘Say it like nonno did.’

‘Bello!’

Roberto and Maria walked over to the door with Christian.

‘Do you remember your notes Christian? And all your mental shortcuts?’

‘He’s gonna be fine Maria, he’s a smart one, aren’t ya son?’

Christian laughed, but didn’t answer his dad. He stood in front of the door where Maria gave him a hug. He could see that Angela, Rosa and Antony were waving to him before he turned to enter the classroom.

Inside, all the furniture had been moved to the side of the class. Desks and chairs were piled up next to the walls and the cabinets were moved out of the way. Two pieces of tape marked an ‘X’ on the floor in the centre of the room.

‘Buongiorno Christian.’
At the end of the room, a table was set up with three seats. On the left was the man with the slick hair. Next to him was an older woman who reminded Christian of Rosa, although she must have been at least twenty years younger. On the right was a younger woman. Christian thought she couldn’t have been much older than Antony. Behind the table was a small window through which Christian could only just make out figures moving. Not wanting to be distracted, he tried to focus on the judges.

‘Buongiorno.’

Christian spoke with an uncharacteristic sternness. He almost didn’t sound like himself. The man with the slick hair handed the other judges some sheets of paper.

‘Christian, I want you to stand on the ‘X’ marked on the floor there. Today we’re going to be judging you on your pronunciation, delivery and complexity of vocabulary.’

Christian nodded. ‘Si.’

Then, the woman in the middle took over. Christian could hear her Italian accent colour her sentences.

‘In addition, you are also going to be marked on your body language and bodily expression. So we want you to use your hands like a real Italian!’
She threw her hands into the air, prompting a laugh from both the judges and Christian. He felt looser now, more confident.

The final judge spoke.

‘Christian has decided to write his own speech for us! Is that correct Christian?’

‘Si signora.’

‘It’s not very often that happens, I hope you’re practiced and can finish within the fifteen minutes?’

‘Si, posso.’

‘Very good, the time will begin when you start talking Christian. Remember to speak loudly and clearly good luck.’

‘Grazie.’

Christian took a deep breath and made sure he was standing directly over his mark. He swayed back and forth for a moment as his eyes moved from the window, to the chairs, to the desks and to the window again. Then his eyes caught those of the older judge. Even from half way across the room he could make out the wrinkles above her cheeks. In his mind, Christian thought of the wrinkles on his nonno’s face, on his nonna’s face. How he remembered their look and pattern, their feel. He remembered how he could only just begin to see the signs of
those same wrinkles appear on his mum and dad’s face. How he hoped the scar on his brother’s face would fade away one day, and become just another wrinkle. He remembered Angela’s face, and how he could never imagine wrinkles ever appearing there. Without realising he had done so, he raised his hands before himself. Christian spoke.

‘Pensavo di conoscerlo meglio quando ero piccolo.’

His words carried across the room, filling the walls with his voice. The emptiness of the space and the quietness made Christian feel as though he was in some secluded cave, or a chamber. The feeling of isolation, it brought him back, far back, to the garage. To when he played alone and his nonno found him there. Christian continued to speak, but it was to himself. He spoke as though the room was empty. He remembered his nonno speaking to him in Italian. Small fragments. The words Cosimo could have said, Christian guessed at what they might have been. He repeated them out loud as he spoke.

‘Piccolo. Questo. Magia.’

One after another, the words passed through Christian’s lips. He paused after every one, though he didn’t intend for it to be that way in his practice. He wanted to get through the words as quickly as he could, but something weighed them down. When he heard them, when he heard the words spoken in his own voice, they were heavier. He could hear Cosimo’s voice.

‘Pensavo non capisse’
From his mark in the middle of the room, Christian could tell the judges were in a state of unease. He didn’t look directly at their faces as he continued his speech. He focused on their shoulders, their hands. The two women were leaning into their desk, writing notes after what seemed like every sentence. The man with the slick hair had one arm draped over the back of his chair and held his pen between his teeth. Instinctively, Christian felt a break approaching in his speech. He took the chance to collect himself, as he had been speaking automatically for a few minutes.

‘Non mi sento così...’

Christian rocked on the spot. He felt a dryness in his mouth, which reminded him that he had forgot to drink water before heading in. He cleared his throat. The unexpected pause threw him off. He lost his place. For a moment, he stared into the faces of the judges, completely silent. They stared back. Each set of eyes planted firmly on him. At once, they fell out of focus, lost to streaks of light that reflected out of the tears that were beginning to pool in Christian’s eyes. This wasn’t supposed to happen. Christian had practiced so many times. Over and over he repeated the words he wrote down. When he was at home, when he was with Angela, before he went to sleep, when he woke up. Now, they felt almost alien. Christian looked beyond the judges to the window at the end of the room which was now nothing more than a mass of smudged light. It felt familiar, somehow. The light, smudged and distorted, brought a comfort to the room that Christian couldn’t quite place. It summoned into his mind images of his family. He remembered the feeling of sitting with his mum and spelling out his name. For a moment, he thought he could see a figure pass by the window. There was no way he could know exactly who it was. Then, something changed. He thought about his nonno again, about him being there, on the other side of the window.
Christian imagined Cosimo, looking in from the outside. He imagined him in the room, sitting with the judges. Christian rubbed his eyes, suppressing the tears that never fully formed.

‘Scusa, ho dimenticato di bere.’

He took a deep breath and continued.

‘Non credo sia importante quale linguaabbiamo parlato.’

Christian had always found it funny that no matter how many times he spoke in Italian, whether intended or not, he always thought in English. Even now, in the midst of a task made entirely to test his proficiencies in the language, his mind did not reflect his words. He thought about his nonno, about how Cosimo thought. In Italian. It must have been in Italian. His whole world must have been different because he heard things, saw things, in Italian. All the moments he could remember, when he sat at the table with him, went for walks, ate with him. Even when he was in the hospital and Christian had to watch him while he spoke from behind the mask. Every moment for Cosimo must have been so different. It took years of remembering, thinking about those moments again in his mind, trying to think in Italian, to see and hear the world like his nonno. It took Christian so long to ask himself:

Does it matter?

‘Non importa.’
It didn’t matter that his world was something else, that he could never truly see what Cosimo saw, that he could never think in the way he thought. It didn’t matter that when Cosimo spoke, his words never formed a completed picture in Christian’s mind. What he thought was only a part of what Cosimo meant.

‘Un Frammento.’

These fragments, they were all he knew his nonno by, they made Cosimo up. They were how Christian saw Cosimo. How he heard him.

How then? How could it be that Italian wasn’t important? That he didn’t even recognise the words and the sounds that made up his nonno? His own nonno, who for so long talked to Christian as though he knew in his mind what was said? His own nonno who could now never hear him finally speak in the same way as he did after so, so long.

‘Capire.’

Christian understood.

He had always understood. When his nonno talked with him, when he walked with him. When Christian was with Cosimo, he could feel what his nonno meant. Through his face, through his eyes, through the air. In the words he heard but didn’t recognise, he felt Cosimo’s meaning. He felt comforted when he hurt himself in the garage. He felt sadness when Cosimo said goodbye from the hospital bed. It was more than just the words Cosimo spoke. It was everything. Every part of every moment with Cosimo, every piece of those moments, those fragments. They came together in Christian’s mind, each stacked on top of
It took a moment for the judges to realise Christian was finished. There was a brief pause. Then, the judge in the middle began to clap.

‘Bravo! Bravo Christian! That was beautiful!’

The judge on the right also started to applaud.

‘Very well done Christian, that was very impressive.’

The judge with the slick hair let out a soft chuckle and rubbed his eyes.

‘Yes, good job. Thank you Christian.’

Christian breathed deeply, his throat was completely dry but his eyes began to water again. He shook his head, trying to suppress the tears.

‘Grazie, Grazie.’

The middle judge continued.
‘It’s finished now Christian. We’re going to complete our marking, you can head back outside now.’

Christian nodded.

‘Grazie per l’attenzione.’

He headed to the door. As he was about to exit the judge called after him.

‘Christian!’

He turned to face the judges.

‘Your nonno would be very proud.’

Christian paused for a moment.

‘Thank you.’