

Dark Paolo

WHEN I was 11, I had a playmate, a boy soldier. He was a year or so older than me, an inch or so taller, his fine straight hair a few shades lighter than mine and streaked pale from the sun. I saw him and picked him out from a dozen or so other boys; he had a high, charming voice and an aura of mischief and vitality, but his face didn't quite register in my mind.

I saw him in an adventure movie set in World War II, about a group of village youths, 15 in all, whose families have been gunned down by Nazi soldiers, and who have holed up in a cave in the mountains somewhere in northern Italy, waiting for the opportune moment to seek revenge. This comes in a form of a U.S. army captain, the sole survivor of his team of paratroopers, whose mission is to blow up a dam in enemy-held territory. The captain needs them to carry out his mission; they need him to massacre the contingent of German soldiers who have quartered themselves in their village. My boy was among the younger ones, clad in a striped blue shirt and shorts, with a Schmeisser slung over his shoulder. His name was Paolo.

That movie house – it was dingy and close, a cave of a different sort, perfumed with the sweat of the masses who filled it whenever an action flick came to town. In the seventies, these could well be big-budget Euro-American co-productions returning for a second or third run. War films and medieval sagas and spaghetti westerns – the Park Theater ran them all. It was at the other end of town from where we lived. I say “town,” but it was actually a city – albeit small and somnolent, and in my mind's eye perpetually a mad yellow under the summer sun. Come April the trees would drop their leaves, and the elementary and high schools, just a stone's throw from my childhood home, would fall silent.

The first days after the end of the school year (always in March), I would take a razor blade to the used pages in my school notebooks. My notes, carefully copied from the blackboard, my homework, marked and signed by the teacher – all these would fall away from the spine, to be discarded in the wastepaper basket and thought no more of. That left me with page upon beautiful blank page, and because I wrote so neatly and carefully throughout the year, saving as much paper as I could, there was always a huge supply for

the summer's stories and drawings, so much so that I eventually began passing my extras to my older sister to write in. Every summer she and I would make up stuff about the people we had seen in films. There was seemingly no pattern to the movies we would fall in love with, apart from the fact that they were violent and exciting, and in those days that meant they were about war. Every year, there would be new movies to obsess over. *Waterloo*. *War and Peace*. *The Battle of Neretva*. It started when I was in kindergarten, and by the summer before the sixth grade, our habit of invention was in full swing.

So it was that a week or so after my 11th birthday, our family saw *Hornets' Nest* together, my mother grumbling because it was a weekday and because she already knew she would hate the film. On the way home, though, my sister and I couldn't stop talking about it. We strode through the darkness, chattering excitedly, scarcely aware of the broken sidewalks beneath our feet as we relived the movie frame by frame. The story was so straightforward and the dialogue so simple that even an 11-year-old could repeat the lines. That morning I'd been a kid searching through the verges by the Protestant church for pop plants, filling my pockets with seed pods, the ripe ones exploding satisfyingly when I placed them on my tongue. But now I was a gun-toting war orphan, sharing a universe with a cadre of boy soldiers, including the light-haired one with the cute voice and a face I liked but could not describe.

A few days later, I made the first tentative attempts to draw his likeness. My sister had said that my face seen from the side reminded her of him. Right. Except I had no idea what my profile looked like. So I drew a front view, starting with the eyes. My sister had said he'd had the most amazing, innocent brown eyes. I made them huge, like a Japanese cartoon character. I followed this with a couple of lines to suggest a nose, then a thin pursed mouth, and an oval face with a round chin. I drew straight, rather messy hair parted on the right, exactly as my hair looked in the mirror. The memory of his face was fading, and with each stroke I lost even more of it. I gazed at this lovely two-dimensional boy I had limned in ballpoint. Now he was no longer a fading impression of someone glimpsed on a movie screen. Now he lived, beneath my fingers; now he was mine.

But he was incomplete. Next to him, I drew a girl, starting once more with eyes as huge as his and with almost exactly the same features, except that the hair covered her forehead in a glossy fringe. This was how I wanted my hair to look, but it required frequent

encounters with the scissors to maintain. I carefully wrote his name, and then mine, under their respective faces. A couple of days later, one of my cousins flipped through the notebook without asking. I feigned nonchalance. “Who is Paolo?” she said, pronouncing it in the Spanish and Filipino way, with three syllables. I shrugged. “Just some boy.” She peered in perplexity at the other face. “Oh, it’s Bing. But pretty.”

I was an unsightly 11. It was the eyeglasses; thick and rimmed in black, they dominated my face. My neglected bangs obscured my eyebrows, and the rest of my thick hair fell about my shoulders in a solid curtain, turning up at the ends. On occasion I would stick a fistful of those ends in my mouth and give them a satisfying chew, marveling at the crunching sound they made. I was shy, and kept my shoulders hunched to stay out of trouble.

This was a survival mechanism of sorts — I was the youngest, and the outlier in a family of eldest children. My sister, three years older, had steered my life for as long as I could remember. One day, coming home from lunch, she had stuck the point of an umbrella in my back and ordered me to “Walk!” the five-minute distance from the elementary school to the house. Meekly, I’d complied. When we got home, there was a shit storm. My mother had seen us as she chatted with a colleague across the road. My sister, she bellowed, was tyrannical and irresponsible: what if the umbrella had (of its own mysterious volition) run little me right through? Neither my sister or I admitted that the business with the umbrella was, in fact, a role play: I was the prisoner, she the jailer. I don’t recall what her punishment was: whipped with a dress hanger, most probably. My mother had supervised six siblings to adulthood and thus was consistent in her punishment style.

My father was domineering in a different way. The eldest of 13, he not only had graduated summa cum laude, he’d had the highest grade point average of every student at the University to that very day. Neither of us were allowed to forget that distinction. It was understood that our sole purpose in life was to get top marks and thus live up to parental expectations, but we were slapped or whipped if we dared to talk smart to either of them.

It sounds like hell, but it wasn’t — it was a very happy childhood, for as long as my sister and I were left to our own devices. She was an accomplished writer and artist, inspired by the books and comics she read (*The Odyssey* and *Iliad* at ten, *Sgt. Rock* a few years later). I remember how, walking home at noon, she would hold one graceful pianist’s

hand to the side and gently twist and turn her wrist, observing the shadows cast on the pavement. In this way she taught herself to draw hands better than I ever could. At night, after our parents had forced us to stop talking by turning off all the lights in the house, we would press our faces close in our respective beds, straining past the green acrylic mosquito nets, and whisper about Paolo and Bing, and Lani and Aldo, and Carlo, Giacomo, Luigi, Antonio, Lorenzo, and so forth. Because we never got the names of all the Italian boys, much less of the actors who played them, we had to invent. We gave them complete personalities, and in the process collapsed one boy into another and made two or three out of what had been one. We called our characters Lani and Bing, which were our actual nicknames. Foolish adults, eavesdropping, might have assumed it was us we were referring to, affectedly, in third person, but that was untrue: we spoke of our fantasy selves as though they were real, reporting on every one of their deeds and thoughts.

In this alternate universe we were both exceedingly beautiful and irresistible, as were all the other girls who populated it. No female bullying, no nasty put-downs. We were not sisters, but distant cousins – I think I must have been an embarrassment for her, with my glasses and my awkwardness and my bad Cebuano, and this was her way of disengaging. And of course, we were war orphans, because in a fantasy world, parents tend to complicate things.

The Italian boys were not alone; inevitably they were joined by people from other movies and from comic books. Our stories went behind the scenes, to ridiculous spoofs of the filming of *Hornets' Nest*, and on to the lives of some of the actors, all of which we had to invent. Paolo's actor became a child star whose fame was starting to wane with puberty, though he could still do professional cute. He had the improbable name of Stefano Sigaretto, because in the film Paolo had distracted a sentry by begging for a cigarette. There were two iterations of Stefano, the California boy with the nice clean dark-blond hair who lived in the present day, and the Stefano who was an indentured servant in a vampire castle who had to poach for rabbits with an antiquated rifle, because he couldn't drink blood. In both cases, he was mischievous and boundary-stretching, if somewhat naïve – a free spirit. In a way, Stefano was comic relief from the more intense Paolo, whose experiences included weapons- and explosives-handling, getting killed and brought back, and getting mangled by a horse-monster who'd once been one of his boy comrades.

It was hard to keep my head down in the sixth grade – my grades were good, and since beginning art lessons with a private tutor, my drawing had improved to the point that several of my pictures were displayed at the back of the classroom for a couple of weeks. That didn't sit well with a few of my classmates. At the end of the school year, a day or so shy of 12, I stood onstage in a pink dress and delivered a memorized speech full of grand ideas that my father had written. I was elementary school valedictorian, a skinny girl not even five feet tall, with a big head and those awful eyeglasses. While committing my grand speech to memory, I'd been writing a manuscript called "Raid on Rio Nova", directly on a typewriter that was missing an "n", a reject of my dad's. It was an adventure story filled with blood, guts and explosions, featuring the cast of *Hornets' Nest* (minus the pesky adults), and with girls, us included.

By the following school year, a new element had crept into what I was writing. My sister's stories had always been sexual – she was an ardent reader of bodice-rippers, a genre that disgusted me – but now, with a slightly better understanding of what I'd been seeing in movies all along, I was beginning to play with the stuff as well. It started with the younger kids spying on the adults and catching them in compromising positions, to be moralistically condemned at trial (I'd been obsessed with the play *Inherit the Wind*). But then a copy of *Little Darlings* found its way to the house, and true to our practice of ripping off whatever intriguing things we had seen or read, I wrote a story from Paolo's point of view, in which he nearly loses his virginity, on a dare, to Bing. They both end up bawling, saying, "No, it would ruin everything!" Still, I avoided those pages in the notebook after I'd written them. Some sort of boundary had been overstepped. I'd done him wrong, and by drawing him half-naked under a blanket, eyes deliriously shut, I'd somehow spoiled him.

As for my sister, not all her stories were erotic wish-fulfilment. A truly amazing one, written the Christmas she was 16, was a novella where all the inhabitants of the world were killed by a weaponized virus, except for Paolo, Bing and maybe two others. I think she was annoyed at how I'd fallen in love with another movie boy. She was a stickler for fidelity. And so she disposed of this new fellow, off-page, as backstory – he wasn't even important enough to have a fully dramatized death – leaving Bing and her faithful dark-blond buddy with the task of either fixing a time machine or repopulating the earth.

Those who didn't grow up in the Philippines of the '70s and '80s might wonder why, if we were so sexually curious, we didn't simply grab ourselves a willing classmate and get it on. Apart from the usual religious injunctions and middle-class concerns about reputation, I'm pretty sure the age of consent had a lot to do with it. Until 2022, the country had one of the lowest ages of consent in the world – 12. It meant that if by 12 a girl had had sex forced upon her, she would have no protection under the law, especially if a medical examination proved she hadn't been a virgin. By the age of 12 we were presumed to be sexual beings overall, and not just in our minds – if not agents, then certainly targets. So we had to take responsibility for ourselves.

Lani and I fell out, gradually, when I was about 15 or 16. She'd challenged me to start experimenting with a boy from another school who she'd picked out for me, someone I disliked; in spite, I'd shown some of our writings to a psychologist I was seeing – one of those Christian counsellors for whom help came with obligations. I don't think my sister ever forgave me for that. The psychologist left for the States and kept our stuff. As though to minimize the impact of this loss, my sister repudiated everything we'd ever done together. The old school notebooks and folders of drawings were shoved into a box under her bed, and it seemed a condition of our new and more cautious relationship that Aldo and Paolo and the various comforts of that shared universe be never referred to again. She dropped her American accent. Mine got better – or worse, depending on who you ask.

Our baggage might have been packed away, but that wasn't the end of the war orphans. In 1988, my senior year in college, our family bought a VHS machine. We were maybe the last household in our city to do so. One of the first tapes that I borrowed was *Hornets' Nest*. When Paolo came onscreen, I studied his every feature. There were the large eyes, the long androgynous hair, the wide mouth with the cheeks plumping out on either side. How we had loved those cheeks. He was a big boy, about 13 – older than I'd first thought, and not half as cute. My tastes had changed from when I was 11, and I was going through a regrettable anti-American phase. Paolo was too white. And played by Luigi Criscuolo. What a strange name, how very Italian. It somehow didn't suit his pale coloring and his accent, but what the heck did I know. The movie was embarrassingly bad. I watched it a couple more times, making quick drawings of the boys and writing down descriptions. The personas we'd created were an annoying mismatch to the originals, and I

still didn't know what anyone was called. Few of the youths were referred to by name. There were a few cute names that we'd failed to notice. Mikko, Rico, Tekko. What a missed opportunity. What fun we would've had with a boy called Tekko – if we'd only known which one he was.

I called my sister long distance, but she was alternately sarcastic and vague, waving me off in her new lazy socialite's voice with the Manila accent that made my blood boil. I had no idea at the time of her misery – that these were anguished efforts to fit in, make herself beautiful, sustain the interest of the opportunist boyfriend who mistreated her.

She never got the chance to be recognized for published work. She'd stopped writing fiction in her junior year at college, at around the time she began to work seriously on her grades. At 20, she'd graduated – B.S. Psychology, magna cum laude. As far as I know, she never wrote fiction again, although when I was a lifestyle editor around 1997, I pestered her to crank out a few pieces for my page. She complied, and the work was (of course) brilliant and funny. My editor asked for more, but Lani declined. The first baby had come; she had no time. If she drew at all, it was chubby, pleasant little cartoons of her co-workers, for birthdays and such.

We did not really reconcile until a few weeks before she died, which is a weird thought, considering there are studio photographs of our grinning selves, and me and her daughters playing. But our relationship was fraught – once we moved to Manila it became impossible to rekindle that spirit of trust and collaboration of our childhood. We were bitter rivals and in our own way, enemies. She said I was high-strung, judgmental and conceited; I thought she, who had revelled in her strength of character while in college, was so desperate for love that she suffered her partner's abuse and begged for more. Each time I paid a visit to the dingy apartment I would brace myself, as she could either be sweet and funny or a termagant – there was no telling which.

She died in agony, from the cancer, and from the effort of holding on, of reaching for every one of her final breaths. When it was all over, they simply unhooked her from the IVs and the oxygen and wheeled her down to the morgue. I didn't get to spend a single moment alone with her, and neither did my parents. She had become the property of her husband and his friends, and now that the show was over, they moved with the efficiency of

stagehands packing up the light and sound gear after a neighborhood breakdance tournament.

When I set foot in Italy for the first time, in 2009, it was with a sense of guilt. She ought to have been the one with face pressed to the train window, observing the landscape of blue mountains and the flash of white blocks and red-tiled roofs that signalled the distant towns. She would have loved the men – taller than I'd expected and theatrically dark. The women would not have been rivals, but opportunities for story. She'd named her daughters Bea and Sofia – Sofia being the name of the younger sister she had assigned to Paolo. She would have met her fantasies head on, with delight.

I saw *Hornet's Nest* again in 2011. I was living in a new country, grappling with a foreign language, engulfed by a marriage, defeated by an eye infection. There was a socio-linguistics thesis to get over as well. Desperate for a distraction, I sat through the film, watching it on Youtube, arming myself with a yellowed copy of a based-on-the-screenplay book I had purchased for a few dollars off Amazon. This book only served to deepen the mystery. How was it that all of Paolo's lines were assigned to the boy named Tekko? And which of the other boys was this Tekko anyway? As for the movie, the years had done nothing to improve it. It was a competent little actioner, featuring a fading Rock Hudson and a cast of unknowns, and that was all. Each time Paolo came onscreen, I winced. I'd outgrown him, obviously. And it was so long since I'd written about that awful derivative dare to lose his virginity that I'd come to believe that he actually had, to none other than my prim imaginary self. Such embarrassment. Such perversion – at 12! Still, I found myself previewing vintage lobby cards on Ebay, wishing I could afford them – all the familiar scenes: the American captain knifing a sentry from behind, the youths crouched in a huddle, the littlest boy imploring a woman doctor for help. Mementos of my precocious childhood. My wagon had derailed, and here I was stuck with an aging husband among equally aging couples in Scandinavian suburbia, coldly ignored by my contemporaries, wearing second-hand clothes and writing erotic stories for the money. At least, I thought, those long-ago competitions with my sister to write the best bodice-ripper rip-offs were bearing fruit.

2022 was a weird year – in parts of Europe, people were going about their business as though the horrors of Covid-19 had never taken place, but in the Philippines, the

populace was masked and fearful. Having lost a couple of my regular gigs, and with lots more time on my hands, I'd written a short novel that Spring – a way of diverting my thoughts from the looming future. Somehow the experience of sitting at the computer and creating situations out of thin air, rather than typing up lesson plans for a revolving cast of English learners, had left a crack in the massive structure that held my memories in check. In August I returned to the family home in the Philippines, and though my parents' health preoccupied me, I finally summoned the courage to open the boxes of notebooks that sat in various corners of the house. The first was filled with my drawings, the second with my sister's stories. I had not read many of them in over 40 years. My heart ached as I photographed each page; she'd been such a good writer – irreverent, no-nonsense, with a voice all her own.

And once again, as at some of the most stressful periods in my life, I felt the urge to find the *Hornets' Nest* boys, the real ones. But now I had social media on my side, not to mention the Internet Movie Database and the entire contingent of blogs, magazine articles and databases that had been slowly accreting, ignored and unexplored, in the years that I'd struggled to find my footing in Europe. I figured if I ran searches for the actors' names, the visages of a few sexagenarians might surface. The best place to begin would be Facebook, beloved of people of my generation and their parents. Peering at search results for Luigi Criscuolo or Giuseppe Cassuto or Mauro Orsi or Giuseppe Coppola, I might recognize some feature or expression, out of these faces transformed by experience and time, from back when they were youths of 14 and 15.

Who knew -- with the aid of Google Translate, I might even make the first momentous attempts at contact.

Almost immediately, I found the three Colombaionis, circus performers at that young age, keeping up a family occupation that went back a couple of generations. They even had their *Hornets' Nest* photos on their social media profiles. I found the Danaro brothers, who had played the well-built but bad-swimmer Umberto and the handsome, doomed Silvio. I found the actors Mark Colleano and Mauro Gravina, naturally. I thought I'd discovered a couple more of the boys on social media, and compared their ears and noses and mouths to what I could screenshot from the film, but no joy there. Nearly half the boys were unaccounted for. I ran search after search, crossing each actor's name with the

movie's foreign language titles. Each time I was directed to databases I had seen before. The internet was *not* the storehouse of all knowledge. I was about to give up and write a blog entry under the scanty information I had, when I chanced upon an alternate Italian title for the movie, *Il Vespaio*. What no movie aficionado seemed to know or remember was that *Hornets' Nest* had been filmed under this name; hence it was this its young participants would forever associate with the summer of '69.

And so, the day after my sister's death anniversary, after I thought I'd discovered everything there was to be found about Captain Turner's baby brigade, I ran a search for *Il Vespaio x Daniel Keller*, and found him, my little Paolo – for real.

"Dear Mr. Keller,

"I came upon your website while I was trying to find out all I could about the boys of Il Vespaio.

"I first saw this film in 1980, in a packed movie theatre in a small city in the Philippines. ... Everyone had seen Hornets' Nest, and the boys' theme was whistled in school corridors for months after that. Adolescents in the Philippines were very militarized under Ferdinand Marcos -- there was Citizens' Army Training at age 15, then ROTC at 16 and 17, so guns and war were dear to the hearts of many boys and girls..."

I really didn't know how to start. The last thing I wanted was to sound fatuous. I'd read a few of the articles on his website and noted he was socially engaged – an understatement. He supported Bernie Sanders. I thought a little bit of political context might further my case. (But what case did I think I was furthering? What did I want?) In a few sentences, I outlined my childhood, the shared fantasy universe. I told him about my search for the *Il Vespaio* boys.

And then the questions: *“How did you come to be cast in the movie? Was it as fun as it (still) looks onscreen? Did all the boys get along? Did you all speak Italian? Do you still visit Italy?”*

What I wanted was stories. Tales of adventure and misfortune. I wrote that, then erased it quickly. It sounded so demanding.

“I haven’t seen all of your website yet. It is like a good book that I want to read slowly, the better to savor it. There is plenty to take in, and lots more left to the imagination. I hope you don’t mind... while it is the story of your life, it is out there in the public sphere.”

By the time I’d written these words, though – to young Paolo as much as to older Dan – I had a general idea of his story. He was no brown-skinned, superstitious, rosary-spouting village child with a love for the woods and for animals. He was an American teenager who’d turned 15 during the filming but was small for his age. Pale, sophisticated and irreverent. Growing up in Rome but originally from New York. And Jewish – how glamorous and unexpected and yet not all that exotic. I’d had many Jewish classmates in Ventnor, an Atlantic City suburb where I’d spent the fourth grade. A sizeable contingent among the American authors and film directors I liked were Jewish. Daniel’s father was the artist Charles Keller; his mother was Judith Herman, a nurse; both parents, members of the Communist party, had lived on a collective farm in New York state before having their passports revoked. As soon as they got their travel documents back, they packed the family up and headed to Italy where Daniel grew up, speaking English at international school and Italian among his friends. That accounted for the hybrid American-Italian accent onscreen – he’d been “doing” the Italian bit, not the other way around.

A week went by. He was not interested. I had nothing to offer. I was a nuisance, a sixth-grade nothing, a toad.

When I saw his name in my inbox I let out a scream.

“Dear Bing,

“Apologies for my slow reply.

“I am flabbergasted by your astounding message!

“I had never considered this movie to be more than good-not-great and the idea that it could have such a following as you describe amazes me.

“Since you ask, here are some memories....”

He'd come to be cast when the producers had visited his school, the American Overseas School in Rome, in search of English native speakers. He'd been the right age and had the right look. What a find he must have been, with the maturity of a 14-year-old and yet a still-high voice and relatively small stature. There'd been another American among the unnamed boys, and a British one, and another from Israel. The rest were from Italy. Several of these were from Naples, and although by then Dan could speak Italian, he could barely understand their dialect.

He wrote of the production, the huge budget and the special effects typical of its time. The dam blown up by Captain Turner's teenage demolition team was a scale model, just five or 10 meters long. Two models were built; the first one was so solid that it did not explode immediately, and by the time the water gushed through the ruined structure, the cameras had used up their film. The cave, which had figured so much in my fantasy universe, had never existed; it was a papier mache set built in the Cinecittà film studio in Rome. Part of a sequence that took place in some fields had to be refilmed some weeks later. But the evocative red poppies that bloom in late spring in the Po valley area had wilted, and thousands of paper flowers had to be wired by hand among the stalks of grain. The 15 boys, crouching amidst the poppies as their families were shot in the village below, wept tears from menthol blown into their eyes. When they finally got to fire at the Nazi soldiers from a moving army truck, the stocks of their guns had to be welded to the bed of the vehicle to keep them from jittering all over the place.

Despite the hardships and screw-ups, the slings and arrows of filming on location in the heat and humidity of an Italian summer, Rock Hudson, the star, and Phil Karlson, the director, were polite and even gentle, far from the temperamental dynamos my sister and I had imagined.

And his character name? It was Tekko. *He* was the mysterious Tekko. Paolo – Luigi Criscuolo – was a bigger boy, with curly hair and a stocky build, one of the dam-demolition swimmers. But in one scene Rock Hudson had clearly called Dan “Paolo”, and so that was who he became. Rock, said Dan, must have been reading from a different iteration of the script: “In those days the word processor was a typewriter.”

There was our correspondence. The sweetness and the overall decency of it. And there was his website, which was labyrinthine, a sprawling record of his life, his family, his

opinions, his travels and his career. The sharp, well-educated perspectives, the articulacy, the absence of profanity even as a last resort. I flipped through a few pages in amazement, reading his articles, looking at photo albums of his friends and his folks. He had an awful lot of friendships, and he had sustained many of these over decades. I wondered which of the women in the photos he had been married to, and which had been his girlfriends, and which had been just friends. By the looks of it, he was one of those extroverted types who got along with men and women, family and colleagues, in equal measure. He liked adventure sports; he played music; he'd lived on a decommissioned Navy vessel in the San Francisco harbor for a couple of years. Often, losing my way and trying to get back to a particular photo, I found myself in a new and eye-popping area of his online life history. A few times I shut my browser window in discomfiture. Tame he was not. He made Paolo and Stefano look like greenhouse plantlets, blooming and rootbound in their cells.

I studied the transformation of his face through the years. He looked nothing like the adult Paolo I had recently imagined. There were some black and white photographs from the last years in Rome, before Stanford and the beginning of his life in California. Here he still had a bit of his *Tekko-Il Vespaio* face, though the childlike innocence was gone. I pored over the text and behind-the-scenes photos on his *Il Vespaio* page, where he had uploaded some of our correspondence. It was not hard to see the relationship between his features then and today, the images from what seemed to be a wild, yet entirely normal, Roman early '70s adolescence forming the bridge. If I wanted to, I could read about his youthful adventures and speculate. But I wasn't ready for that. I wanted to know all about his *Il Vespaio* summer, the summer of '69.

Or maybe I wanted mine – the *Hornets' Nest* summer of 1980 – back.

Don't plague the man, I told myself. Never pressure him. Never demand. Wait. And whatever you do, please, please don't hurt him. You who have a history of destroying relationships with your words – the spoken, more commonly, but the written, most painfully. Don't let your ego, your impatience, your dark juvenile desires get the better of you. Approach him tenderly because it is you who wants something from him. Please don't screw this up, as you've screwed up so many friendships in the past, because before young Paolo, there was nobody – he was the first you wanted, and the one green, unexploded seed pod you carried with you out of the garden of those early years.

And then, as the school where I taught closed for the Christmas holidays and we slid inexorably into the darkest weeks of the year, I told myself: Write him now. Write out your beloved Paolo ... now, before, the encounter with Dan Keller erases him for good.

So I did. In my mature voice. Nothing that drew on newly acquired knowledge, but an attempt to give an adult explanation for some of the crazy things my sister and I created, the ridiculous situations she wrote and drew for my character Bing. There was one picture that had annoyed me for years. It was of Bing, sitting up flustered in bed in a frilly nightgown, while Paolo slept blissfully by her side, bare-chested and with the blanket down to the waist in a manner that, in the language of film and comics, signified nudity. By the bed, tears rolling down his cheeks, was a second boy – Charlie, the character who had already replaced Paolo in my affections, and who my sister despised. There, the picture seemed to say, let's see you wriggle out of that one, you little tart.

But wriggle Bing did, with the aid of her wiser, middle-aged creator. She and Paolo shared a bed because they couldn't sleep without the other; they were war orphans and had seen horrible things; darkness was not a comfort but a bringer of nightmares. In the beginning, there were other children, lumped together like a dog pile in a large ancestral bed, pretty much the way my cousins and I slept when we visited on weekends, though on a mat on the floor as there was no ancestral bed to speak of. Inevitably, the imaginary peers melted away until it was just Paolo and Bing, chaste in the comfort of each other's arms. Once I had that settled, I could move on to other mysteries. Why did the boys all have two names, their official monikers and the secret ones they used when they spoke Italian among themselves? Why did they talk in a medley of accents? How did Carlo and Silvio come back from the dead? What turned Giorgio into a vengeful horse monster, biting and killing everyone in his path?

The tale was narrated by a supporting character, recounting her memories of the orphans some forty years after she had known them, with the bittersweetness of hindsight. This choice kept me off the emotional rollercoaster of writing from the perspective of my alternate self, while speculating about her struggles with a critical eye.

"I suspect I must have resented Bing, too, deep inside, although we were good friends and roommates. I did not like her self-absorption, her burning obsessions with a handful of things and her utter disdain for everything and everyone else. But her lack of interest in other

people's affairs also meant she tolerated no gossip. Secrets could be expected to remain with her; she refused to take sides. One thing she enjoyed, though, was spying. She liked to find out what adults were up to, the mechanics of their private actions, their flustered reactions when they were caught. She wanted to know what made them tick, and once she'd figured it out, once she had made sense of it all in her childish worldview, the whole romance of spying was over. The thought that you could use someone's weaknesses to torment them and ultimately destroy them never once occurred to her. She was totally clueless."

These were the meagre kindnesses I permitted myself.

I was generous with my imaginary lover, however:

"Paolo was clueless, too, but not in any way annoying. He was a big-boned boy, and the baby fat that we'd found so adorable quickly evaporated as the weapons training progressed. He was growing taller and was disturbingly tactile. He had this need to touch objects and know them better. There was the pet dog he kept, flouting the rules. He could be rough with it, thumping it around, running about with the animal at his heels, but there were quiet, contemplative moments when they would sit together, the dog under his hands, him gently running his fingertips over its fur, the dog squeezing its eyes shut in pleasure.

"He was just so unavailable, though. He simply wasn't interested. He laughed a lot, and he had a tendency to sit close, warm thigh, warm arms brushing yours, but he never stole a look down your blouse, or leered, or told dirty jokes. He was completely innocent, and in that innocence, perversely appealing. The golden skin with a soft fuzzy layer of hair that was pale gold in the light. The almost-blond hair that curtained his face.

"Oh, that hair. He prided himself on never owning a comb. He took showers like most of the other orphans, embracing modern amenities, and would emerge with his fine hair half-drying and already falling into place. 'Paolo, c'mere,' one of the girls would say, and pull his light, unresisting body close. She'd run her fingers through his hair to smooth it and end up running an actual comb – the wide-toothed kind we always carried in our back pockets – through his hair until it was glossy and glittered when he walked, like a girl's."

I got up to 20,000 words before it was time to think about the next year's teaching load. I was on fire. I hadn't written this kind of fiction in decades. In my 20s and 30s my stories had been written for competitions, to earn grades, to show off my prowess to the literati of Manila. Moving to Europe had in no way made my life as an author easier; in fact,

the constraints had tightened, as I needed to prove to Immigration that I could sustain employment that was commensurate with the abilities of the natives. Since “gainful employment” was measured in terms of either hours or a minimum income, being an “author” would not do. How could one reckon the actual time poured into the manuscript of one’s *bildungsroman*? If one racked it all up, and divided it into my paltry royalties, my hourly rate was the cost of a single thumb-sized pastry made from sugar and stale bread. Hence, I’d had no choice but to stifle my voice: working as an English teacher and a graduate thesis editor, helping STEM students whose native language was Chinese or Russian or Farsi, trying not to think of the time I could have dedicated to my own work.

But now, bad or good, I was writing solely for my own pleasure and practice, without thought of publication, just as in the earliest days, amid the troupe of imaginary friends from way back. From time to time, I sent emails to Dan Keller, and in turn received his amiable replies. I didn’t show this new work to him, or to anyone. It was too personal. I did ask permission to draw him, using the photos on his website as reference. “Of course,” he wrote right back. “What a question!”

So I came to draw his face, several times, working in pencil, from the lightest of outlines to the darkest of shadows. Or I used pastel, working my way from the background to the highlights, so that bit by bit his features emerged as though from the murk of my memories. I had some experience by then, enough to enjoy the process. In one of these drawings, he sat with his musician hands crossed over his thin knees, doe eyes staring into mine, a knowing smirk on his lips. He looked like a modern young boy, the kind I might see on my travels, glimpsed on a train platform or sitting on the steps of some august building with his friends. These were the drawings I had been unable to do as a child, when I had no idea how to get a likeness and had to invent Paolo-who-was-really-Tekko from whatever I could remember. They were a do-over, a gift for my young self.

It occurred to me that he was one of those lucky people whose image, whose youthful essence if you like, had been particularly well-preserved. There was Tekko of *Hornet’s Nest*, of course, forever 14. Aside from that, his father had drawn and painted him many times over – looking pensive, playing the guitar, with his eyes closed in sleep.

This latter image, done in pen-and-ink in 1968 when he was 13, is my favorite of Daniel. It’s called *Ragazzo Dormente*, Sleeping Boy, and although he is not named as the

subject, it's clear from the rounded eyes with the crease at their outer ends, the long nose and the thin precise lips, that it's a portrait of him. His long hair falls partway over his face. The picture is drawn with such tenderness and expertise that he seems, somehow, to breathe. It's my little Paolo at last. If Paolo were real, that's how he would be.

I will always associate this new urge to write – to update my blog, to work on a new novel without promise of publication, to bare my heart – with the encounter with the grown-up Daniel Keller. From the time I packed away the secret universe of my childhood, I'd viewed creative writing as an emotionally-wrenching, high-risk and utterly tedious experience, like sawing myself open with a nail file. Yet a necessary evil, because it's one of only two things that I'm good at, drawing being the other.

For years I avoided both. So did my sister, fearing even more of the criticism and contempt that life had heaped on her.

I'd tended to view confessional writers, and anyone with the nerve to self-promote, as exhibitionists, and not of the pretty sort, either. But is it exhibitionism, or just the human urge to leave a trail, or a footprint, or even just a tiny pressure mark, as evidence that we have once been? When we're dead and gone, who will do us the favor of collecting our letters and memories and giving them a dignified analysis in a literary journal? We are not Jane Austen, nor Emily Dickinson, and in this digital age our paper trails are scant. If I died tomorrow, my laptop would probably be wiped by an eager young relative who would need it more. My boxes of drawings and notebooks are steadily being eaten by insects and moisture. Soon my external hard drives will be unreadable. In less time than it took me to get from the imaginary shelter of my childhood to the wiser woman I am today, I will be gone.

It's better to do the curation and the publication myself, while I am alive and while I still can, while people who know me and possibly care about me can appreciate them, and before crippling arthritis or dementia or the crushing weight of isolation get the better – no, the best – of me.

Several months before I'd discovered Dan's existence, an older Paolo had come without warning into my mind. Twenty-six or 27 years of age, carefree, sexually insouciant, riding a powerful motorcycle like so many of the lovely southern European men I'd seen on my travels. So devoted was he to my fantasy Bing that he was willing to debauch the girlfriend of a man who had scorned her. And of course, she found out and went ballistic – her indecision, her sly ability to segue between two loves, leaving her with neither. Slipping in and out of my thoughts as I tramped over fields in northern Germany, this little drama, or dream if you like, never got written. Neither did another, an alternate situation, where they ran away together and threw away their careers for a life as street artists.

As it had been when I was a child, I had called him up, for my own pleasure. Or maybe just to process whatever it was that seemed to threaten my world: the loss of companionship, the expulsion from shelter. Or maybe just to find a respite from the narratives I felt constrained to write – about the little au pair at the train station, the bus driver from Cebu in the Covid ward, the *aswang* skulking in the pines – stories of legend and social concern from that section over there devoted to the Third World.

Will he still exist in the darker regions of my mind 20 years from now, if I manage to live that long? I wonder what form he will take. Will I view him as a comfort, as always? Or as a curse, a symbol of missed opportunities – the shirking of reality?