

MAURO VALLI

FAMILY STORY, BETWEEN HARDSHIP AND DIGNITY

Drawn from a Life's Recollections



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This volume is based on the autobiographical writings composed by Mauro Valli between 2010 and 2014. The text was revised by Natascia Sgarbossa.

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1956, Mauro and his sister Carla returning from the fields (digital reworking)

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*There are stories worth telling,
and ours is one I would share
with the whole world.*

Mauro Valli

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Stories need to be told, and our father knew this well. He carried within him a world of memories pressing to emerge, to take shape and substance.

In the final years of his life, he devoted himself to writing with passion and patience, gathering his thoughts and recollections into a narrative that is intense, clear, at times poetic, yet always faithful to the truth he lived.

Those pages remained in our hands for a long time as a precious gift. Now that Dad is no longer with us, that manuscript has become something even deeper: a living trace of his voice, his values, and his ability to face every challenge with courage and humanity.

For this reason, together with Mum, we chose to publish it: so that his story may continue to speak.

To those who will read these pages, our invitation is to recognise his gentle tenacity and the spirit with which he offered himself to life each and every day.

Enzo, Marco and Christian Valli

Chapter 1

THE TIME OF THE FOG

The Roots of a Resilient Life

My name is Mauro Valli, and I was born in Carpi, in the province of Modena, on 25 May 1939, during the Fascist period.

My mother, Norma, worked in a hat factory, while my father, Egidio, was a farm labourer in the surrounding countryside.

Agricultural work was not steady, and so every year my father, together with many other labourers from Carpi, travelled to the Bassa Padana for the rice harvest.

This took place between the end of September and the end of October. At that time, the machinery we know today did not exist, and rice weeding required a great deal of time and manpower. The rice was first cut by hand with a sickle, then gathered into sheaves, and finally taken by cart to the cascina for the various stages of processing: threshing, drying, and then husking.

For these reasons, in 1939 my father left for a cascina called Cicerchia, in the municipality of Candia Lomellina, whose tenant farmers were very good people. And once the harvest season ended, my father asked the owners to take him on as a year-round labourer. They gladly agreed, as he was known to be an excellent worker. So, when I was just four months old, we left our home in the centre of Carpi and set off for the Bassa Padana.

The move was due not only to the severe economic crisis hanging over Italy at the time, but also to the fact that my father was an activist of the Italian Communist Party. Finding permanent work was no easy task for him.

That move brought an enormous change to all our lives. In Carpi, my parents lived in the town centre, Mum worked as a milliner, and my siblings attended nursery school. There were shops, the cinema, and that open, urban atmosphere that broadens one's outlook. When we arrived at the cascina Cicerchia, instead, we found nothing but thick fog, backward country folk, and many, many animals.

A curious episode occurred in the first months after our arrival. My parents had declared only two of their four children in order not to be turned away; many children meant too many mouths to feed. When we reached the cascina, on St Martin's Day, the first piece of furniture to be unloaded was the perforated trunk where my sister Maura and I were hidden.

For a few months no one noticed us, but one morning, while Mum was away, I began to cry so desperately that I attracted the attention of the steward's wife, who lived next door. Hearing the incessant wail of a baby, Signora Graziella came to knock at our door.

Meanwhile, my sister Mirella, who was only eight at the time, had the idea of hiding us inside a large basket near the stove where we kept the firewood, covering us with a towel before opening the door.

Mum had a fright when, returning from doing the washing at the river, she found Graziella sitting at the kitchen table with little Mauro in her arms. I was pulling her hair while she gently cuddled me. I cannot quite explain it, but a kind of understanding sprang up between the two women: one who had to hide the children of her own womb, and another who had never been able to have any.

From that day on, not a single morning passed without her coming to visit us, to the delight of us all.

We stayed five years at the cascina Cicerchia, during which Mum gave birth to two more children: Carla and Franco.

There were six of us: three boys and three girls. Let me introduce them in order of age: Mirella, born in 1931; Giorgio in 1934; Maura in 1937; me, Mauro, in 1939; Carla in 1941; and finally Franco in 1943.

WHEN THE WAR CAME TO OUR DOOR

The dearest memory of my childhood is tied to my cousin Voglio, who was almost twenty years older than I was. As I mentioned, we were in the midst of the war. It was 1944, and my cousin, like many boys his age, did not share the ideology of the Fascist Party and was therefore considered a traitor to the homeland.

One dreadful day he was captured by the anti-partisan unit of the X^a MAS (a special force of the Italian Social Republic operating alongside German units against the Italian Resistance) and imprisoned in the Mortara jail. My aunt, desperate, went to the prison several times, but she was never allowed to see her son. The whole family was in anguish, for we knew well the repressive methods used against partisans.

One evening, after gathering several prisoners, the Fascists took my cousin Voglio to the Mortara railway station, where a train bound for Germany was waiting for him.

During the journey, Voglio and the other companions, driven by a surge of courage mixed with fear, evaded the German guard on the wagon and jumped from the moving train, fleeing through fields and woods. They walked all night and, at dawn, parted ways. Each

took his own road.

After two nights of walking, Voglio reached the area near our cascina.

During the day he remained hidden in the woods.

It was only at dusk that, seeing my father returning from the fields, he found the courage to step forward and whisper: "Uncle, it's your nephew Voglio!"

I cannot describe my father's emotion as he embraced him; they both wept with joy. They made their way home with the utmost caution; spies could be anywhere, ready to report anyone who had escaped the raids.

Once at the cascina, my father inspected the courtyard, then all the rooms, and finally signalled to Voglio that it was safe to come in. As soon as he entered the house, Mum and we children ran towards him, showering him with hugs and smiles, almost competing to see who could hold him first.

Voglio was filthy, thirsty, hungry, and utterly exhausted. After he had eaten and rested, he began to tell us the story of how the Fascists had captured him, the ill-treatment he had suffered in prison, and the escape from the train that would have taken him to a concentration camp in Germany.

From that evening onward, my cousin lived with us, forbidden to leave the house, and we were forbidden to say a word to anyone, under penalty of his capture.

I was only five, but I remember many details clearly.

During the day, Voglio stayed inside, and I would repeatedly ask Mum, "Why doesn't Voglio ever go out into the courtyard?"

Mum, a very patient woman, would stroke my face and reply with her usual line: "Your cousin is ill and needs to stay indoors for his health." That explanation satisfied me for a while, and I would return to my games.

I remember well how skilful Voglio was at fixing anything.

When we had arrived from Carpi, my father had brought along an old broken record player. My cousin calmly worked on it and managed to repair it. In the evenings that followed, after the long days of farm work, we would sit together listening to old songs and dreaming of a better future.

But one evening, about ten days after my cousin's arrival, we heard the sound of a motor growing closer. Cars were rare back then, and we immediately sensed danger.

My father and Voglio quickly ran up the stairs to the upper floor, looking for a way out. They opened the bedroom window and threw themselves into the stream running alongside the house, crossed it at speed, and reached the woods where, some time before, my father and other companions had built an underground shelter for English soldiers who had escaped capture. Meanwhile the men of the X^a MAS burst into the various houses of the cascina, searching every corner. Mum managed to gather us in the kitchen and urged us not to speak of our cousin under any circumstances, repeating anxiously: "Your father's and your cousin's lives depend on it!"

After a few minutes they reached our door. I will never forget the violence with which they stormed into our home, insulting and threatening my mother, turning upside down the modest furniture that made up our house. Two men ran upstairs; we heard them shout, "They escaped through the window!"

Their commander ordered the woods to be searched, then began questioning my mother. She showed great courage, managing to remain calm and repeating the same story: her husband had gone to visit a cousin in Mortara and would not be home for several days.

The inspection of the cascina lasted several hours, but no one was found. At first light, my brother Giorgio went to the shelter. Our father and Voglio were safe. That same day, Dad helped our cousin

reach some partisan friends at a house outside Mortara, where he remained until the end of the war.

Another vivid memory of my childhood was the bombing raids, and my mother's arms always ready to grab me and pull me to safety. The roar of aeroplanes over the cascina and the bullets whistling past like swallows in flight. I did not understand it then, but we were constantly in danger.

TOWARDS THE CASCINA RINALDA

At the end of the war, in April 1945, our time at the cascina Cicerchia also came to an end. After five years there, and after the birth of the last two of my siblings, my parents decided to move to another cascina in the municipality of Breme Lomellina.

Our old tenant farmers, now elderly and without children, had decided to retire, and new sharecroppers had taken their place—people of rather questionable character.

And so we moved to the cascina Rinalda, and a new life began for us. My first impression was marvellous: Rinalda was a recently built farmhouse, its rooms freshly painted white, equipped with indoor sanitation and running water—an unexpected luxury for us.

It stood beside the hunting estate of the Tagliabue family. The manor house was surrounded by a large garden filled with plants and flowers: beautiful magnolias, camellias, rhododendrons, and various species of pine trees of all sizes. There was also a vast orchard with apple, pear, persimmon, cherry, peach, plum and fig trees.

In spring the garden was an explosion of colours, a natural painting that released the sweetest fragrances.

Signor Rinaldo Tagliabue was a true Milanese gentleman who worked in the petroleum sector. He visited Rinalda once a week; we could hear him arriving from afar in his luxurious car as it drove down the lime-tree avenue leading to the cascina. I admired him deeply. His innate elegance and the kindness in his manner made him a model of manhood to which I aspired all my life.

I remember that in spring and summer, every Sunday, he would bring an ice-cream maker from the village and offer ice cream in abundance to everyone, young and old alike.

During the hunting outings, we boys were tasked with retrieving the game and carrying the rucksacks filled with packed lunches. There were foods we could only dream of: smoked salmon, cured ham, all kinds of cheeses with mostarde whose flavours we had never known. All this was a marvellous and unexpected discovery for us, in addition to the thousand-lira tip given to us at the end of the day. In a single hunting season, we children could earn up to forty thousand lire, the equivalent of one and a half months of my father's wages. At that time a farm labourer earned no more than thirty thousand lire a month.

In 1946, when I was seven years old, my father began entrusting me with small chores to do after returning from school. There were eight of us in the family, and we were soon taught to contribute to the running of the house, the vegetable garden, and the animals.

Mirella and Maura helped Mum in the kitchen and with household chores, while Giorgio and I were responsible for cleaning the rabbit and piglet hutches and feeding the animals.

In summer, when grass was plentiful, we gave them fresh forage; in winter, when it was scarce, we prepared a mash made of chopped turnips mixed with bran.

Another task, carried out during the brief winter afternoons, was to

cut branches from the trees to make stakes for the vegetable garden, used in summer for growing tomatoes, aubergines and green beans. One day, after feeding my little animals, I saw my mother busy preparing luggage for an imminent departure. I asked her why she was in such a rush. She told me that the next morning she would leave early with my father and cousin Voglio for Reggio Emilia, to the bedside of Aunt Olga, who was gravely ill. That evening at dinner, our father instructed us to behave well during their absence and to obey our sister Mirella. They would return as soon as possible.

The following morning, Signor Tagliabue made a small carriage available to my parents to take them to the railway station in Candia Lomellina.

Seven days passed without any news, though we didn't think much of it. One afternoon I asked Mirella for permission to go and play marbles with my cousin Lauro and other children from the cascina. It was my lucky day, as I won almost every match. But suddenly my cousin, with the spontaneous bluntness typical of children, turned to me and said, "You may have won today, but your mother is dead..." A shiver ran down my spine. I fell silent and walked home in a daze. My sister Mirella noticed my gloomy expression and asked whether I had quarrelled with my friends.

I told her no and ran upstairs to my room.

When Giorgio and Maura came home later, I plucked up the courage to tell them what had happened. I burst into tears as I repeated what Lauro had said.

Mirella, as caring as ever, comforted me, convinced it was nothing more than a cruel joke. I still remember her words: "Oh, come on, Mauro! Lauro only said that because he was annoyed at losing. Just wait a few days—Mum and Dad will be back and we'll all be together again."

Her reassurance, together with Carla and Franco's laughter as they

chased each other around the table, brought me some comfort. That night, though, I struggled to fall asleep. I kept thinking of Mum, unable to stop myself from crying.

The following day my teacher scolded me several times during the lesson because I was very distracted. My cousin's words echoed in my mind endlessly.

THE FIRST TRAGEDY

As I have already mentioned, my parents and my cousin Voglio had left to visit my aunt Olga, who was dying from a brain tumour. She was leaving behind seven children, one of whom was only two years old, with a husband who was almost always unemployed.

My parents intended to raise the youngest child in our home; one more mouth to feed would not have been a problem. He would have grown up alongside Carla and Franco, who were four and two years old. It was an unspoken agreement between sisters in a moment of deep despair.

Unfortunately, that journey ended in tragedy: my mother died on 29 December 1946 at 5:40 in the morning at the railway station in Reggio Emilia. The war had only recently ended; trains were in a precarious state, and negligence was common. When they arrived at the station, the train doors opened onto the tracks instead of the platform. My father protested, saying it was unsafe to get off on the track side, but no one listened, and in the end they were forced to follow the others. Just then an express train was approaching. Panic broke out. My father was helping my mother with her suitcase when the air pressure from the passing train suddenly slammed the door shut, striking my mother on the head. She collapsed into my cousin's arms. Everyone thought she had fainted, but moments later they saw a stream of blood running down her temple. Emergency

services were called immediately, but nothing could be done.

Years later, my cousin Voglio told me about my father's anguished cry and how he tried to throw himself under a moving train, pulled back at the last moment by a Capuchin friar.

At the hospital in Reggio Emilia, an autopsy revealed that Mum had died from a clear haemorrhagic lesion to the temple.

Five days passed before the funeral could be held. In the meantime, my father and Voglio went to see my aunt, who was on her deathbed. Olga asked why her sister Norma had not come; she needed to talk to her, to feel her close, now more than ever. And then there was the question of the youngest child. No one had the courage to tell her the truth. Her husband tried to comfort her. They told her that Norma had had to stay in Breme to care for Franco, who was seriously ill with bronchopneumonia.

Fate decreed that my aunt died on the very day my mother's funeral was held.

THE SECOND TRAGEDY

The second tragedy was returning home without Mum. My father did not know how to tell us. After the terrible accident, one of my mother's unmarried sisters, Aunt Bruna, decided to move in with us for a while to help us cope with the loss and support my father in running the household. It was a foggy, bitterly cold evening when we heard the carriage arriving at the cascina. My siblings and I were gathered near the fire, listening to the stories of my uncle Celso, Voglio's father and my favourite uncle. He was kind and patient, always had a gentle word for everyone, and told gripping stories that held us spellbound.

When they entered the house without Mum, I shivered.

All I remember is a great commotion, people coming and going to

offer condolences to my father, and my older siblings crying. No one paid any attention to me.

At one point my father came over, took a black-and-white photograph of Mum from his pocket and said: “Mauro, from now on you will see Mum only in this photo. She has gone to heaven. But she can see you from up there and is watching over you and your brothers and sisters.”

It was the saddest night of my life. Nothing can console a child after the sudden loss of his mother. We fell asleep only towards dawn, exhausted from crying, our hearts torn, unable to accept her absence in a home where everything spoke of her. The only one who could not fall asleep was my sister Mirella. Aunt Bruna later told us she lay motionless on her bed, her eyes fixed on the ceiling. Only when my father put on his cloak, saying he was going to fetch the doctor, did she burst into tears – a long, liberating cry that finally broke her stillness.

The next morning none of us went to school. Aunt Bruna made us a warm breakfast of rice and milk, doing her best to comfort us with the sweetest words.

From that day on, my father became even stricter in his upbringing, fearing that the absence of Mum might in some way harm our development. We didn’t understand it then, and at times we suffered because of it. He was harsh, uncompromising.

Today I understand that, on top of grieving for his wife, he suddenly found himself raising six children alone in very difficult circumstances. He had been advised to send the youngest to an orphanage, but he chose to keep us all together under one roof. It was a brave and difficult decision. During the day my father was at work and no one supervised us; the only presence was our sister Mirella, who had just turned fourteen. I can still picture her losing herself in household chores; she wasn’t made for that – she was

studious, loved reading and writing, and held a deep admiration for Cesare Pavese. She soon had to give up her inclinations for domestic duties.

Besides the housework, laundry and cooking, she had to look after the two youngest children, who desperately longed for their mother. Carla followed her everywhere and Franco bombarded her with questions about everything.

We had always been poor, but happy. Life together had been beautiful before Mum passed away.

A month after her death, I still could not recover. I no longer played with my friends; I kept to myself and spent my afternoons sitting on the steps by the kitchen door. This is what Mirella told me years later.

At that point my father made a decision: I would go and stay for a while with Aunt Bruna, Mum's unmarried sister, who had come to live with us after the tragedy. She lived in Carpi, where she worked independently as a seamstress.

I will remember that train journey for the rest of my life: I did not take my eyes off the window for a moment, watching the landscape pass by and admiring new places and towns I had never seen before. We arrived in the late afternoon. Carpi was very different from the rural world I had known until then; there were many people, all well dressed. The ladies wore elegant wide-brimmed hats, and there were quite a few cars on the roads. Another thing that struck me were the shop windows: they were beautifully arranged, full of refined things I had never seen before. Despite being in the immediate post-war period, there was an atmosphere of progress and rebirth. People were eager to rebuild.

Aunt Bruna lived on the third floor of an old building right in the town centre. We knocked on the door, she opened it with a

welcoming smile and invited us in.

At dinner I met her nephew and niece: Carlo and Ametella. They were eighteen and nineteen years old and both worked at the Carpi cigarette factory. They asked me about school and whether I would like to visit the cathedral the next day. I was indiscreet, as only children can be without realising it, and I asked them why they lived with our aunt. "Don't you have parents?"

My father was about to scold me when Ametella spoke gently: "We are orphans, Mauro. Our mother died when we were little, and we never knew our father."

It was a small consolation to know that I was not the only sad one in the world.

That evening, as I lay in bed, I felt a sense of relief when my aunt came to tuck me in, the sheets fresh from the wash. For a moment I felt like a son again: loved, cherished, protected.

The next morning at breakfast we were greeted by a delicious apple cake and warm milk. I was glad to see Dad a little more relaxed; that brief separation had done him good as well.

Later we walked him to the station, where he reminded me to behave and work hard at school. I remember spending a lovely morning with my aunt, going shopping and then registering at school.

I remember my school building well, a large structure with tall windows and many classrooms. There were none of the mixed-age classes of the Bassa Padana, but several sections for each year. I was captivated by the order and austerity of that big grey building, which soon became very familiar to me.

What excitement on the first day, when the teacher introduced me to the class. My desk mate was named Pietro, and we became friends immediately.

I enjoyed having lunch in the refectory and then running outside to

play marbles or hide-and-seek in the courtyard until the bell rang. At first my aunt waited for me outside school, but after some time I began walking there on my own, like most children then. To get home I had only two streets to cross, and part of the route I walked with a boy who lived nearby. I was very happy with my new life because, in addition to my aunt's affection, I also received the attention of Carlo and Ametella, who took me around Carpi and every Sunday to Reggio Emilia to visit another of Mum's sisters. She prepared delicious dishes for me: pumpkin ravioli, il gnocco fritto (as it is called there), tagliatelle with ragù, sweet fried pastries with chestnut filling, and savòr, a traditional grape-must jam from Emilia.

Every time I went out with my cousins, I discovered new things. I had begun wandering under the porticoes after school. One afternoon I crossed the street absent-mindedly and was struck by a passing car, fortunately going slowly. I scraped my hands and knee but did not tell my aunt for fear of being scolded and perhaps sent back home. When she noticed the bruises, I told her I had fallen while playing but, as the saying goes, lies have short legs. In fact, it happened that the lady driving the car was one of my aunt's clients, and I found her in the living room one afternoon after school. My aunt forgave me, but warned me never to lie to her again.

My life continued peacefully, but in the evenings melancholy crept in. I thought of Mum, whom I would never see again, and I could not find any peace. I thought of my siblings, whom I missed terribly. One late-May afternoon my aunt told me that my sister Mirella had suffered a terrible domestic accident: she had burned herself with a pot of boiling water that had slipped from her hands, and she was now in critical condition. Beyond the intense physical pain, she was confined to a wheelchair for at least a couple of months.

I felt guilty for not being there with her. My aunt and I wanted to go to Breme to help, but my father was adamant: I would not lose the school year.

My homesickness grew stronger, especially in the evenings when I went to bed. I didn't speak of it to my aunt for fear of hurting her feelings, but I confided in Carlo.

One Sunday afternoon, returning from a walk in the park with my cousins, I was astonished to find my father in the living room.

It was pure joy; we embraced tightly and shared with each other all the news of the past months.

I would be going back home to my brothers and sisters. I couldn't wait.

Although my time in Carpi became one of the sweetest memories of my childhood, my place was at Rinalda with my five brothers and sisters.

During our first dinner at home after my long absence, Mirella said: "Now we are truly a family, every seat at the table is filled, there are no more empty chairs. Let's hope we always stay united."

Mirella was strong and gradually recovered, continuing to manage the household and succeeding at secondary school. She was unstoppable, and whatever got in her way only made her stronger. She chose to study political science by correspondence, being, like Dad, passionate about politics and a member of the Italian Communist Party.

For all of us, life went on at its usual pace.

My brother Giorgio had already been working for a couple of years as a helper at the cascina's dairy, and soon I followed him, working during the day and attending evening school after dinner.

At the dairy where I worked, my tasks were to clean the cattle sheds and take the pigs to the outdoor pens. Then I had to disinfect the

workshop where butter and gorgonzola were produced, first the machinery and finally the floor.

We finished work at around 4:30 in the afternoon, but once I got home, my day was far from over. In winter I took care of our animals; in summer there was work to be done in the vegetable garden.

Dinner was ready at around eight, always the same menu: rice and beans, or vegetable soup, followed by a little egg or cheese.

School began at nine. I still remember the name of my teacher: Giovanna. She came from the province of Milan and stayed with us for the entire season. She ate with us and shared a bedroom with Mirella. They got along very well and remained friends for life.

Despite the tiredness that weighed on me after a long day of work, I would never, ever have given up on my education. At the evening classes we were about twenty people, men, women and children. Most were men in their forties. Mandatory schooling, which we now take for granted, was then a privilege for the few. Many times I asked myself what my life might have been like had I been able to continue studying.

On the day of my final exam I could not sleep from the anxiety. It was a hot Saturday morning in June and, after waking up early to revise all the subjects, we set off for Candia, where the teachers were waiting for us.

It was 1949, and obtaining an elementary school certificate was already an achievement. My school career ended that June morning because, at only eleven years old, I began working for a baker in Breme Lomellina. It was hard work, but better paid than what I earned at the dairy. Waking up at two in the morning was my daily test of strength: I was so sleepy my eyes would close, but then I gathered my courage, got dressed and headed down to the bakery where the day's work began.

The first task was to clean the oven of ashes with a damp cloth, then we would start preparing the bread dough.

Once the kneading was finished, we shaped the little loaves, which were put into the oven at around six. We worked until eight in the morning and, when all the bread was ready, I would begin my delivery round by bicycle. Loaded with bags in the two baskets I had at the front and back of my bicycle, I rode into the village and then to the surrounding cascine, including Rinalda.

During my morning rounds I sometimes managed to meet one of my siblings. The one I saw most often was my sister Mirella, still confined at home because of her bandages.

Once the deliveries were done, I went back to the baker's house (prestinaio, the dialect term for baker), where we had lunch at one o'clock. Afterwards I would rest in my room until late afternoon.

The man and his wife were simple, kind-hearted people. They lived in the house above the workshop with their only son. They cared for me, and I felt comfortable with them, yet even there I felt a deep longing for home.

The baker's house was silent, empty. A house of adults who seemed old to me. I missed the liveliness of my brothers and sisters, their noisy shouting, and the stories told by popà (Emilian dialect for "dad"). I missed Mirella, animatedly discussing politics, and the friends who came dancing on Saturday evenings. Now and then I went back home, but I felt like an exile, far from everything and everyone.

After spending three years at Pietro and Nella's house baking loaves of bread, it became clear that my destiny was not to be a baker.

After seven years at the cascina Rinalda, my father once again lost his job as a farm labourer, once more for political reasons. And so, on 11 November 1953, once again on St Martin's Day, we moved to yet another cascina in the surrounding area, known as the cascinetta

of Cozzo.

Here my father was hired as capo cavallante, meaning head of the stables. My brother Giorgio would work alongside him, while I was entrusted with the care of the calves.

I did not like this new place at all: the cascina looked like a large grey prison, there were no schools and not even a church. It was overcrowded, and the houses were damp and dilapidated. The toilets were in the courtyard, shared with the other families, as was the running water.

It was a step backwards for all of us, but we had no alternative. The main problem was the water, which we had to draw from the well, and this required great effort. My job as manzulè – in Pavia dialect, the boy who looks after the calves – began at four in the morning and ended around eight. First, we distributed the hay to feed the animals, then cleaned the stables of manure and spread fresh straw on the ground. Finally came the cleaning of the calves, which I carried out using a brush and scraper. Then we went home for breakfast: dry bread and warm milk.

Afterwards Mario, my friend, and I would rest for an hour in the warmth of the stable. We dreamed of being somewhere else, of redeeming ourselves from that fate of hardship and poverty. Our friendship made the work less heavy and reminded us that we were still boys, carrying all the dreams and expectations that came with that age.

After our moment of rest, we had to collect the eggs from the henhouses, home to hens, guinea fowls, ducks and beautiful geese. Finally, in the evening, it was time again to change the straw in the stables so that the calves could sleep in a clean place.

For those of us who took care of the livestock there was never any rest, because animals had to be fed every day.

In the evenings at dinner Dad demanded the utmost politeness; we were not allowed to fuss or leave the table until everyone had

finished their meal. He wanted us orderly and composed; his good manners would serve as an example to us for the rest of our lives.

After the meal, however, we talked about our day; each of us had some amusing anecdote to share, and Dad listened to us. Today I realise how important it was to grow up in an open household, even if extremely poor.

Dad was a generous man and often on Saturday evenings, after the ritual of the bath, he would invite the children of the other families to our table, where he and Mirella made a puff pastry dessert filled with chestnuts. He would usually call one child at a time so they could serve themselves by cutting a slice with their eyes closed. Mirella guided their hand and we all burst into laughter. Then we listened to music on the old record player and danced all evening.

We did not live in comfort; with six children to feed, there was always the need to earn a little extra. And so, in the evening, Dad sat hunched over a chair by the stove weaving broomcorn twigs to make brooms. It was his second job, which allowed us to live with dignity.

Even today I find myself thinking about how often his eyes would close from exhaustion while his hands kept working without pause, and I am moved to tears. You become more sensitive with age, you know. Many poor children from the cascine, before, during and after the war, were sent to live with the nuns or with more fortunate families. Some were even adopted. As I have already told you, Dad was always against this and, despite his strictness, I am grateful for everything he did for us, even for the harshness with which he strengthened us. Nowadays I see parents doing the exact opposite, shielding their children from every sacrifice. A serious mistake.

Pain, misfortune, the effort required by study and work ennoble a person and make them better. It is in hardship that one understands the depth and value of life.

Giorgio and I also began helping him make broomcorn brooms and, to his great surprise, I even managed to find a method to speed up the process. In no time at all, we tripled the daily output.

Our brooms were in high demand in the neighbourhood.

On Sundays, Giorgio and our cousin Rino went door to door to sell them. I want to tell you a funny anecdote to show you what kind of man my father was. Sometimes a few brooms had defects, and Dad decreed that those should be sold at half price.

However, the two rascals turned a deaf ear, selling them at full price and pocketing the difference. When Dad found out, he was furious: our reputation was at stake. He forced them to return the money, house by house, apologising to each person.

Our family carried on. Although the absence of Mum was a constant shadow over our lives, we learned to manage on our own. A powerful bond grew between us, one that still endures today despite time and the different paths life has taken us on. We would never have survived without that strength, the ability to give and receive, to learn from those who were older and to teach the younger ones.

Mirella was our emotional guide. Blessed with sharp intelligence and a generous heart, she knew how to give advice and helped us with the most varied tasks. Giorgio was a real joker: he could charm girls with his lively chatter and always had a quick comeback ready. A born actor, capable of making anyone smile. Maura was more independent — also very intelligent and a hard worker — but often in conflict with the rest of the family. She had suffered the loss of our mother in silence and expressed her unhappiness with long sulks. Carla was beautiful and determined; she adored Mirella, whom she saw as a second mother. Franco, the youngest, was the best at school; all he had to do was listen once to remember the lesson, and he bombarded Mirella with questions about every possible how

and why. Sometimes my sister, exasperated, would say, “Enough, Franco! Let me finish my work in peace!” But he never gave up — his thirst for knowledge had no limits.

Dad lived a life full of sacrifice, even emotionally. After Mum’s death he had never rebuilt his life, but one day he announced that the following evening we would have a special guest for dinner, a lady named Gemma. He urged us to behave well and be polite. You can imagine our faces when we heard those words, especially us older ones. Mirella quickly tidied up the kitchen and gathered us all in the bedroom to devise a plan of action: “Do you know what this invitation means, boys?”

“What?” the younger ones replied innocently.

“It means that Dad has decided to take a wife! And this is a danger for all of us. We must be polite to obey Dad, but united in fighting her secretly! A stepmother can split us apart and send us to the nuns, just like what happened to the Berardi sisters!” she declared decisively. That night I went to bed with a knot in my throat. I had not expected this whole stepmother business.

In the end Gemma never became a problem, because once she realised what awaited her, a house with six mouths to feed and a great deal of hardship, she bolted before we could put into action the plans Mirella had devised. Poor Dad would remain alone.

Chapter 2

THE SEASON OF STRENGTH

The Courage to Grow

In 1954, when I was just fifteen, we moved to the Risi cascina, located in the same municipality, Breme Lomellina. The accommodation consisted of two large rooms, but fortunately the bedrooms were not damp and we had running water and indoor sanitation.

Here we youngsters were hired as annual labourers, paid throughout the year even if we lost workdays because of rain or other mishaps. It was in this cascina that I began working with the horses. My task was to transport cartloads of manure to the open fields to fertilise the soil and to bring back to the cascina the wood cut along the banks of the streams.

It was extremely hard work and, in addition to the physical effort, we also had to contend with the fog: a layer so thick that you could easily crash into something if you didn't pay attention. The wood was always wet, wrapped in a layer of frost that made our hands freeze.

I can hardly describe the cold we endured.

At midday there was a half-hour break. We usually ate our tin of pasta and beans and chatted among ourselves, mostly about girls. Our romantic adventures almost always coincided with the arrival of the mondine. From late April to early May the girls from the province arrived for the rice harvest, and for us it was a great

celebration. During the week they worked in the rice fields, but on Sundays they had a day off and we would meet up. Loves were born that lasted only the length of a season.

This was my childhood among rice fields, cows, horses and oxen. Then in 1956 everything changed. We moved from the Bassa Padana to Piedmont, to a small village on the shores of Lake Maggiore called Oleggio Castello. One of my father's sisters, Aunt Emilia, lived there with her husband Angelo and their three children.

In December of that year we all moved into our new home, beginning a new chapter of our lives. At that time the Novara area was full of industries; commercial and manufacturing activities were flourishing everywhere in a crescendo that would later be remembered as the economic boom.

In less than a week each of us found a job, except for Giorgio, who had been called up for military service, and Franco, who was still attending lower secondary school.

In Oleggio Castello I was hired by a blacksmith a few metres from our house. His name was Angioletto and he was a good man, but I did not like the work. I spent the whole day straightening iron rods for household use, using a hammer so heavy that by evening my right shoulder was numb from the effort. Every day was the same, breathing in the toxic fumes of the welding machine, for a wage far lower than what I earned in the countryside.

After a month of this penance, during which I tried to convince myself that I owed it to Uncle Angelo out of gratitude, I changed jobs and went to work in a turning shop. Another monotonous job. I spent the whole day milling bolts, feeling like a complete idiot.

After six months I decided to look for something else. My father was furious, thinking I did not want to make an effort. He did not understand that I felt unexpressed in that role. I needed to fulfil myself and grow on a human level as well.

Sometimes it is very difficult to talk to a parent who has sacrificed everything for his children. I did not want to live his life of hardship; I felt I was meant for something different, or at least I wanted to try. My life was not meant to end within the four walls of a turning shop.

After some time I heard that an entrepreneur from Somma Lombardo was looking for workers for his spring factory. I went there one September morning in 1958. It would be the beginning of a great adventure.

That morning I took the train for the second time in my life. The first, as you may remember, was when I went to Carpi to stay with my aunt Bruna after my mother's death. I woke at dawn and cycled to Arona station. I felt the cool air on my skin and an indescribable lightness mixed with joy for this new experience. On my back I carried a rucksack with my work clothes and packed lunch. I arrived at the station well in advance for the 6:20 train to Milan Centrale. The ticket clerk pointed it out to me, and I replied that I preferred to be early. He smiled at my naïveté; later we would joke about it more than once.

Once in Somma, I walked towards the Lamperti company. That morning I met my employer, a tall, thin man, serious and straightforward in his manner. He introduced me to his son Paolo, who also worked in the company, and to the other labourers. I liked the work immediately, even if it was repetitive, done in series. I felt satisfied, and that is fundamental when you get up in the morning to go to work. Summer had just ended and the days were still long enough that at midday we ate lunch outdoors with our colleagues in the factory courtyard.

My working day ended at five o'clock. At that hour I went back to Sesto Calende station, where the train to Arona awaited me. From

there I continued by bicycle towards Oleggio Castello, stopping at the Casa del Popolo, the village bar run by my father, where we siblings all helped out. Dad would lift the shutters at seven in the morning and, until I returned in the late afternoon, he barely had a moment's rest. The regulars were mostly men; they spoke in dialect, came to play cards and drink bianchini. My father struggled to understand how they could spend entire days in such total idleness. Didn't they have anything better to do?

You know, it was the late 1950s and Italy was not exactly a shining example of emancipation. At times Dad steered the conversation towards politics. With age he had learned to soften his tone, but deep down he remained a proud man.

I really enjoyed working for the Lamperti company, and the business was growing month after month, acquiring new orders, investing in new machinery and hiring more and more staff. I was learning to handle every situation, and I felt great satisfaction in solving both small and large mechanical problems. Sometimes I would even start earlier than required and return home on the nine-o'clock train. But, as I told you, mechanics fascinated me, and as a result time flew.

My first year of work there passed without any problems. I soon became able to repair equipment and set up the machines for my colleagues. My employer was impressed by my initiative and willingness to work; our relationship was excellent, until the first general strikes began.

In 1960, at the height of the economic boom, workers began to mobilise to assert trade-union rights in factories and to renew the metalworkers' contracts. It was an epoch-making change: masses of workers were moving from the south to the north of the country, migratory waves from rural areas to nearby cities were fostering the development of a new mentality born of emancipation and the fusion of languages and cultures. And then there was television,

which, entering people's homes, promoted the cultural development of a nation that until then had grown divided into a tangle of dialects and customs differing from region to region.

For the first time in history, in Milan, students marched alongside the workers' demonstrations. On the morning the general strike was called, I joined without a second thought. My father had taught us to work hard, but he had also always urged us to stand up for our rights as workers.

When I arrived at the workshop the following day, my employer was waiting for me at the entrance. He greeted me and continued: "Yesterday were you absent because you were ill, or because of the strike?"

I did not hesitate to reply that I had taken part in the strike.

"Just as I imagined!" he exclaimed irritably. "Now come with me."

He took me to the office, where he already had my work booklet and an envelope containing my pay for the previous days ready.

"You're free to strike as much as you like, but not here in my factory," he declared loudly. I objected that striking was one of my rights, but he gave me no time to respond; the decision had already been made, and so he dismissed me on the spot. There was nothing for me to do but leave. I quickly said goodbye to my colleagues and trudged back home.

When my father saw me enter the Casa del Popolo at that hour, and with such a gloomy expression, he asked what had happened. I told him everything, and this time he did not scold me; on the contrary, he defended my position.

After lunch I immediately set out to look for another job. I found work with a certain Mr Zola, who ran a mechanical workshop and worked alone. He was an original character — just think that he powered his equipment using the hydroelectric energy generated by the little river running alongside his house for developing his inventions.

The following day, however, while I was serving customers at the bar, I saw Paolo, Mr Lamperti's son, walk in. He had come to ask me to return; he told me that his father had a difficult temper, but he recognised my abilities and did not want to lose me. I was pleased to hear it and accepted without hesitation.

When I walked into the factory the next morning, my colleagues looked at me in astonishment, because nothing like that had ever happened before.

The task assigned to me that day was quite a headache: I had to set up a piece of equipment to produce elongated eyelets to be shipped to a customer in Germany. From the chaos surrounding the machine it was clear that someone had attempted, unsuccessfully, to fix it. Several tools had been damaged and the entire device had been assembled incorrectly.

First of all, I adjusted the structure, setting it up properly, and then, with great patience, I began restoring the tools.

Knowing the job was urgent, I worked late into the evening and even missed the last train home. Despite the long hours, I did not feel tired; I was happy I had managed to get it working.

The next morning Mr Lamperti congratulated me on the excellent work and told me that, as far as the strike episode was concerned, we could put it behind us. I went back to working with immense passion; every month there were changes in production, which allowed me to learn and continually challenge myself.

During that period I was also fortunate enough to be exempted from military service due to an epigastric hernia, gaining eighteen full months of work experience.

After about six months from my first dismissal from the company, I was fired again, this time for having protected a co-worker. It happened on my twenty-first birthday, 25 May 1960. The sky

was overcast and we decided to eat our packed lunches inside the factory. After the meal, a young colleague of mine, an awkward fifteen-year-old lad, accidentally knocked over a very delicate tool, which fell to the ground and broke. I picked it up and placed it on the table, reassuring him that I would not tell anyone. If he had been a sharp type, perhaps I would have kept quiet. But he was a poor boy, fragile, often mocked by the others for his clumsy yet gentle manner.

I felt sorry to see him crying over what had happened; it would have been a real shame for him to lose his job. When Mr Lamperti discovered the damage, he called me to his office to find out who was responsible.

I denied knowing anything and he flew into a rage. I was dismissed on the spot.

Once again, a couple of days later, someone came looking for me at the Casa del Popolo. It was Mr Lamperti himself.

I could hardly believe my eyes.

He turned to my father and said, “Mr Valli, I really cannot understand your son’s behaviour,” then continued: “He wants to take responsibility for everything and shoulder the blame!”

The next morning my colleagues were once again astonished to see me back at the factory, this time with a small pay rise. After this second episode, however, clashes with my employer became more and more frequent, even for the most trivial reasons — for example, how to set up the job or increase productivity. I had reached the point of taking initiatives at my own expense, not to mention the overtime hours I worked.

I would like, in this regard, to tell you about my first patent.

The company I worked for produced torsion springs for electrical switches, which were wound using equipment designed by my employer. With those machines it was possible to produce different

types of torsion springs simply by changing the spindle and the cam that set the spring's pitch. In my opinion, however, they were not suitable for winding a small spring of that kind, and I told him so, but he did not listen.

Time passed and I tried again. I made him a proposal: if he allowed me to stay after working hours, Saturdays and Sundays included, I would study a new method to increase hourly production. Mr Lamperti finally agreed, reminding me to pay very close attention to the tight tolerances required for both pitch and opening angle. I replied that I knew how complicated it would be, but I wanted to try. After he gave his approval, I asked my sister Maura whether she could take my place at the Casa del Popolo to give Dad a break. Thanks to her, I was able to devote entire days and weekends to my ingenious project. I bought a small grinder and made all the modifications needed for my experiments.

The trick lay in the ratio of rotations obtained by turning the crank. With the old system you had to turn it five times and then, with the same hand, cut the spring wire. With my process, instead, moving the crank once produced five rotations of the spindle, while to cut the wire I used my left foot on a pedal. A tension spring allowed the cutter's handle to return to place, so the fingers used to turn the lever never had to move — a significant saving of effort.

It took me three months to perfect the spring pitch mechanism, but I succeeded. When I began producing the first five hundred pieces, I could hardly believe my eyes. The tiny springs were perfect and productivity had soared: from the three hundred and fifty pieces of the old method, I had reached one thousand five hundred per hour. Moreover, during periodic checks I found no defects.

Before announcing the good news, I produced more than fifty thousand springs to make sure everything was working properly. Finally, one Friday afternoon after working hours, I asked Mr Lamperti to let me show him my patent.

I went to the changing room and took the equipment from my locked locker. All the lads gathered around to see the new production system. Once everything was set up, I began to produce the springs. Lamperti watched in astonishment, as did my colleagues. I explained that with my method production would increase fivefold. Then I fetched five bags containing the fifty thousand tested springs, ready to be shipped. I asked my employer to check their quality, just to be safe. He looked at me, amazed, and said, "Congratulations, Mauro. I have no words for the extraordinary work you've managed to do. Well done!"

My colleagues joined in his enthusiasm, offering words that filled my heart. I felt an immense satisfaction, the kind that makes you feel light as air. In my pay packet I found a reward of sixty thousand lire, the equivalent of two months' wages. There was also a special gesture: the employer offered lunch to all the employees in my honour. It was one of the happiest days of my life up to that point.

A few months later, believe it or not, I was dismissed for the third time.

The reason? I was accused of entering the factory with a copy of *l'Unità* under my arm. It seemed so absurd to me that I replied at once; I could not keep quiet in the face of such an affront. As you can imagine, I was hired back for the third time. Mrs Lamperti confided that her husband was very fond of me and would have loved to have a son like me, passionate about both work and life, whereas his own children "were good lads but, having grown up in comfort, less inclined to produce."

I replied that I, too, was very fond of him and grateful for everything I had learned from the moment I first arrived at the spring factory.

When the August holidays were over we returned to work and, to our great surprise, found two automatic machines used for the mass

production of compression springs, machines we had never seen before. A specialised operator had been hired and, although I did not know it yet, he would become a lifelong friend. His name was Roberto Comuzzi, whom I nicknamed Camuzzo. Our friendship and collaboration lasted until the day he died.

After two years, work at the Lamperti spring factory was increasing visibly. These were the years of the economic boom and there was work for everyone. At that time my employer, to avoid hiring too many people, began turning to external suppliers, at least for the simpler productions. In the 1960s there were no tax controls like today and most home-based work was not invoiced; it was undeclared work.

So I too began to consider the idea of setting up on my own. After all, what did I have to lose? If things went badly I could always return to being a factory worker, but I could not give up such an opportunity. You know, it is something you feel inside.

So one morning I gathered my courage and spoke to my employer. I asked whether I could become one of his suppliers, working independently from home. In that way I would avoid the commute which, including the bicycle, took me a full four hours. Mr Lamperti did not give me an immediate answer and walked away. He only came to see me at the end of the shift, saying, "All right Mauro, I have thought about it and I agree with your initiative, but on one condition: for any internal need you must be available to the company, with payment for your working time and reimbursement of travel expenses."

Of course I accepted and was even flattered. I went home excited, eager to tell Dad and my brothers. My father, however, did not welcome my decision with enthusiasm. He was worried about the uncertainty that such an undertaking would involve. It hurt me deeply not to have his approval, but I decided to follow my own path.

LESSON NUMBER ONE

On 17 January 1962 my dreams came true: I registered as a mechanical workshop with the artisans' association. I was only twenty-three years old. Starting out with not a single lira in my pocket was not easy. My entire capital amounted to seven thousand five hundred lire. Fortunately, Mr Lamperti supplied me with the equipment I needed to carry out the work.

Prices were very low and I earned a decent living, as long as I did not count the long hours I worked. With my small capital I went to the hardware shop in Arona to buy at least the basics: spanners, a hammer, pliers and wire cutters. The total came to fourteen thousand two hundred lire, but Mr Gattoni, the owner of the shop, allowed me to pay in instalments because he knew my father.

My first workshop was little more than a makeshift shelter, a space under a balcony closed off by a tarpaulin to protect me from rain and wind. I stayed there for a few months while waiting for my sister Maura and her husband to free up a corner of their storeroom. Then, shortly afterwards, a great opportunity arrived. A friend of my father offered to rent me a large room in his big house for five thousand lire a month. It was an unexpected stroke of luck that made me feel I was finally on the right path, just as my heart too was finding its own direction.

Two years earlier I had met the love of my life. It was Christmas Eve 1960. After Mass I found myself with friends in the parish courtyard to exchange greetings. There was joking and laughter, and I was considered the joker of the group, always quick with a comment and ready with a smile. Among us there was also Sandra. I had seen her only a few times; she lived outside the village and her strict mother kept an eye on her on every possible occasion. That evening, however, her friend Carla confided that Sandra would have

to go home alone and was worried about her. I did not think twice and offered to accompany her. I told her it would be a pleasure for me.

That girl intrigued me. She had a sweetness mixed with shyness that made her special. I do not know why, but I felt affection for her from the very beginning. I could list her many qualities, the ones I discovered later, but back then I hardly knew her, yet I sensed I could trust her. Love is something you feel without being able to explain why.

On the way to her house she told me about her family, her elderly and overprotective parents. I found myself telling her about my mother, about the conflict I had with my father, and without even realising it I opened up completely to her. When I returned home I felt a deep sense of fullness.

We met again several times, in the village, dancing at friends' houses and also at my own home. Compared with the other girls, she was full of innocence. What I liked most about her was her ability to keep the right distance.

With time I began to appreciate her and love her. Every day I went without seeing her, I realised I missed her more and more.

On the feast of my name day, Saint Mauro, I wrote her a little note by post inviting her to the cinema the following Sunday. I told her to meet me at the bus stop for Arona at two in the afternoon. That Sunday I got ready with great care and, when the time came, I kept pacing back and forth, waiting to see her appear. My heart was pounding and I was filled with anxiety, that mixture of happiness and fear that her mother might not let her come. But there she was, emerging from among the bus passengers just a few minutes before departure. My heart was overflowing with joy, my eyes were smiling, and I wanted nothing more than to be with her. We took seats in the back row. These are memories that are hard to forget,

even after more than fifty years. During the journey I kept looking at her and then, very gently, I took her hand and stroked it until we reached the station.

When we got off the coach I asked if I could take her arm, and that was how our wonderful love story began. I do not remember anything about the film, but I know exactly where we sat and the kiss I gave her towards the end of the show.

On the bus ride home I told her about my work and she told me about hers. From that 15 January 1962 a new life began for me: I had a woman who loved me and many dreams ahead of me to fulfil. After about four months of meeting on Sunday afternoons I decided to make our engagement official. One evening in April I went to speak with her parents, although in that house the one who wore the trousers was her mother Angela, a determined woman with a friendly manner and firm principles.

Angiolina, as she was called in the family, welcomed me kindly but got straight to the point. She wanted to know whether my intentions were serious. If they were not, she said without beating about the bush, she would forbid her daughter from seeing me. I replied sincerely that I was driven by the best intentions, and from that moment on I was welcomed in their home.

I believe they recognised in me seriousness and determination, the same qualities I brought to my relationships as well as to my work.

In that period my business was growing rapidly. I managed to increase the production of various items. For me, creating new operating systems was an exciting challenge and in just a few months the workload increased, so I began hiring a couple of young workers to ensure all orders could be completed without difficulty. I moved into a large building where I set up my first proper workshop. Thanks to my initial earnings I began making my first investments and my company was finally taking off.

In the spring I bought a motorcycle and decided to take Sandra to Lomellina to meet my uncles and cousins. We set off early and arrived at the cascina Rinalda in the morning, where my uncle Celso and all my cousins were waiting for us.

They welcomed us with great joy. Naturally they invited us to lunch, and I told them about my new entrepreneurial venture. We reminisced about the old days at the cascina when Mr Rinaldo was still alive.

Since becoming self-employed I had been receiving visits almost every week from my dear friend Roberto Comuzzi, who admired what I had achieved in such a short time and kept me updated on what was happening at the Lamperti factory.

Business was going very well and at the end of the year I received a visit from a second spring factory called Fiorina, which had learned about me through my former employers and was now offering me the chance to produce springs for them as well.

The following year I asked Sandra to marry me. She had just turned twenty.

At the beginning of March 1963 we started the paperwork for the wedding and on 15 April we were finally husband and wife.

For our honeymoon we travelled to Reggio Emilia and Carpi, my hometown, the places so dear to my earliest childhood. I felt like the luckiest man in the world.

Everything was going well. My wife worked in a small clothing company, my own work was progressing nicely and, a few months after the wedding, we decided to buy a car. My intention was to purchase a Bianchina estate car so I could transport goods comfortably. Once we arrived at the dealership, however, the salesman suggested an Austin A40, which had a higher load capacity. Sandra and I hesitated because of its considerably higher

price, but Mr Savoini insisted with such conviction that in the end we agreed, sealing the deal with a handshake. I would pay for it in instalments, fifty thousand lire a month for ten months.

You should have seen my in-laws' faces when we drove into the courtyard with our brand-new car. It was 20 July 1963, and at that time very few cars were seen in the area. For me it was a great satisfaction, the fruit of my dedicated work.

"Envy is a terrible disease," my father used to say, and he was right. From the moment I began visiting my customers in the new Austin, the problems began. A friend who still worked at my old company told me he had overheard some comments: they were saying I earned too much. Shortly afterwards the orders began to decrease and the payments for my work were reduced. It was the beginning of sleepless nights spent wondering how to pay the car instalments and support my family.

At that very time Sandra became pregnant with our first child. It was then that, thanks to an old acquaintance, I managed to secure an appointment with the purchasing manager of the Barazzoni company. I began working with them, although in the beginning the financial conditions were far from what I had hoped for. But I had to start again, and I can say that I learned a great deal during that period.

After acquiring the new work we managed to get back on our feet a little and, as soon as we had the necessary sum, my wife and I decided to pay off the car loan early. Only four months had passed since we had bought the Austin.

I still remember Mr Savoini's words as he acknowledged the final payment: "I'm glad you settled the account so quickly, but above all because of the bet I won with my brother."

"What bet?" I asked, surprised.

"He wasn't convinced about the deal made with just a handshake, without promissory notes. But I knew I could trust you. I had done

my homework...” He gave me a wink and we said goodbye.

In that same year, on 26 March 1964, our first son Enzo was born. I will never forget the joy I felt as I held him in my arms: he was a beautiful, chubby newborn with two large blue eyes. When the three of us returned home, I felt like the happiest man on earth. Everything was going wonderfully. Unfortunately, the work that on one hand gave me great personal satisfaction and allowed us to make plans for the future, on the other kept me increasingly far from Sandra, and I often found myself coming home very late.

One evening, returning as usual around ten o’clock, I found my wife sitting in the kitchen waiting for me with a sad expression.

I greeted her with a kiss and apologised for yet another delay. She replied that she was getting used to my hours, that I should not worry, but that she had something to tell me. I asked whether she was unwell, she took a deep breath and told me that she was pregnant again. Then she burst into tears with little sobs.

At first I was taken aback, then I held my wife in my arms and pressed her to my chest, comforting her by drying her tears and telling her everything would be all right. In fact, the children would be only a year apart, they would grow up together, there was nothing to fear.

The following morning Sandra was unsure how to tell her parents, so I took the initiative. I went to my mother-in-law and said:

“Angelina, your daughter has some wonderful news for you.”

She lit up: “Really?”

Sandra managed a smile, then, with a bit of hesitation, she turned to her mother: “Mum... I am expecting another baby.”

Angela was stunned: “Don’t joke, Sandra! The first is still on the bottle...”

Sandra nodded: “It’s the truth.”

At that point my mother-in-law looked at me seriously: “Mauro, what kind of joke is this?”

I replied calmly that it was no joke. We had not planned it, it had just happened. And I added: “To feed, clothe and raise this child I will work a little more. My father raised six children on his own, in poverty, and none of us ever went hungry. As far as I remember.”

One foggy, chilly evening towards the end of November my father came to see me. He had a business proposal. It was the purchase of a wholesale warehouse business that had been put up for sale at a very low price despite having an excellent clientele, including several hotels and restaurants around the lake. They had also recently obtained the exclusive distribution rights for the whole area for soft drinks and mineral waters from the Crodo company. The information came from the village customs officer, a decent man who carried out the weekly duty inspections there.

I told my father that I was already quite busy with my own work. He suggested taking it over in partnership with my brother Giorgio, who at the time was working independently as a bricklayer without much success. In this way he could replace his idle time with deliveries and employ his unemployed wife in the office. “Mauro, you would be doing your brother a great favour, please think about it.” I replied that I would discuss it with Sandra, who, as always, gave me her unconditional support. I thought about it for a couple of days and decided to accept, not only to please my father and my brother but also to put aside some savings to fulfil my dream: building a workshop for my business.

So we purchased the business together with the entire stock of wine, mineral water and soft drinks.

The overall cost was minimal compared with the value of the inventory. The Barbero company gave us one hundred and eighty working days to pay for the remaining stock, while the goods we

purchased thereafter were settled within ninety days.

We defined the tasks required for the deliveries. The first problems began after only a few months. My brother, without informing me, took on a large building job and had less and less time for the deliveries. Not wanting to upset my father, I kept quiet, running from morning to night, dividing myself between my own business and the deliveries he no longer had time to do. I was down to devoting only six hours a day to my company and eight hours to the new venture.

In the evenings I came home with my back aching from lifting and unloading crates of water. I tried to hold on for a while, working an average of fourteen hours a day, until I realised the warehouse stock was starting to run low.

I asked my sister-in-law whether she had ordered the goods. She replied that I should not worry. But the wine was running out and at that point I realised I would have to keep an eye on this matter too. One evening after dinner I went back to the warehouse and took inventory of the missing goods, then I left a note on her desk listing the products to be ordered the next day.

More days passed during which she assured me she had placed the order, but there was still no sign of the goods. At that point, without her knowing, I called the Barbero company to chase up the delivery. The response froze me. The goods were ready to leave, but we would first have to settle the bank drafts.

I apologised in a faint voice for the embarrassment mixed with anger I felt in that moment.

When I asked my sister-in-law for an explanation, she told me that part of the money was being deposited in the bank while the rest she kept for her salary. It was a great deal of money and above all it was dishonest towards us. That evening I gathered my father and my brother and told them of my intention to take over the entire

business so I could settle the debts and eventually sell it. My wife and my in-laws supported me without hesitation, and it was their trust that gave me the strength to face that difficult moment.

I must tell the truth. My mother-in-law Angiolina was an extraordinary woman. We understood each other instantly. She always saw the positive side of things and with her by my side I felt ready to face the whole world.

I took over the business, put it back on its feet and within a year we managed to restore it and sell it. It took great sacrifice from me and my wife, who, with two small children, went back and forth between home and warehouse, and the essential help of her parents, without whom I do not know if we would have managed it.

On 24 March 1965, exactly one year after his brother, our second son Marco was born. As soon as I saw him in my wife's arms I exclaimed, "How beautiful he is!"

That was a lie. Unlike Enzo, Marco was not at all a picture-perfect newborn: his little head was slightly misshapen from the birth, with a fine dark fuzz...

But it took only a few days. His head took shape and he too became as beautiful as his brother. My two boys, the most beautiful in the world.

That same year the construction of our first workshop building began, the place where I planned to divide the production into sectors and create an organised environment. My in-laws were so generous as to give me the land on which to build. At last I would be able to work in a comfortable space, with the right light and adequate room. I would also begin hiring staff.

I asked my brother Giorgio to prepare an estimate and we began the work. The surveyor who worked with my brother designed a workshop of around one hundred and twenty square metres, above which our flat would be built.

Total cost, turnkey: fifteen million lire. I went to the bank to request a loan and we got started. Meanwhile the company was growing day by day and I was acquiring new clients. I began working for a firm in Novara that produced headrests, a job that earned me a great deal.

The workshop was completed within a few months, but the wait for the flat was longer. By then we had almost exhausted our savings.

When we moved into the flat, we brought the few pieces of furniture we had from the old house, but in rooms so large they hardly showed at all. In one corner of the living room stood a table with six chairs and a small sideboard against the wall, and that was it.

The sitting room was practically empty. In the kitchen the furnishings consisted of a few wall cupboards and a gas stove, while in the three bedrooms there was only the bare minimum. Despite the limited means we were happy, especially in winter when we were all gathered in front of the lit fireplace.

Once the headrest boom ended, I continued with the production of storage trays for the Fiat 500. I began working for various companies in the area, often solving technical problems related to equipment development. That was my strength.

One episode from those years has stayed with me particularly vividly. At the beginning, as I mentioned, I worked as a subcontractor for the Fiorina brothers. They were the ones who commissioned the work and, although I was young and inexperienced, I soon realised that the payments were extremely modest. I pointed this out, but no better terms were forthcoming.

Then fate intervened. Word spread that in Oleggio Castello there was a young man who made springs. An industrialist from the area managed to track me down. I did not even have a telephone at the time and the man came directly to the workshop asking whether I could supply an order for him. I examined the drawings and

recognised the same springs I was already producing for the Fiorina brothers.

I was taken aback. I felt it would be wrong to take their customer, so, faithful to my father's teachings, I replied that I was not equipped to do the job.

The man, however, insisted and at least asked for a quotation.

To get rid of him, I offered a price five times higher than what I was receiving from the Fiorinas, convinced he would turn it down. Instead he came back saying, "You have made a mistake, because this is far too low a price. I will pay you five times more."

I was speechless. I realised the true value of my work. I bore no resentment towards the Fiorinas, on the contrary, that experience opened my eyes and gave me the final push to take the leap. From that moment I began looking for direct customers and proceeded independently. Certain principles also matured within me, principles I have always kept and passed on to my children: always treat everyone fairly and recognise the right compensation for suppliers and collaborators, because exploiting others will inevitably backfire on those who do it.

Those early insights became the ground on which my later choices grew, when I found myself facing new challenges and opportunities. In 1968 I decided to hire my dear friend Roberto Comuzzi, but to guarantee him work we needed a proper machine, one capable of producing on an industrial scale.

In those days things were nothing like today, when you can find out everything about everyone. In workshops the labels bearing the manufacturer's name were removed, a closely guarded secret. I only knew that at Lamperti they used French machines and had convinced myself that one of those was exactly what I needed. With difficulty I managed to track down the representative, signed the contract and paid a deposit. For me it was already a huge

commitment. I felt almost like an industrialist.

Shortly afterwards, a friend who also had a small business said to me, “Mauro, will you come to BIMU in Milan? It’s the mechanical engineering fair, every machine in the world is there!” I did not even know what it was, but I agreed. When we arrived at the fair, I found myself standing before the stand of the Bobbio company, an Italian manufacturer. I was left speechless. Those machines produced springs at a speed I had never seen before.

Cavalier Bobbio himself came over to me. He gave me a friendly pat on the shoulder and asked what I was watching with such amazement. I told him my story, that I came from the countryside, that I had just started out, that I had signed for a French machine and paid the deposit. He listened attentively then said, “Lad, a French machine is not for you. Listen, you inspire trust. I have just collected three used machines from a larger spring factory. I will give them to you. In fact, I will even advance you the money to recover your deposit, because you will see they will ask you for twice the amount to release you from the contract. You take these three machines, start working and pay me over a year, take your time.”

It was an incredible gesture, something from another era. Today no one will give you so much as a bolt without guarantees.

You may ask whether I ever went through difficult times. I can tell you that I experienced many. I met all sorts of people, honest and humble men as well as ambitious entrepreneurs who were not always fair. Above all, I learned that a great spirit of sacrifice is needed, along with the ability to adapt to circumstances.

Lesson Number One: always keep busy and test yourself. Believing you can plan the future is an illusion, because there are so many variables that everything can change from one moment to the next. You never stop learning. In fact, the moment you think you know

everything is exactly when you get caught out, plain and simple. You certainly need to look ahead and make plans, but you must also know how to adapt to the changes that life inevitably brings. Those who stiffen and resist the current are swept away. Those who know how to follow its flow and shape themselves to it survive. And then there is luck, a good dose of it, which can make all the difference. My family continued to grow and in July 1975 our third child, Christian, was born. How proud I am of my children, they are three remarkable boys.

IN IRAN, LESSON NUMBER TWO

I want to tell you about an adventure that began at a particularly difficult time. Because three customers had failed to settle their invoices, we found ourselves in serious financial trouble. Our bank credit lines were at their limit and we were carrying on with great difficulty.

One day Mr Moltrasio, our supplier of spring machinery, arrived at the company with an unexpected proposal. He spoke to us about a project to start up a factory in Iran. The amount offered was very attractive and, if we accepted, he would put us in touch with the owners of the contract.

I discussed it with Sandra and with our two eldest sons, who by then were of age and had begun working with me.

I then asked four of our employees whether they would be willing to come with us. The first thing they asked for was a pay rise. I agreed, of course.

A week later we were sitting at a table with one of the partners of the Iranian company, a wealthy banker accompanied by his nephew, a sharp young man who spoke Italian perfectly, having studied in

our country.

His name was Rody Housman and he would act as interpreter throughout our stay. We were to set up the work and they would observe the operation of the machinery and the entire production process. They then explained that the Iranian Minister of Labour would provide the non repayable grant only if the company was correctly started up. They said it would take months. There was also a war in progress between Iran and Iraq, the risk was very high. In the end, of the four employees I had asked, only Camuzzo found the courage to leave. The others backed out because the war was too great a risk. I could not blame them.

And so we set off in four: my son Marco, then twenty years old, Eric, a French classmate of his from boarding school, Camuzzo, and me. Enzo stayed at Sandra's side to run the spring factory in Italy, which by then had about fifty employees.

The aircraft of the Iranian national airline was nothing like the Alitalia Milan to Rome flight we had just taken. It was crowded with passengers who carried no suitcases, only cardboard boxes tied with string, and in some cases even crates containing live poultry. The floor was sticky and an acrid smell lingered between the seats, impossible to ignore.

Camuzzo and I exchanged a perplexed glance. So many bearded, solemn faces that inspired awe the moment you set eyes on them.

When dinner arrived, we looked at each other again. We tried to taste that strange mush, but we could not manage it. It simply would not go down.

My seat neighbour, an Iranian man in his sixties, gestured that it was delicious. I pointed to my stomach with my hand, trying to explain that we were already full. He burst out laughing.

Then, very politely, he made it clear that he would be glad to take our portions as well. I nodded, and he carefully placed them in his bag.

Once we landed at Tehran airport, our Odyssey began. It took us more than eight hours to get through customs, in three separate queues, under the unblinking, severe gaze of the officers. The benches beside us were there only to discourage people. Sitting was forbidden.

No one smiled. These were members of the Mutawa, the Islamic religious police responsible for enforcing Sharia, the religious law, with powers so extensive that they could even enter private homes to check adherence.

The air was heavy with tension. One could feel a stifling, almost physical sense of control.

At one point an elderly man, exhausted from the journey and the endless wait on his feet, let himself drop onto a bench. Three officers immediately rushed at him, shouting incomprehensible words, lifted him roughly and dragged him away.

I shivered. I looked at my son Marco, trying to convey with my eyes a single warning: do not do anything that might seem wrong.

When it was our turn, the guards rummaged through our suitcases brutally, without the slightest regard. They tore through the clothes, searched every pocket, checked everything.

But it was an episode beside me that struck me more than anything else. On my right was a poor Indian man with a small, worn suitcase. Inside were a few tins of peeled tomatoes, still sealed. The guards opened them all, one by one, plunging their fingers inside.

The man tried to protest, but he had no time to utter a word before two policemen grabbed him by the arm and dragged him away.

I asked our interpreter what would happen to him. He replied, calmly, that for such a gesture he would receive corporal punishment and a few months in prison.

At that point I begged my team: whatever they ask of you, do not argue. After what we had seen, there was no room for pride. Even though Rody tried to reassure us: "They are more lenient with

Europeans,” he said.

Words that did nothing to ease our unease.

After the exhausting checks, we left the airport where two jeeps were waiting for us. We climbed aboard and began our second long journey: another eight hours in the desert, keeping a distance of about three kilometres between one vehicle and the other so as not to attract attention.

The area was patrolled by military aircraft ready to bomb salt convoys.

We had not slept for two days, the trip felt endless. Only at dawn did we finally reach the factory. Our accommodation was modest but welcoming, connected to the plant we were to set up. It consisted of a large kitchen and four bedrooms, each with its own facilities. We were greeted by the site manager, an Iranian engineer who spoke excellent English. He told us he would be staying with us. From that moment on, we worked side by side throughout our stay in Tehran. In the centre of the plant stood a large wood-burning stove, already lit. I asked the interpreter why, since the thermometer read thirty seven degrees. He explained that once the sun went down, the temperature swing would make it drop below zero.

He was right. In the evening hours, despite the stove and the night heating, the inside was bitterly cold. During the day, instead, the heat was unbearable. The sheet metal cladding only intensified the extreme temperature changes.

That first evening we were exhausted. After a good shower, I cooked a nice plate of pasta for the crew with the spaghetti we had brought from home. But once our food supplies ran out, the fasting began.

We had a cook at our disposal, but the menu never changed: boiled rice with a goat broth sauce and mutton. The smell was pungent and a thick layer of fat floated on the surface. So we began the diet of plain boiled rice. Rice for lunch, dinner, and even breakfast.

I still remember the gaunt face of our cook: long and wrinkled, he

looked twice his age, as often happens with people of the desert. We devoted the first five days to the electrical system and the machine connections, with the support of some Iranian electricians. Then Marco and Camuzzo began arranging the first compression spring winders, following our customers' drawings. With Eric's help, I took care of positioning the torsion spring machines and finally those dedicated to finishing.

Our working day began at six and, if everything went smoothly, ended around nine in the evening. My son and the others called me a tyrant, an exploiter of human beings, but I told them that if we wanted to manage everything within a month, we had to put in the effort. You cannot catch fish if you sleep.

The Iranians gave us several drawings, most of them for car spare parts: torsion springs, compression springs, even tension springs, and various shaped wire pieces such as door rods and other components. Camuzzo and I were the only ones capable of operating all types of machinery. Our task was to supervise all the work. After about twenty days, averaging thirteen hours a day, we completed all the drawings they had given us and had every machine running perfectly. At that point we received a visit from the government authorities.

They congratulated us and Rody's uncle organised an evening in our honour.

That afternoon, for the first time since we had arrived, we left the compound. With us were our interpreter and the drivers of the jeeps. The landscape around us was barren, almost lunar, yet fascinating in its stark simplicity. As soon as we passed beyond the walls, a herd of agile, silent gazelles darted across our path like an apparition.

We continued through vast pistachio plantations and small cultivated plots. Here and there, amid the dust and the golden light, we glimpsed makeshift sheep pens near huts with roofs and walls of mud and straw.

Around six in the evening, the mountains began to turn white. The sun was sinking behind the ridges and the panorama transformed into a breathtaking spectacle.

After our tour through the desert, we returned to our lodgings.

There were eight days left before our return to Italy, and the priority was to teach the local workers how to operate the machinery.

Among them only one was a trained technician: during the time of the Shah he had worked in a car factory and had a solid understanding of mechanics. The others were mostly shepherds, with no experience whatsoever of machine tools. Some, acting in good faith, ended up damaging the equipment when they tried to handle it.

We therefore decided to organise them into small groups. We would explain the functioning of the machines in rotation: first they would observe us, then they would try for themselves under our supervision.

Within a month we had managed to start production and, as Rody had promised, we were invited to dinner at the banker's estate. We climbed into the jeeps and headed towards our destination.

I could not believe my eyes. In the middle of the desert stood a majestic estate surrounded by walls at least three metres high.

Once we passed through the entrance, we found ourselves in another world: a small lake adorned with palm trees and lush plants, an immaculate English lawn, intensely green and perfectly tended. Inside those walls it felt like being in another country, perhaps another time.

We were welcomed into a vast drawing room where fine Persian carpets covered the floor and even part of the walls.

Dinner had been set up in the centre of the room according to local custom: on a large silver tray lay a grilled gazelle, surrounded by discs of Iranian flatbread. A second tray offered the usual boiled

rice, seasoned with goat broth and pieces of mutton.

We sat down on the floor and the evening began. To our great surprise we discovered that everyone ate with their hands, often without much ceremony. The meat was torn apart, tasted, then placed back on the shared serving platter. It was an unusual experience, different from anything we were used to.

I must say, however, that the gazelle was truly delicious, cooked to perfection and flavoured with delicate yet lingering spices. We also enjoyed their traditional bread, naan.

After dinner came the most curious moment of the evening, especially for me, because as the oldest man in the group I was considered the leader.

They took me by the arm and led me into another room, where several men were sitting on the floor smoking opium.

I tried discreetly to step back, but the interpreter whispered that refusing would be taken as a serious insult. He assured me that nothing would happen to me, but that a gesture of courtesy was expected.

The men, seated in a circle, passed the hookah to each other with slow, solemn movements. When my turn arrived, I accepted reluctantly. I tried to inhale while keeping my lips as far inside as possible, almost as if to avoid touching the mouthpiece.

The man to my right, seeing how awkward I was, took the hookah firmly from my hands and showed me how to do it. I tried again, still with little enthusiasm and a certain disgust at the thought of that mouthpiece passing from one mouth to another.

I must have looked truly comical, because suddenly they all burst into laughter.

Meanwhile the opium began to take effect. The faces around me grew blurred, the voices blended together. Then darkness.

The next morning I woke up dazed. It was already ten o'clock, and I remembered nothing. I did, however, feel a strange inner sense

of wellbeing, as if my body were still floating. I joined the boys at the factory, more relaxed than ever. They laughed and said they should drug me more often, at least then I would stop being such a tyrannical nuisance.

It was Marco who told me what had really happened.

While we were having dinner, some men from the secret police had suddenly arrived. To avoid trouble, our host had led us into another room where the old patriarch, suffering from prostate cancer, smoked opium to ease the pain.

At that point we were asked to take part in the ritual as a gesture of respect according to local custom. And so it was I, the oldest, who was chosen to represent the delegation.

A surreal situation. When I think back on it now, it still makes me smile.

After production was fully up and running, the owner informed us that for the upcoming holiday, the following Friday, he had booked two hotel rooms for us in Tehran. It was a generous gesture to allow us to visit the city and relax after so much work. I gladly accepted; I have always had a taste for discovery and curiosity about worlds different from my own.

Along with the accommodation, he sent us a stack of local banknotes. We had no idea of their value, but we trusted that they would be enough to enjoy the day. After all, he was a banker, was he not?

On Friday morning we set off early for Tehran. Seeing it emerge on the horizon was quite a sight. The city stretched across a difference in altitude of almost one thousand metres; Rody explained that on one side you could walk around in shirtsleeves, while on the opposite side, towards the mountains, people were skiing.

We checked into our hotel in the city centre. Rody's uncle had booked two suites in one of the best international hotels in Tehran.

The first thing I did was order a good meal in the room; after eating so much rice and mutton, it felt like a dream when those delicious, familiar dishes arrived. After lunch everyone was exhausted, no one wanted to go out except me. "I didn't come all this way just to stay shut up in a hotel!" I told the lads, and I set off through the streets of Tehran. Taking photos was forbidden, but I still carry those unforgettable images in my heart, made of colours and landscapes so different from our own, and I can still smell the scent of freshly baked naan and hear the voice of the muezzin rising above the city's chaos to call the faithful to prayer.

I remember groups of women entirely veiled, their black abaya covering their bodies to make them invisible. And then the doorless cars, the open-air markets where goods were piled up at random.

I noticed crowds of people heading towards the main square. At that moment I heard two men speaking Italian and I introduced myself. They were two Italian engineers, also in Tehran on business. I asked them why there was such commotion, and they replied that every Friday in the main square public hangings were carried out for crimes such as sexual assault or drug use.

I left quickly. That was certainly not the kind of spectacle I wished to see. The thought of such a display left me deeply shaken. A great longing for Italy and for Sandra welled up inside me.

After wandering far and wide, I slipped into a bazaar where beautiful goods were on display, from the most precious jewellery to exquisitely coloured fabrics, many of them from India.

That evening we dined in the hotel's dining room and were struck by the elegant atmosphere. The women present were dressed in Western fashion: shimmering evening gowns, short skirts, generous necklines, carefully applied make up and elaborate hairstyles. Some were truly captivating. The ladies of high society were able to study, work and lead a freer life, away from the eyes of the Mutawa. The

poorer classes, instead, remained bound to a strict observance of Sharia.

At the end of dinner alcoholic drinks were served. We were told that a type of grappa, distilled in secret in the cellars of the wealthiest estates, was very much in vogue.

I turned to Rody and whispered, "So all this purity is only a façade?" He nodded with a faint smile, "Everything that is compressed eventually explodes, in physics as in life."

He was right.

How I missed the freedom one breathed in our beautiful Italy. With all that did not work, or worked badly, it was still a happy island. That night I had terrible dreams, perhaps because I had not yet shaken off the after effects of the opium, or perhaps because I had been so disturbed by hearing them speak of hangings.

We returned to our factory in the desert, carried out the final checks and left some instructions on how to proceed should any unforeseen situations arise.

At last the day of departure arrived. We asked management for our passports, but they replied that the documents were still being held by the police and would only be returned once the training of all personnel had been completed.

I immediately turned to our interpreter, asking him to intercede for us. The workers had already been trained, they only needed a little practice. I added that Christmas was approaching and I felt a deep need to return home.

Fortunately, the uncertainty lasted only a few hours.

We were put onto a small truck and taken to the local barracks, where an officer handed back our passports. Shortly after, Rody arrived with the plane tickets. We would leave the following day.

At the airport, however, another nine hours of queuing awaited us, standing at the customs checkpoint before we were finally allowed

to board.

As soon as the engines started, Camuzzo turned towards me with a sigh of relief. But it was only an illusion. The engines suddenly shut down and, moments later, two soldiers came aboard.

They scrutinised every passenger carefully. The tension was palpable. They moved slowly down the aisle, inspecting each row. Camuzzo whispered under his breath, “Mauro, it’s not over yet...” After a few minutes the two soldiers returned to the front of the aircraft, dragging two handcuffed men with them.

“I wouldn’t want to be in their shoes...” murmured my companion, without taking his eyes off the scene.

Then the engines restarted and the aircraft took off, leaving Iranian soil behind.

First stop Rome Fiumicino, then Milan Malpensa. There, waiting for us, were Sandra and Enzo. The knot inside me loosened. We were finally home.

What joy it was to embrace my wife and son again, and to know that we had done it. We had managed to start a company in just under a month and lived through an unforgettable story. Now all that remained was to settle our debts with the banks and begin anew.

When I said goodbye to Rody to thank him for his work as interpreter and for his pleasant company, he asked whether I could return the two bags of rice he had entrusted to me before departure because he no longer had room in his suitcase.

I opened my luggage and handed them to him.

He took them with a slow gesture then, with a conspiratorial expression, said, “You know, one of the two has gold in it.”

I was stunned. I did not understand whether he was joking. But then I saw him open the bag and pull out, one by one, bracelets, necklaces and rings hidden inside the rice. I could not believe my eyes. If they had searched me at customs, as they had that poor

Indian man, I would have grown old in a Tehran prison. My son hurled every insult at him for daring to betray my trust.

Lesson Number Two: never trust strangers.

OPENING UP TO THE WORLD WITH A SMILE

The journey to Iran, undertaken in desperation due to a financial crisis, had come to an end. We had left out of necessity, with our bank credit lines on the verge of collapse. Once we returned, we settled our outstanding debts with the banks and, in 1990, we merged the two businesses into Mollificio Valli Srl. From that moment on, we invested every resource in research and development.

A few years later Christian also joined his brothers in the company and I, as chairman, entrusted them with the reins of the future. Step by step we managed to transform our business into one of the most respected spring manufacturers in Italy, and from there we opened ourselves to international markets.

In 2001 we travelled to China. I had already seen much of the world with Sandra, but business trips with my son had a special flavour. I experienced them with the spirit of a traveller combined with that of an entrepreneur. Approaching another culture from a professional perspective is enlightening; it allows you to truly grasp its soul.

I remember our first trip to Nanjing very clearly. It was an odyssey. We left Milan with a stopover in Germany, then flew on to Hong Kong and finally into Chinese territory. An exhausting full day of travel.

As soon as we stepped out of the airport, I was struck by the incessant swarm of workers: a river of people on bicycles, crowded rickshaws, women with children in tow. It was a surreal sight: narrow streets, dilapidated buildings, laundry hanging from windows, stray dogs

everywhere. Women cooked on the street outside modest homes. There were no sewers. The acrid smell in the air was so strong it was difficult to breathe.

The first spring factory we visited was on the outskirts of Beijing. The work was carried out using rudimentary methods. The springs were polished by hand, one by one, with the risk of cutting one's fingers on the metal. We continued our exploration through rural areas among the rice fields. The landscape was lush, yet the air was already laden with smog, a sign of what would later become the new industrial face of China. It was the 1990s, and the country was preparing to become a global power.

We experienced unforgettable moments there as well. One evening we were invited to dinner with a delegation of Chinese and Italian industrialists. It was a productive meeting. We established important contacts with representatives of various Italian companies and ended the evening in unexpectedly high spirits. I even managed to get a group of Chinese entrepreneurs, both men and women, to join in the dancing. I even drew a smile from a few of the security guards, known for their strictness. The Italian delegate, surprised, confided to us that in all his years he had never seen anything like it.

Another curious episode occurred during that trip. We visited a large shopping centre where you could find everything at rock bottom prices: clothes, cosmetics, accessories. I wandered away from the group to explore more thoroughly and, while Marco was doing some shopping to take back to Italy, I browsed through the stalls. In the end I dressed myself from head to toe for just twenty five euros. Two very cheerful Chinese shop assistants invited me to try on several items. We could not understand each other but we made ourselves understood with gestures. I made them laugh so much that, after a while, a small crowd of customers and staff gathered

around us. Alarmed, Marco came looking for me. He found me there in the middle of the crowd laughing like a child.

Chapter 3

WHEN EVERYTHING CHANGES

The Nobility of a Second Life

Returning from Beijing, we continued to invest in our growth and improvement, supported also by the contribution of my three sons, each of whom held a strategic role within the company according to his own nature and inclination.

I decided to expand the factory grounds to allow for potential future development and to create a large car park for the employees, who by then numbered more than one hundred.

In 1997 I went to negotiate the purchase of the land in front of the Oleggio Castello site with the owner, Mrs Confalonieri. She owned a vast estate with large cultivated fields and grazing areas for livestock. Contrary to what I expected, she offered me a fair and reasonable price.

Before proceeding, however, she informed me that she would have to notify the farmers of the neighbouring cascina, who had been paying her rent for years and held the right of first refusal.

I offered to speak with them personally.

I went to meet them and explained my intentions: I needed that land to build a car park for the workers of the spring factory. I was ready to offer them compensation, but it was not necessary. They replied politely that at the end of the year they would be leaving the cascina to move elsewhere.

The year two thousand marked a turning point for the European economy, and for the Italian economy in particular. The single currency, the euro, was introduced and with it many long standing balances shifted.

A few years later came the crisis, a long and deep wave that swept away thousands of small and medium sized enterprises like ours, brought to their knees by the fierce competition of Asian countries capable of producing at negligible costs.

The crisis lasted well over a decade. When the market finally showed some signs of recovery, the atmosphere was no longer the same. The years of the boom, with their opportunities and vitality, had become a distant era.

A few months after work on the new plant had begun, I was diagnosed with a rare degenerative disease.

At first, however, no one took it seriously. Not even my GP, who attributed the initial symptoms to stress and suggested a possible mild form of depression. But I have never been prone to discouragement. I was enthusiastic about the new projects, proud to see my family growing, with my children now married and many grandchildren calling me Grandpa. When that same doctor went so far as to tell my children that I was an “imaginary patient”, it hurt me deeply.

Yet at that time I had nothing to be stressed about. The company was doing well, my sons were running it competently, and Sandra and I were finally able to dedicate ourselves to our greatest passion: travelling.

It was an unexpected episode that changed everything. We were having lunch together when, suddenly, I collapsed in the small service bathroom. They found me on the floor, unable to get up. My legs no longer responded, I was paralysed. After a few minutes I recovered, but that was the sign that something was truly wrong.

I turned to my niece Norma, an anaesthetist in Varese, in whom

I have deep trust. Thanks to her, we began a series of specialist examinations. The first was with a well known neurologist, who recommended that I be admitted to San Luca Hospital in Milan. There I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

But the journey was not over. We continued seeking answers and it was only at the Carlo Besta Institute in Milan, thanks to the expertise of a determined doctor, that I received the final diagnosis: it was not multiple sclerosis, but upper motor neuron syndrome, a rare degenerative disease.

I was hospitalised for a series of tests, then sent home with a treatment plan that would continue for years.

Five long years passed, during which Sandra stood by me with complete love and dedication. She has always been my support, physically and emotionally, and in those last years I truly do not know how I would have managed without her. She rose early every morning, prepared my breakfast and encouraged me not to give up. She insisted that I continue my treatment, stay active and go to the company every day, even if only to say hello.

There are difficult moments, especially when you have always been independent and full of energy, and suddenly you find yourself confined to bed. It is hard to explain: you feel only half alive, as if trapped in a body that no longer responds.

And yet, perhaps it was Sandra's love, or that of my children, but a new strength began to grow inside me. Little by little, I got back on my feet. I am no longer the daredevil Mauro I once was: I can no longer ski, or go mushroom picking in the mountains with my friend Giulio, or explore deep Africa with Sandra, or play football with my grandchildren. But I have become something else. I reinvented myself, if one can put it that way. At sixty five I changed my life: I did not fight against the current, I let myself be carried by it. Just as water adapts to the vessel that contains it, I learned to adapt to my new condition.

The first thing I did was immerse myself in another great passion of mine: music. At sixty, I learned to play the piano. And you know what? Age does not matter, it is all excuses. Youth is a state of mind, and I remained a young man, at least in spirit.

I was fortunate to meet an excellent teacher, patient and skilled. After a few years, encouraged by him, I performed in some small amateur shows.

Last Christmas I received a black grand piano as a gift: it had been my dream for as long as I can remember. I practised every morning, when my hands were still responsive. Then, a few months ago, my right hand began to lose strength. I had to stop. It was a hard blow: it could no longer open. Every time I walked into the living room and saw my beautiful piano, my heart tightened.

After an initial period of deep discouragement, I decided to dedicate myself to the land, as a return to my origins as a boy raised in the Bassa Padana. I had a large greenhouse built on the land purchased years earlier from Mrs Confalonieri. There I grow all kinds of vegetables, which I gladly give to my children and friends. In that greenhouse, returning to my farming roots, I was also able to share my passion with the children of the Oleggio Castello primary school. It was wonderful to show them how, from a tiny seed, with a bit of soil and patience, a small plant can grow, destined to become fruit and vegetables. Some prizes for the best vegetable garden were for me a source of pride and joy, because they made me feel still useful and able to offer something good to others.

Working in the fields is my daily exercise, my support, to which the affection of loved ones is added. I am surrounded by dear people: my brothers and sisters, my brother in law Bruno, Gigi, Sandra's cousin, who, together with his partner Gianna, fill our weekends with music and cheer. And then there is Norma, my niece, a doctor and guardian angel. It is thanks to them, and to the affection of all

who stood by me, that I found lightness and serenity again. With the same strength, last year we celebrated our golden wedding anniversary with Sandra and the whole family: fifty years of life together, with joys and struggles, bright days and difficult moments. That celebration remains a precious gift to me, an embrace I carry in my heart. Watching my grandchildren grow and play fills me with joy: with them I become a child again and rediscover the games I missed when I was young.

And today I devote myself, heart and soul, to my family: to Sandra, to my boys – I still call them that even though they are now over fifty – and to my eight wonderful grandchildren. To them I leave the most precious legacy: my affection, my story, and the deep sense of what truly matters in life.

BIOGRAPHY

Mauro Valli was born in Carpi (Modena) on 25 May 1939.

Raised in a farming family amid the hardships of the war and immediate post war years, he moved at a young age to Piedmont, to Oleggio Castello in the province of Novara.

In 1962, at just twenty three, he founded his own mechanical workshop. A year later he married Sandra, with whom he would share joys, challenges and the raising of their three children: Enzo, Marco and Christian.

His tireless entrepreneurial spirit led Mauro to grow the family business, Mollificio Valli Srl. Today it is a thriving company with more than one hundred and fifty employees, now led by the new generations.

He passed away in 2018, leaving behind a precious legacy of work, dignity and humanity.

Photo: Mottarone, summer 1980, Mauro in the centre
with Sandra and their children



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BETWEEN HARDSHIP
AND DIGNITY
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“You never stop learning.
The moment you think you know
everything is exactly when you get
caught out, plain and simple.”

There are hands that knead bread, that grip heavy iron,
that assemble machines and hold a family together.
They are a man's hands, shaped by mud and hardship,
able to build a future by drawing on courage.
This book is his family story,
a life's message teaching us not to give up.