

Dear Franco,

Tuesday August 29th. 1995

It was a hurried journey. First down to London by train... then tube across to Earl's Court: a street full of backpacking Australians, bureaux de change and cut-price travel agents. Pick up tickets. Barge through the evening crowds to a different tube station. On to Liverpool Street, no longer the station I remember from most of my life, but a new maze of glass, girders, television monitors, shops selling fancy lingerie for the last-minute business man, stalls of plastic croissants under pretend French flags. A side street where the buses turn, full of fumes in the sunlight wavering up the surfaces of air-sealed buildings to add some yellow to the plants trailing from the roofs. Shuttle-bus to the City Airport. East. Along the Thames. Across the Thatcher-era desolation of the docklands. Almost as far east as North Woolwich, just over the river from where I grew up. We even passed the ruin of the giant Tate & Lyle sugar refinery where I once went for a job, when I was sixteen, climbing across the high interior roof-struts to scrape off the sticky residue. Tiny airport. One runway. Businessmen with mobile phones. Their secretaries. Crossair: a subsidiary of Swissair. Stewardesses (recruited for their "elegance" I read in the in-flight magazine) in grey gabardine uniforms pouring free glasses of champagne (real glass). Small plane. Most passengers off at Zurich. Half-hour wait on runway, then with only five of us left, on to Lugano.

Through customs and immigration, and there were Giona and Karl Bruder. Fast drive to Riva. Into the courtyard, light on in Elda's window, voices coming through the grille from your room. Inside, hugs and kisses from Jean, Kagumi, Kenji, Stefan, Monika, Vera, Judy. Some wine. In the alcove under the bookshelves that fell the other week a small shrine. Giona's photo of you from the catalogue, a lit candle, some incense, a few letters, a jar of flowers (Vera changed the water every

morning), some feathers. I left the stone Joanne gave me in Bolinas a few years ago and which I've had in my pocket since; and the small stone Duncan brought me back from the Cyprus cave. Then there seemed too many people so I went out through the courtyard and walked around the garden in the dark. A looming shape turned out to be a dark blue inflatable pool. Looked into the stone house where we read by candlelight... Corrado, Gianantonio... the night of your 50th birthday. Clutter of bicycles, childrens' toy cars, stacked fire wood under the portico. Didn't feel like going back in, so I leaned on the wall near the wisteria. The shape that came down the stairs from Flora's was Antonella. We hugged and went for a walk. Along the road out of town. Sliver of moon. Traffic hum from the autostrada. She told me the saturday story. How you woke with pains in chest, arm and neck. Wouldn't go to the civic hospital. And in the ambulance to the Italian hospital told her to get rid of the television... "an anti-communication machine". How you got some colour back around four... told Giona to "get the post"... how when she returned around eight for you to be moved to Lugano she sensed something strange... too many people rushing about... they wouldn't let her in. But she got in... you died "his last sound was "aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa"... she began contractions... they let her lie on a bed beside you as "he was still warm". We were almost out of town, through the fields; turned and wandered back. Heart attack... but it was a ruptured aorta that finally was too much.

Back at the house the volume of conversation had risen. I don't remember much of talk with Karl, Stefan, etc. They went to sleep at Judy's. Jean, Kagumi, Kenji and I drove to Mugena with Anto. She was nervous at Jean's fast driving up the mountain road. We parked in the usual space. Took in the bags. I noticed you'd taken over the corner by the fireplace and the Franco-pyramid had started... an open case, a stack of books and letters, a pile of transparent blue plastic folders. There were some new postcards of volcanoes on the windowsill. Don's drawings were still there. A new Archipelago (Anto's) on the wall. Jean,

Kagumi and Kenji went to bed (in the room Julien slept in) Anto and I sat for a while... till about three in the morning. I made up a bed in the usual room, exhausted. On the spare mattress beside me I left my small tape-recorder, switched to "voice-activated", but before I could say anything I fell asleep in that absolute mountain silence and dark.

Wednesday August 30th. 1995

Woke at six. I could hear Antonella on the telephone in her room. After I dressed I noticed the tape-recorder. Picked it up and saw the tape had moved on. I ran it back and played it. A peculiar pulsing sound, and a faint voice, with your timbre, saying three times... "Tom"... "Tom"... "Tom". Jean and his family still sleeping, Anto and I sat at the table, drinking coffee, talking, looking at close-up photographs of volcanoes. Getting my jacket I was moved to see, in the hall upstairs, your brown leather bag, open as always, with a blue denim shirt lying on top. We left a note for Jean and went for a walk into Arosia. Just outside Mugena we turned left onto the mountain path (that, Anto told me, she didn't even know was there until you found it). Two men were cutting down the bracken. One, Antonio, had picked the green walnuts you sent me in late June to make a few bottles of nocino. I thanked him, we talked for a while, and he gave Anto two splendid porcini mushrooms. Almost plastic in their brown perfection. We walked on, the path scattered with lime-green spiky husks of young chestnuts. The higher mountains were clear in the distance, the sky pale blue. The *Amici* was closed, Piero on holiday, so we went to *San Michele*, climbing through the gap in the fence near the old cable cars left for children to play in. We had coffee... and Anto had some toast and honey (not chestnut). On the shelf over the fireplace the *Giona Editions* books we'd signed for Monika were still leaning. Out into the sunshine, and uphill to the postoffice where Anto got the last sheet of A PRIORITAIRE stickers... now a rubber

stamp is going to take over their job. We started to walk back, Anto remembered cigarettes and I waited for her by the small bridge, watching lizards warming themselves. At the house Jean and Kagumi were up. Anto and I went down to her studio while they took Kenji for breakfast (Jean complaining about the price when they got back... 21 francs for two coffees and a coke). Midday. We drove to Riva.

Giona in the courtyard. Your father and mother having coffee at the table on Flora's balcony. Suddenly Chicco was hugging me. A pang to see him there, outside your house, after all those years we'd tried to persuade him to leave Venice and visit. I took him for a walk in the garden. He was weeping, deeply upset. We met Pio... then, coming back into the courtyard, a blur of friends. Franco Giuliani... Milena... PAM... Gianantonio and Massimo... Andreana, Luca, Antonello, Daniele... Claudio Cometta... Emmanuel, Julien, Henri Peres, Nicole... Katia Bagnoli and Natalie du Pasquier... Aziz and Myriam... Dario and Marta arrived with Antonio Ria... Dario helped out of the car and into his wheelchair, his straw hat gleaming. Suddenly Daniela Ronconi, limping, with a metal cane. Giulia Niccolai looking fit, trim and alert. I spoke briefly to your father, in his brown jacket and trousers. Giona had everything in hand... he was doing fine... in that manic-speed-detached-efficiency of the first few days' shock. The sun beat down and it was time for Mendrisio. The cars moved off. I went with Katia and Natalie. Their car, parked outside the school, was like an oven. We waited until Patrizio's car passed, then followed the Padova numberplate. But of course they didn't know the way either. And we were followed by Aziz and Myriam. Through Mendrisio several times, asking the way, turning against the traffic, causing totally un-Swiss confusion. Finally up a path beside the old hospital. Park. Walk to a gravel square, tall pines and a view to the mountains. The door of the building is open. Gianantonio, Chicco and I go in, just as your father is coming out, crying. And there you are. In a coffin covered with glass, two electric candles at your head, garish (red yellow and blue) stained glass window behind you...

you're wearing a pale-grey round-necked sweater (made by your mother) and jeans... there's a single red rose between your knees... your right eye is a fraction open and the left side of your upper lip is slightly raised, almost in a smile. Outside, we wander off separately. I walk through the trees, the wind is sounding in the branches. Paulo leans against one, his dark glasses on. I see Pio taking care of your mother and two other elderly ladies. There's really only the sound of feet on gravel, and wind in the pines. Gianantonio and Franco G stand with Chicco and me under the trees. People begin to move off. The hearse rolls up to the door in reverse. There are white flowers inside. Four or five men in pale grey suits with company logos on the pockets start moving around. One of them brings out a wreath of bright yellow flowers. Anto comes out and stands with Dario, Marta, Antonio and me. The closed coffin is slid into the back, and we walk to Antonio's car. Anto shows me the silver clasp bracelet reclaimed from your wrist that she slips on to her right one. We pack Dario's wheelchair in the trunk and move off, passing Giovanni Blumer standing at the roadside in voluminous black coat and tan cap. Then to Lugano. Dusty black grapes hanging in rows. Two traffic jams. The lake scintillating.

The cemetery. Marta pushes Dario along the path between the mausoleums, swinging wide at bends not to run over the cobbles. Ahead, people have already overflowed onto the outside steps of the crematorium. To the left, just beyond the cemetery wall, is the giant red and white striped tent of the CIRCUS NOCK. I help Dario up the steps and he is guided inside. I'd rather stand in the air, on the steps, under the carved lions' heads. The sound of Nino's clarinet ripples over the graves. Jean reads one of your poems, Christophe talks about your youth in Zurich, Dario reads his piece. All the time there's circus music in the background and occasional waves of applause. Goodbye Capitano Alexis. Then it's over. The crowd sweeps down the steps and there's another blur of friends. Giovanni D'Agostino weeps briefly on my shoulder. I talk to Patrizio and Milena. Fabrizio Vreni. Christophe.

Giovanna and Michele. Giovanni from Riva with his broken leg. Julien. Finally Claudio offers me a ride back to Riva. There the courtyard fills up again. Judy, Monika and others have laid a long wooden table under the arches. Wine, bread, cheese, olives appear. We eat, drink, talk. I notice that our friends are not afraid to laugh... but there are a few people I don't know so well who look a little down their noses at this.

Evening. The dispersal. Milena hugs me five different times in five different places. She and Patrizio go to the car with Massimo and Chicco... but Gianantonio stays talking to Dario and me. Backwards and forwards into the courtyard comes Chicco to pull him away... eager to be back in the safety of the canals. Julien (a sort of Sarenco-like beard now), Emmanuel, Henri and Nicole leave... Emmanuel still enthusiastic and energetic to have *Choses qui Voyagent* in Marseille. Finally Dario, Marta, Antonio and I leave for Milan. Full speed down the autostrada as the sun sets.

Twenty minutes in the flat and Dario calls a cab. Across Milan we go, Dario, Marta and I, to a restaurant that specialises in food from the Trentino. A place Dario always wanted to take you, but it never happened. Brown wood... dark green paint... dusty bottles. We eat well... paté... myrtle sauce... wild duck... lamb... Drink a couple of bottles of red wine. And finish, alone in the restaurant, with three glasses of different grappas in front of each of us, which we drink to you. Home. I sleep on the couch, the door to the balcony open to the night sounds of Milan.

Thursday August 31st. 1995

Marta brings me coffee and two almond cakes. At eight thirty she and Dario leave for the hospital for his blood check. We lunch together in

the kitchen (steak tartare... salad... cheese... wine). Then Dario and I spend the rest of the day, he on the couch, me in the armchair... talking occasionally but mostly in silence. Katia comes by briefly and cheers us up with stories of no water and the problems of translating *Three Men in a Boat* into Italian. It only seems a moment ago that you and I, carrying our bags from Venice and Bologna, paused on our way to the station for five minutes in the *Caffe Milano* and I met Dario for the first time as he zipped through, with Fiamma, dapper in his dark jacket and bow tie.

Evening. I say goodbye. Drag my bags to the metro... then to the small ticket office (closed) and back across the station to the queue. Take the intercity to Chiasso. There Cita picks me up, we wait for Giona, drive back with him to Riva to search for Vera's dog which has run away. And on to Lugano, to the Japanese restaurant in the luxury *Hotel Paradiso*. A place Giona had always wanted to take you... but it never happened. We eat a procession of fish, raw, with rice, decorated, fried... the tall chef is from Hokkaido. We talk, laugh, drink sake. Giona drives us back to Vacallo where I'm to stay the night. He goes to sleep at Castello san Pietro with Vera and her daughters. To sleep at four.

Friday September 1st. 1995

Cita wakes me as she leaves for work at seven. I wash, shave, go out on the balcony to stare over Chiasso, the frontier. A knock at the door and Mimi comes in. She makes coffee and juice. We reminisce, looking over the balcony at her pumpkin patch. At ten Giona collects me and we go to Riva. For the first time it feels as always. Giona and I mooch about for a while, Laurie comes by, we have some tea. Jean phones from back in the Cevennes. Giona looks for the mail. Duncan's letter arrives... and one from Cid Corman. We both notice that the photo of you and me that was always propped on the materials table has disappeared. Later,

when Pio comes by, he registers that a little blue sculpture has also vanished. The souvenir pickers. Giona and I spend most of the day sorting and replacing the books that fell when the wall collapsed. The collected works of Corrado... of Spatola... we put them back as best we remember. Judy comes by and we talk for a while. She reminds Giona of the Beltrametti family get-together on Sunday. I talk on the phone to Anto who tells me she's been eating and sleeping better. Towards evening Giona and I drive to Lugano where we meet Fabrizio and drink coffee granitas as the rich mill about. Then to some friends of Fabrizio's for their daughter's birthday. Sabrina. Who Giona likes, but whose boyfriend, François, is also there. We eat chocolate cake, smoke cigarettes on the balcony and leave, exhausted. Anto wanted us to go to Mugena where there's a supper, and music, at San Michele. But I'm too worn out. Giona drops me at Riva, where Laurie has given me the key of the meditation centre. I light a candle, pull out the futon, and sleep.

Saturday September 2nd 1995

I wake early. Tidy up and carry my bags across the square to your house. The first time I've been there alone. Open the window. Put on a tape of Nino. On the table lies Duncan's letter, weighed down by your buck knife, the blade resting inside the envelope. Ivo passes the window, comes in, then brings me a coffee. I'm standing at the end of the table, looking at the books in the rack above the cupboards, where Ken Botto's postcard is pinned, when out of the corner of my left eye I see you in mid-stride heading towards the cassette-player. I sort out some more books, straighten up a few things, wash-up what's left in the sink. At eleven there's Pio, as always, outside the window. In the courtyard Silvana waits with Ziki, who's fascinated by the leaves. Bags in the trunk of Pio's car, lock the doors, leave keys on the doorframe, and up the mountain to Salorino. Twelve years ago we did this for the first



time... Pio, with long hair and bow and arrow riding bareback. Now, as Ziki guides me down the path, past the grapes ("too cold this summer"), a flick-book of memories. You watching as Giovanni Vela and I had a competition to see who could cram the most of those tiny delicious cherries (the leaves are turning as I pass the tree) into our mouths. The ghost of that splendid dog, Macho... you Pio, Claudio and I sitting on the edge of the wooden Japanese house, smoking and swinging our legs in the hot sunshine... was it only two years ago? We eat sausage and pasta washed down with Pio's own wine. He tells me of his last telephone conversation with you... the evening before your death... how there were a couple of strange silences in the conversation... as if you weren't there. At one point he says he's not painting any more... "there's no-one to show it to now". Ziki goes to sleep and we sit outside, looking over the valley.

Back down to Riva. Noise in the courtyard. At the table are Aziz and Myriam. There's a bottle of brandy. Gianni Castagnoli has arrived. We embrace, laugh, drink, he tells me about Sicily, Greece, Bologna. Vera and Giona arrive. Aziz puts a canvas in the courtyard and everyone either paints or sticks something on it. Fosco comes by. Gianni can stay at his place tonight. We arrange to meet at midday tomorrow to go to lunch with Aziz and Myriam. Anto, Myriam and I go up to Elda's for a glass of wine. She shows us your lock of her hair, framed by Claudio. Towards evening Antonella, Judy, Giona and I leave. We head up into the mountains. At Devoggio we meet Claudio and Silvia who guide us further up to Arogno. Sheep. On the slope behind the house, past the vineyard, Michele and Yamina have laid a long wooden table. You remember the evening in the kitchen, eating couscous, just after Sara was born, when Yamina made me her godfather?... well Sara is sitting at the table finishing her meal. Now she's almost seven, I haven't seen her for five years or more. But she recognises me, grins, gives me a drawing and zooms off through the vines on a fluorescent-painted bicycle. Candles are lit on the table, there's a precise gold halfmoon through the

trees, an occasional light on the mountain side, and we eat couscous... with mutton from one of Claudio's sheep. Judy admires the vegetable plot. The wind starts to gust and we shield the candles with one hand and eat with the other. Later, having coffee in the kitchen, Michele takes me into his studio, shows me some of his sculptures... a giant swinging pointer of turned wood... some rebuses in wax, with fish-hooks... and echoes Pio's words almost precisely... "I don't produce much... only now and then... but now there's no-one I feel I can show it to". Anto takes me aside and says she feels a need to sleep at Riva, for the first time since your death, and will I stay with her. Giona goes back first to clear stuff from the small bed in your room. He leaves. Anto and I sit for a while at the table, then go to bed. The black hat you bought in Udine the day I broke a wineglass that fell from the counter into the antipasto and the girl simply smiled when I apologised and said "già dimenticato" is a silhouette balanced on a tube of drawings. The bells chime. Two times. Elda's light stays on all night.

Sunday September 2nd.

Anto and I get up early. She tells me she woke a few times, some periods of sadness, but managed to sleep and was glad to be there. She begins to sort out sheets, clothes, for the wash. We have some tea, I light a fresh candle, and, as I turn back to walk to the window, clearly hear your voice say "Tom" once. At eleven Judy arrives, looking for Giona. We phone to Vera's, and he's on his way. He draws us a map to Castello san Pietro. Your father arrives, irritated that Giona's not ready... the rendezvous is at eleven-thirty. That old railwayman sense of punctuality. He, Judy and Giona go off to the Beltrametti family gathering. Gianni and Fosco arrive. They arrange to take Angelo Schmidt and Claire with them, and Anto and I follow Giona's map and go first to visit Vera. We find her house and drink some wine with her

and her two teenage daughters... talking about the new school year, starting tomorrow. Then to Morbio Inferiore and Aziz and Myriam. They, Gianni, Fosco, Angelo and Claire are sitting in the kitchen drinking wine and eating sausage and cheese. So the afternoon goes. Aziz shows a video of himself painting. We listen to RAI, and to the songs of Fred Buscaglione from the fifties. Gianni dozes. Cita arrives. We go to fetch more wine and bread. Suddenly it begins to rain heavily. Lightning flashes. Thunder nears. I try to reach Giona on his mobile phone but there's only a recording in Italian saying the connection is not possible. The Beltrametti family mystery-tour must have ended up over the frontier. Then, in a break in the rain, Giona arrives... happily drunk... the day was not too bad at all... a few people he got on with... lots of white wine. We all eat mutton and beans... then salad. I say my goodbyes. Giona walks with me in the rain up the road to the spot outside the church where Pio is to pick me up. A final embrace. Then with Pio into the mountains again to stay the night with Claudio and Silvia. She makes me spaghetti with home-made pesto. Pio dashes off through the storm. And there on the wall is the photo from 1987 of you and Val and Claudio in this kitchen. And the two or three pictures we made together, over the years, for Claudio. Silvia makes me a bed up in the workroom, where all of the ARCHIPELAGI pictures are stacked, under clear plastic, ready for the exhibition this week. I don't want to move them, but look at the top one. It is the Island of Tom... with its two salt lakes... all in blue. I sleep in the black of the mountain until 4am. Coffee with Claudio... then out into the dark, Orion clear, on his side, just on the tips of the mountains. A cat crosses the path. Claudio moves his motorcycle (red and white lights briefly flick on) to open the studio door to show me the statues he's restoring. Old white heads. We head down the mountain, hit the highway, empty, stop for gas, then reach the airport at 5.30. Claudio's gift to me is a 1986 Swiss Post and Telegraph fax machine. We say goodbye. As I walk out to the tiny plane the thin blue light of dawn shows the line of the mountains, turquoise where the sun will rise. Then it's a walk through Zurich airport, a

German-speaking customs woman... the same plane on to London... hot sunshine... no bus... a tube strike... a tortuous journey to the station... a trek in the opposite direction to the crowds on their way to work... a two hour train journey to Cambridge. Before getting on the train I buy the morning paper... open it... and there you are.

Well, Franco, that was the week. Val sends her love. Lisa's back in hospital. See you soon. As ever, ti abbraccio forte.

Tom