

# Clouds of smoke...

## The story



Gianluigi Ciaramellari



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**Clouds Of Smoke... The Story**

«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

**Ciaramellari G.**

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Damien is the charismatic owner of an electronic cigarette store in Florence. He's wise, spiritual, rich and above all, he has a healing power that comes from water, like steam. Desperate souls come to Damien's store unknowingly searching for help. Like Sonia, a beautiful girl consumed by a cancer; or Massimo, overwhelmed by serious economic problems; or Giorgio, a wealthy young man who is apparently shallow, but hides a past of anguish and darkness

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Clouds of smoke...

The story

Damien is the attractive owner of an electronic cigarette store in Florence. He's unfathomable, mystical, rich and above all, he has a healing power which is born from water, like steam. Desperate souls unconsciously come to Damien's store for help. Like Sonia, a beautiful girl devoured by cancer; or Massimo, afflicted by serious economic problems; or Giorgio, young, rich and seemingly superficial, who hides within him the seed of Evil and pain.

Barbara Mennitti (Sigmagazine)

"The struggle between good and evil, in this novel, assumes the fashion of a thriller and it'll surely catch all readers' attention"

Sellerio Publisher

"The value of this anagogical book makes it essential, one of those books that you have to have on your shelf, because it's much deeper than it seems. A work that makes you feel better than you did before reading it."

Sergio Bonfiglio (Aromatiere)

## **Gianluigi Ciaramellari**

Clouds of smoke...

The story

To my Grandparents

Silvio and Vera

Clouds of smoke...The story

by Gianluigi Ciaramellari

Let me tell you a story that

began in an electronic cigarette store,

managed by a mysterious character.

Make yourselves comfortable...

Any resemblance to actual persons and to actual events is purely coincidental.

Health warning

Always read in a well-lit environment. Take regular breaks, about thirty minutes every hour of reading. Stop reading immediately if you experience dizziness, queasiness, lethargy or headaches. Individuals who are sensitive to flashing lights or to particular shapes or geometric forms may suffer from a type of undiagnosed epilepsy and could experience seizure attacks by reading this book. If you are caught by seizure attacks, consult your doctor (or an exorcist), or contact them as soon as you encounter one or more of the following symptoms while reading: altered vision, muscle twitching, other involuntary movements, loss of consciousness, confusion and/or seizures.

Because of the use of analogue cigarettes while reading this story and/or the use of smoking tobacco along with other additives, some individuals could experience various disorders, (such as fatigue and eye irritation, headaches or nausea). If you experience such symptoms, promptly stop using cigarettes, joints, chillums, or hookahs immediately, until the discomfort subsides.

We generally recommend avoiding a prolonged use of combustion tobacco and endorse trying an electronic cigarette (also called e-cig) for at least 15 days. However, in the beginning, the addiction recovery from smoking, the duration and frequency of the vape varies from person to person.

The reading of this book by minors (under the age of 18 years old) is yet unsafe.

While reading some short parts of the story, you will learn about certain features and functions of the electronic cigarette and its effects on health. In this novel, some effects have been enhanced beyond all limits of imagination.

Enjoy your reading and I wish all of you a "good Vape".

Gianluigi Ciaramellari

## Introduction

Once, my son Sasha and I, (who was 4 years old at the time), were traveling by car on a highway, when he surprised me with another one of his “whys?”, typical of that age.

It was a winter Sunday morning and the fog did not allow a good visibility, so I drove slowly, especially where the road crossed stretches of farmland. Sasha was sitting in the back, in his “car seat”, bound by the seat belt.

At one point, on the left we saw what remained of an old sugar refinery and the child asked me why there were flashing red lights on the chimney, which was still standing. But he asked me in this manner:

“Daddy, why are the lights of that tower on?” in the rear-view mirror I saw his face awaiting my answer, he was expecting a prompt and thorough response.

“Sasha, those lights are used to warn the birds to be careful not to crash into the tower. They light them at night and when it is foggy, like today!” I replied, waiting for him to ask me a second why. Instead he kept quiet. I felt guilty for not telling him that that was not a tower. Then I stopped the car in a rest area.

The old refinery was truly a ruin, only the “tower” still stood high and proud, it looked like a rocket stuck in the ground, after precipitating and destroying everything around it.

“Sasha – I said, trying to find the easiest words for him - that's not a tower. It's a chimney and when it was alive, it smoked a lot.”

He looked at me as if I was about to tell him a story of wizards and dragons.

“Then it died because it smoked too much?” I wished I could have recorded him.

“No, it died because nobody needed it anymore” I noticed a change in his expression, he looked sorry.

“You know, - I continued - the chimney is a tall, tall tube, which is necessary to blow the smoke of the fire that is lit at its foot into the sky.” Sasha looked at the chimney and, without taking his eyes off of it, he asked again:

“Daddy, then all the clouds in the sky are made of smoke?” I needed to find a simple and short answer. You never know where children's questions may lead you.

“No Sasha, smoke comes from fire, and clouds come from water and all the clouds in the sky are made of water.”

And for the rest of the trip, my son wanted to know everything, about smoke, fire, clouds and water.

Gianluigi Ciaramellari

## **Gen, 1**

In the beginning God  
created the heavens  
and the earth.  
Now the earth was  
formless and empty,  
darkness was over the  
surface of the deep,  
and the Spirit of God  
was hovering over the waters.



## **CHAPTER ONE**

First entries

## Part one (the first time)

Massimo occasionally went through the street of the Novoli district of Florence in which he lived, by foot or by car, and he marvelled that he had never noticed that shop before. It seemed strange to him that in the year 2015, in the midst of the economic crisis, someone had decided to open a business and, moreover, in an unfrequented suburban area.

It was a warm mid-March afternoon, one of those days that whoever could afford it, didn't waste by working. Massimo, as a young freelancer, could afford it, however reluctantly, because his work was scarce. Therefore he strolled around casually, but that store drew his attention and he stopped to look at the shop window, discovering that they displayed electronic cigarettes. On the sign it read: "Clouds of smoke - steam cigarettes".

A middle-aged man was sitting behind the counter, absorbed on working on something that glittered. The shop was decorated simply with makeshift furniture, all in all dignified, but not fancy and modern like many other brand stores. It looked more like a tailor's shop, those of the past, in which the tailor, while he was taking your measurements for a suit, asked you if you had had the measles during your childhood. The lighting of the shop, from the outside, looked as though it wasn't even fit for a card game, but once inside, you realized that the light was just enough to make you feel at ease.

Later, he discovered that it was the "Light" that he had been searching for his entire life. He decided to go inside, just to get some information.

Therefore, he entered.

He pushed the glass door with some force; he pushed hard because it looked closed, instead it opened and the light that greeted him when he entered was somewhat familiar, he felt as if he was in his room, in the evening, reading a book or playing the guitar.

Within the shop one could smell delicate notes of tobacco mixed with other fragrances; it reminded Massimo of his grandmother baking apple pies, his favourite dessert.

To his left he saw himself reflected in a large antique mirror, which he guessed used to be the door of a wardrobe. In the mirror he saw that the light of the store had flushed his face and made his skin look smooth and glowing, making him look younger than his forty-three years of age.

But before he could feel any gratification, he was caught in a déjà vu. He had already seen himself in that mirror a long time ago, but at that time he had a heavy heart.

They say that these sensations are alterations of our memories. For him, however, it was a subconscious premonition.

The deep, full-bodied voice of the shopkeeper brought him back to reality.

"Hello, welcome to Clouds of smoke!" said the man while standing up, with a big smile.

"Hello, I needed some information... May I? I don't want... That is, I'm a smoker, and..."

The younger man seemed a little uneasy, but it wasn't actually an emotion, rather he almost physically felt the shopkeeper's handshake, although he had only greeted him verbally. He found himself with his hand stretched out and it tingled, as if someone had actually shaken his hand vigorously

## Part two (mystical attraction)

The man behind the counter was tall and lean, he had an attractive and contagious smile, a nice and elegant appearance; his eyes were emerald green, and they stood out in his olive skin face, his hair was neatly combed and he had a neatly groomed goatee, both streaked with grey. He had big hands with long thin fingers, manicured nails, although a bit longer than normal.

On his left ear he had a piercing. It was a jewel in white gold, shaped as a five-pointed star, with a small diamond in the centre. The ceiling spotlights made it sparkle for a moment, just as the man spoke.

“Our customers are also smokers; otherwise I would have closed down by now. Many of them have been able to quit, others are still working on it, but every person has his or her own time.”

While speaking, the shopkeeper picked up an electronic cigarette which he had carefully chosen from a display of various models; he put a disposable silicone mouthpiece on it and handed it to him.

“Now, if you don’t mind, I would like you to try to inhale, while pressing on the battery button.”

Massimo, without a word, took the electronic cigarette in his hand and brought it to his mouth, performing the recommended action. He took two or three puffs, then a forth, each time exhaling a white and dense steam, both from his nose and his mouth and he found it very pleasant, as it gave him the typical shot in his throat that he got when smoking a cigarette, the flavour was fine, a fragrance of tobacco mixed with currants.

“It’s great! It feels like I’m smoking!” He said, surprised by the taste.

“Exactly! – said the shopkeeper - But you didn’t smoke. You didn’t breath in all those toxic substances contained in cigarettes that are given off while they burn! What comes out of your mouth is vapour, a condensed spray of natural food flavourings, mixed with vegetable glycerine, propylene glycol and a little pharmaceutical nicotine. None of the substances I’ve listed are harmful to humans, if not taken in excessive doses.”

Massimo inhaled another couple of times and felt glad that he had entered that store; maybe he had found a system to break free from his smoking addiction. He handed the electronic cigarette back to the shopkeeper, but the man’s attention was focused on the front door.

“Oh! Look who’s here! – He said smiling, while he reached for the cigarette Massimo was handing him – Can you do me a favour, young man? Could you open the door for Lisa?”

Massimo turned towards the door but he didn’t see anyone.

“Sorry, for who?” He asked, surprised.

“For Lisa, who isn’t a girl, look lower down!” The other answered.

Lisa was a female Labrador, pitch black, who was knocking on the wood of the door with her paw. Massimo let the dog in, and while wagging her tail, she sat on her hind legs near the counter, barking a greeting.

The shopkeeper went to meet her, apologizing to Massimo:

“Excuse me just a minute, I’ll be right with you - and patted the dog on the head - Lisa can’t leave her friend alone for a long time, can you, dear?” Lisa seemed to like his touch and wagged her tail while she looked at the man with misty eyes.

Massimo noticed that the man took a small case which was attached to the dog’s collar and contained ten euros. In the case the shopkeeper put a small bottle of liquid, which he took from a showcase and a receipt for the ten euros, he then reattached it to the collar and said:

“Here you go, Lisa, now go back home!” he let the dog out, making sure she went in the right direction. He watched her until she turned the corner and then came back into the shop, turning his attention back to Massimo.

“Well, my name is Damien – he said holding out his hand – I was born in Tunisia and I’ve lived in Florence for ten years now, what’s your name?”

“Massimo, and I’m from Florence, it’s a pleasure meeting you! - In that handshake he again felt the same sensation as when he first walked in - I live close by, but I had never noticed this store before.”

“I know, - said Damien while still smiling – a lot of people say the same thing, this store is a little hidden because it’s between two stores which have been closed for a long time and in a small unfrequented street.”

Damien wore a pair of glasses, which he took off when he looked at people in the face and put back on when he had to read or prepare something. His movements were calm, and he gave a sense of irrefutable composure, it almost seemed like he was performing a ritual.

He was a very interesting person, one of those rare old-fashioned shopkeepers, who Massimo immediately took to liking and, somehow, he made him forget that déjà vu he had experienced when he walked in.

## Part three (some notions)

Maybe it was due to Damien's appeal, or to the funny and unusual scene of Lisa bringing the liquid to her friend Marco, but Massimo decided to buy an electronic cigarette, if its cost didn't exceed the amount he had in his wallet.

Therefore he dug into his pocket, while Damien, already sure that he had acquired a new client, watched him with some interest...

"How much does a cigarette like the one you let me try cost?" He asked Damien in a friendly manner.

"Not very much, I'd say, if you consider that you can recover the cost with the first eight packets of cigarettes that you won't buy anymore, once you switch to the vape!"

"Well, yes... I guess so, - he reasoned with a mental calculation - I buy a pack a day! So, do you mean to say that I could buy it with forty euros?" With a quick peek in his wallet, he counted sixty euros and a few coins.

"I mean to say that that amount will do and I'll also throw in a gift for you, - Damien pulled a black strap out of a drawer - see? You can attach this to the cigarette so you can put it around your neck, and have it within your reach every time you want to take a puff!"

Massimo watched Damien put the strap on the cigarette and while he followed the operation, his eyes fell on Damien's long, strong fingers, well-manicured nails, unusually long for a man.

Since he also had long nails, particularly the thumb and pinkie of his right hand, in order to pinch the guitar chords, he wondered if Damien kept them long for the same reason, but he refrained from asking him.

"Well Massimo, now we just have to decide which tobacco flavour and which degree of nicotine you want to load your cigarette with!" Massimo glanced at the liquids in the display case, there was a great number and variety of brands, all arranged in groups, by brand, by taste and degree of nicotine, but not knowing what to choose, he turned to Damien:

"What do you recommend?"

"To begin with, - said Damien heading towards the liquids showcase - I need to know what type of cigarette you are used to smoking, whether light or strong, aromatic or not."

"I smoke these, - and he pulled out the packet - about 15 a day!"

"Alright, Massimo, - he said while opening the showcase and pulling out a little bottle - I think this tobacco flavour is the one for you, it contains about twelve milligrams of nicotine per millilitre, therefore, the amount loaded in the tank of the e-cig, corresponds to the amount of nicotine absorbed by about six of your analogue cigarettes".

Damien explained to Massimo how to carry out the calculation of the absorbed nicotine compared to that of traditional cigarettes, he told him that he multiplied the degree of nicotine to the millilitres of the e-cig charger, divided the result by four and also divided it by the degree of nicotine of a cigarette smoked by Massimo. This confirmed the fact that the nicotine absorbed by vaporization is one-fourth of the one actually contained in the charger, and this was also confirmed by several tests performed in laboratories. While explaining this calculation, Damien filled the charger, calling it "atomizer", showed Massimo all the steps he should follow and advised him to be careful not to pour the contents of the flask onto his hands, and in such a case he should immediately wash them, because nicotine is easily absorbed by the skin.

Then, once he ended the sale, he came out from behind the counter to say goodbye to him.

"Thank you Massimo, for passing by, you won't regret it, today you made an important purchase for your health and you gained another friend. - He looked into his eyes kindly - Come see me whenever you want, I'll let you try new flavours, I'll lead you along the path away from smoking, we can talk, you can tell me about your experience and keep me updated!"

Massimo returned Damien's smile and at the same time, he felt the urge to confess his tendency to be inconsistent.

"You know, - he said lowering his head – I'm not sure I'll be able to quit smoking; every time I've tried I failed after just a few days!"

"Don't limit yourself - Damien answered promptly – don't think of the past. You're trying something new now, make pretend that this is the first time you decided to quit and especially, remember that you are not abandoning nicotine, the gestures, the little clouds you puff, the taste of tobacco! - Then he put a hand on his shoulder, and Massimo felt a reassuring warmth that made him turn towards the mirror attached to the wall - Here, sit here, in the middle of this rosette on the floor and look at yourself in the mirror."

Massimo had already noticed the strange pattern in the middle of the store, a curious and geometrically perfect decoration, a mosaic made of colourful tiles in concentric circles.

He sat at the centre of the rosette and curiously looked at his reflection in the mirror.

"Look at yourself in the mirror – Damien repeated - and repeat with all your determination: "I will stop smoking, I will stop smoking, I will stop smoking".

Massimo promised, while looking at his reflection and as he vowed he felt to be strangely solemn and sincere.

"Now, - Damien added - you have carved this promise in your soul."

## Part four (the reward)

Massimo left the store saying goodbye to Damien, without looking away from his eyes which held him locked like a powerful magnet from which he could not escape.

Finally he lowered his head and walked quickly away, with his mind still reflected on the store mirror, in which he had sworn to give up smoking.

It was six o'clock in the afternoon, the days of mid-March had lengthened and mild temperatures allowed staying out until late at night, to walk, visit the city and feel that spring was already in the air, go window shopping... Oh... No, no, he had shopped enough for one day, he thought, although he didn't regret what he had just done.

He absently put his hand in his jean pocket to pull out his lighter, and then from the pocket of his jacket he pulled out the pack of cigarettes. What was he doing? He stopped himself when he had almost brought the cigarette to his mouth in the act of lighting it, saw his reflection in the window of a bar, and remembered Damien, with his glowing green eyes: "...Now, you have carved this promise in your soul...".

He was overwhelmed by the urge to smoke; he had never wanted a cigarette so much in his life. A man who was smoking casually passed by him and he turned his head in the direction of the smoke, craning his neck and opening his nostrils to catch the grey exhalation, his hand was bringing the lighter to his mouth and his eyes never left his reflection in the window. His mind was fighting a gruelling round; a strange force pulled the flame away from the tip of the rolled tobacco that was panting as much as he was; another force, intentional, brought it close again in the need to satisfy his desire. But the roll remained unlit, because he finally decided to trigger the new electronic cigarette button, he then pulled it out and took a puff.

He took such a long one and he inhaled so much of it that he was afraid he would fuse the battery. He found satisfaction, yes, and decided to put the package back in his jacket pocket.

"For now I can resist", he thought. He saluted his image in the window of the bar, someone inside probably thought that the greeting was addressed to him, but Massimo turned away and continued walking, pleased with himself for not giving in to the tobacco industry.

Shaking his head he resumed walking, he decided that a walk would have relaxed him; he would continue to vape his electronic cigarette on his way home. Once he got home he would put his cigarettes on top of a closet, perhaps he would toss them up there, no matter where they ended.

The taste of tobacco which he was savouring was not bad indeed, it had a pleasant aromatic aftertaste; it didn't give him bad breath, it satisfied his desire for nicotine and the steam coming out of his mouth was even whiter and more dense than that of a cigarette.

A cat crossed his path, passing almost over his feet, and hid in a garbage can. That morning the market had taken place on that street. Several cats were busy rummaging through papers and other debris, even food, spread across the ground. In the distance he saw that the vans of the garbage collectors were already arriving, to clean up the street and the plaza.

The black cat reappeared putting his nose out from his hiding place, staring at Massimo with a look of defiance, his eyes were green like Damien's, and he made a gesture with his paw that seemed an invitation, "Come here if you dare!" it seemed to say.

But it wasn't a challenge. The cat had something under his paw, something made of paper and on which was imprinted an image, a five-pointed star, like Damien's earring, but it didn't shine.

Massimo approached the cat, leaned over and was surprised to see that... Beside the star with five grey tips, was impressed the number 50. He had found fifty euros! Wow, the same amount he had spent in Damien's store! He picked it up promptly, heedless of the cat who ran away quickly, without asking for a reward.

## Part five (stop the clock!)

Sonia had just left the Doctor's Office; the results of her tests were not good at all. Her hands were trembling from the sudden feeling of weakness; she almost fainted before those papers on which her destiny was written. Inexorably.

"First of all you need to stop smoking immediately, - the Doctor admonished her severely – your habit can't win over your will, we'll try every possible treatment to slow down the progression of the tumour".

These words echoed over and over in Sonia's head; her thirty-four years of age had become as heavy as boulders, perhaps they contained all her life and maybe in another life, she would have lived longer. She felt old and out of place, all around her she could only see the uselessness of it all.

What good had her commitment to her University studies done her, or the job she had recently undertaken as an architect, designing homes that would live longer than she would, even from their foundation stage, or the job that promised her a successful future?

Then there was love. She put her love life on hold in order to study and now that she was finally exploring this new world together with her new boyfriend, her time had expired. Everything expired. Time had expired, beauty had expired, pleasure had expired, and she was running out of life.

From behind the counter of the store, Damien saw Sonia, still standing in front of the window of the Doctor's Office, which was just across the street from his store. He looked up from his laptop and took a better look at the girl.

She also looked up from those condemning papers, she looked at her Breil watch which indicated a stupid and useless nine o'clock in the morning and while looking around her, she met Damien's gaze. Although the shop windows were a little obscured, the interior light brightened and allowed her to see inside even from a distance. Sonia had a perfect vision of Damien who got up from behind the counter and started walking towards the door. A sign, the kind with colourful LED letters, lit up in the stained glass window of the store, the LEDs lit up and began chasing each other, reading: "Open".

A flash of lightning followed by a long loud thunder, tinted the lead grey cloudy sky with blue-violet for a moment. To Sonia it seemed that it had always been that colour. Now she couldn't even imagine a different colour than the "Fifty shades of grey"; yet her life, unlike the film, had not been erotic at all.

The weather promised rain soon, the air was particularly electric. The wonderful spring weather of the day before seemed a distant memory. On television she had heard that there would have been yet another return of winter weather. Perhaps one last sprinkle of snow, even at low altitudes.

Sonia crossed the street as soon as the predicted rain started to harshly pour all over her. Covering her head as best as she could with her cellophane covered medical records, she ran straight towards Damien's shop door, quickly opened it, walked in and felt a welcoming embrace that she gratefully accepted.

"Thank you, excuse me!" she said to the man that let her in from the rain.

"Don't worry, - he answered, kindly - you're welcome to stay here until the rain settles down, it's no problem".

"Thanks again, but I don't think it will stop soon!"

Damien ushered the girl to one of the two armchairs in the store, which he used for customers in line or for those who stopped by for a chat, which happened often. He sat on the second chair, never taking his eyes from Sonia.

She was a beautiful girl, blonde with a modern short haircut, tall and thin, with the right curves in the right places, she could be a model, with her graceful movements and tone of voice. She was



wearing a suit, black jacket and pants with a white silk blouse, a little unbuttoned, she wore high heeled pumps which enhanced her ankles and well-shaped feet.

Her hands were beautiful, Damien watched as she rested them on the arms of the chair; he would have liked to take them into his, to feel their softness. Surely she had a rare beauty about her.

“Is this an electronic cigarette store?” Sonia asked to break the ice.

“Yes, - said Damien bringing his eyes back to hers - one of the many that have been opened over the last three years here in Florence”.

Meanwhile, it was really pouring rain outside.

“I have seen some of them - said Sonia - but I never stopped to ask for information on these articles, maybe I should have...”

She put her hand on the clinical records.

“I don’t want to take advantage of this occasion to sell you something - Damien interrupted her, standing up – instead, may I offer you some coffee? I was just making one for myself”.

“That’s very kind of you, - Sonia nodded – but, do go ahead, maybe I’m interested in the topic, you can tell me about it in the meantime.”

Sonia’s frankness was disarming. Damien was fascinated by her and while he prepared the coffee with the electric coffee maker he kept in his shop and then, while they drank the two cups of coffee, he improvised an explanation of the e-cig that was brief, clear and comprehensive.

It was obvious that Damien wasn’t very interested in Sonia as a new possible customer; rather he wanted to know more about her and her story, if she wanted to tell it to him.

But she received a phone call that somehow prevented her from staying a bit longer in the store.

She had to leave in a hurry, therefore she said goodbye to Damien handing him back the empty cup of the excellent coffee he offered her, and as if she wanted to repay him for his gracious hospitality, she pointed to a small statue in the showcase packed with various trinkets.

“This is nice, is it for sale?” She asked indicating a little statue of a man sitting on an old suitcase with a hat in his hand. As she looked at it better, she realized that she really liked it.

“For you it’s on sale” said Damien as he picked up the statue and handed it to Sonia, enjoying the chance to touch her hand.

When she came into contact with Damien’s hand, Sonia felt a shiver down her spine, a pleasant feeling, while she noticed that the man’s pupils widened and their colour went from emerald green into an indigo blue.

“Really, - said Sonia still under the effect of that sensation – how much is it? I like it a lot and I’d like to buy it for my office”.

“I told you it’s on sale, so let’s say eight euros and the promise that you’ll come back to see me and to try an electronic cigarette, okay?”

Sonia opened her purse and took out the money, promised she would be back soon, maybe even on the next Saturday; she said goodbye and went quickly out of the store carrying the bag in which Damien had put the statue.

It had stopped raining, perhaps not for long. She looked at her watch, it was nine o’clock. Still nine? Maybe her battery was dead? She decided to check it out later, now she had to run back to work, or rather, to her Office.

## Part six (a second chance)

She ran towards the bus stop, the bus no. 29 was scheduled for 9:15 and, if her watch hadn't stopped, calculating her twenty minute stopover at the store, she had probably lost it. The next one would pass at 9:40. So there was no need to rush. Walking, she removed her watch from her wrist and checked the dial, which appeared to be running again and it signed 9:10. Sonia thought that some juice would do her good, to regain a little strength following the bad news she had received and her strange encounter. She entered the bar close to Damien's store, the same one where Massimo had stopped due to his urge to smoke a cigarette.

It wasn't a relaxing drink. As soon as they served it to her, outside she saw a parade of ambulances and police cars with their sirens on. People rushed out to see what had happened, even Sonia, who looked out and saw the cars trying to convey to a single lane, leaving room for the emergency vehicles, which were desperately trying to find a passage way in the traffic. From a distance, less than a kilometre away from her viewpoint, she could clearly see a black smoke cloud rising to the sky. For about fifteen minutes, she and many others, some patrons of the bar and others just passers-by, kept watching in order to understand what had happened. It had to be something serious.

Some rumours were passed from one person to the other, bringing back news that was mostly unreliable. Some said it was a bomb, some claimed that a tank truck had exploded, some already shouted about a terrorist attack, others said that it was a terrible car accident.

Sonia realized that the situation was getting worse. She would not have made it to the Office on time for her morning meeting, as she had promised her colleague who had called her earlier, so she thought it best to warn him of her delay or maybe even her impossibility to attend, which seemed to be the case. She went back into the bar and dialled her Office's number.

Stefano, her colleague, anxiously answered following the first ring: "Sonia, finally! Is everything alright?"

"Yes, of course Stefano, why do you ask?"

"So you weren't on that bus?"

"My God, no, - said Sonia, alarmed - what happened?"

"A bad accident, Sonia, they're talking about it on the local radio station, the bus that you usually take, number twenty-nine, collided into a truck and caught fire. A disaster, they say that one person is dead and several wounded!"

Sonia recoiled. She couldn't believe that such a thing had happened and that it had happened to her bus that morning, and at that hour. Yes... That hour... The hour her watch had stopped on, allowing her to avoid such a tragedy.

"I was late Stefano - said Sonia reassuring her colleague - so thankfully I didn't take that bus. Now I see that there is a lot of traffic and I won't be able to make it on time for the morning meeting. You can go ahead without me; we'll catch up later, okay?"

"Okay Sonia, don't worry!" And as Stefano hung up, she could hear the relief in his voice.

It was almost ten o'clock. Sonia considered that it would be better to go back home by foot, it wasn't that far away.

The morning was gone now. Once home, she would try to put the pieces of the puzzle together, the absurd picture of a nightmarish morning, which ended luckily for her, compared to the tragedy if she had taken that unlucky bus no. 29.

## Part seven (Damien's resistance)

On Saturday mornings, especially a sunny one such as “that Saturday” of the end of April, Damien's store was rarely visited, while in the afternoon there was always a lot of work, whatever the weather. Therefore Damien took advantage of that time to restore his manual regeneration atomizer, a job which gave him great satisfaction.

The work consisted in building a coil, namely a “spring” made by winding a resistance wire around a small screwdriver, forming a series of turns, very tight and not crossed, heated by a flame of a caramelizer and then pressed down again with pliers.

Finally this coil was mounted on two conductive towers, placed on a base, called “the heart” of the atomizer, and through this spring, he passed a cotton strip which he then put around it, after closing the whole device with the steel cylinder that was the pre-funnel of the atomizer.

Once he soaked the cotton with the liquid to be vaporized and once he assured himself that the resistance he built had the right value of desired ohms, once he set the right dispenser voltage, he pushed the button of his electric battery. Thus, the incandescent resistance caused the liquid with which the cotton was soaked to nebulize into the atomizer's combustion chamber, coming out full of aroma and fluffiness, when a person inspired from the little tube called drip-tip. Every time he built a coil, he had the foresight to try its incandescence before he dipped the cotton into it, in order to be certain that the resistance became incandescent from the centre outward in a uniform manner and within the required time.

That Saturday morning, something extraordinary happened to Damien's resistance, something which explains the need for the above explanation.

The coil had just been placed on the conductive towers, Damien had screwed the little screws that held the two ends of the resistance wire to the positive pole and to the negative pole, and was about to mount the stand on its battery to test its value, when Sonia stepped into the shop.

“Good morning!” said Damien. He sounded as though he was expecting her.

“Good morning Damien – said Sonia with a radiant smile – I came to thank you for the other morning, you have no idea how lucky I was to stop in here!”

Damien looked at her with the tenderness of a father who is about to receive a gift from his child, he leaned on the counter, resting on his arms and turning his palms to Sonia as if waiting for a gift.

“What happened?” He asked while holding out his hand to shake Sonia's, and she promptly shook his back.

“Did you hear about that bus, number twenty-nine, which caught fire at the end of Via Baracca?”

Damien nodded and shook his head as if to say: “Okay, go ahead!”

“I could've been on that bus, and maybe I wouldn't be here to tell you about it!” She said with her eyes wide open.

“Yes, I heard about it, an awful story, I heard that the passengers couldn't get out of the vehicle”. He said.

Sonia was wearing a pair of tight-fitted faded jeans, a pink cardigan and a pair of strap sneakers, also pink. Even without heels she was tall.

Although not as much as Damien was.

Sonia told him that her watch had stopped and that thanks to that, she had missed the bus that went up in flames, and especially thanks to his kindness, when he had distracted her by offering her a coffee.

They chatted about this event for a while and finally Sonia decided she could trust Damien and the items he sold. She asked him if she could try a VAPE and he happily agreed, also tempted

to bring out a sampling of coloured batteries so she could choose the one which, (he was sure); she would buy that Saturday morning.

Sonia had a craving to smoke, and talking to Damien elated her extraordinarily. She had never felt so attracted to a man, mentally and physically.

Damien handed her the electronic cigarette, after charging it with a good tobacco liquid containing a certain percentage of nicotine and Sonia took it from him as a child taking an ice cream cone from the hands of its mother.

She took two or three puffs, long and close between them, turning her back to Damien, maybe to hide the yearning she was feeling.

It was a good chance for Damien to watch her from behind. He noticed her rounded hips, straight legs, which were so tightly wrapped within her tight jeans that he could admire their perfect shape. Her shortly cut hair, allowed him to admire her long elegant neck.

Damien walked silently towards Sonia, stood to her left and then moved in front of her like a dancer who takes the hand of his companion to invite her to dance. While he moved he could smell the fragrance that radiated from her neck and hair.

He closed his eyes and fully savoured the scent, mentally picturing Sonia, as if he had a three-dimensional view, in front of her mirror at home, as she sprayed the scent on, raising her neck, turning it, bowing her head and lifting it up again to see her reflection, in all its beauty.

Sonia turned her face towards Damien's, who was just a few inches away from a kiss; they looked at each other for a moment that seemed endless and eventually Damien, more alert than Sonia, took the cigarette from her hands, which she gave up as a robot without its CPU.

"What do you think?" asked Damien, while moving slightly away.

"It's good! I didn't imagine it would be!" Sonia answered, recovering from her momentary confusion.

"This might help you stop smoking, Sonia. You have no idea of the benefits that you will find, not only for your health, but also for your whole being. Don't allow tobacco to waste what nature gave you, your beautiful smile, the colour of your skin, its softness!" Damien spoke as he continued to look into Sonia's eyes, trying to communicate that he really believed that those words were meant for her wellbeing.

At that moment Sonia decided she could talk to him about her illness, surely he would listen to her; something told her that he would help her face her disease with a positive attitude, rather than let go and give up fighting. Maybe Damien was the right person to offer her some moral support.

"When I came here the first time, - Sonia started, collecting her courage - I had just come out of the doctor's office across the street, I went to pick up the tests that confirmed that I have a tumour."

"Oooh! - Damien interrupted her, visibly shaken - Are you sure?"

"Yes I'm sure. Excuse me if I told you this, I know it's a little confidential, but I wanted to talk to someone who wasn't part of my family or friends; I think you can understand why."

"Yes, I understand - answered Damien - people who have known you for a long time, always feel very emotionally involved or very embarrassed in these cases, and at the end they are incapable of seeing the situation from a different perspective than yours. You put a lot of faith in me to tell me about it, I thank you for that."

Sonia sought for a way to ease the drama of the topic, not that she regretted have confided in Damien, who was really only a "stranger", indeed, she was glad; however, she believed that she would have the opportunity to talk to him on more occasions, since she was about to become a new customer of his, therefore she would have met him again.

She approached the counter and saw that strange metal object on which Damien was working before she entered the store. She picked it up and asked him what it was.

It was then that he moved closer to her, took her hand which held the basic atomizer with the mounted resistance and at that moment the resistance became incandescent.

Sonia, frightened, immediately dropped it into Damien's palm who sharply said:

"Be careful! I forgot to turn it off – he lied – luckily you didn't burn yourself, I'm sorry."

"No excuse me, - said Sonia, who at that point assumed that the object had an internal battery – I shouldn't have touched it, it's my fault, anyhow I'm not hurt."

Damien shook his head. This shouldn't have happened.

His heart could have resisted her beauty, but not the heart of that atomizer, which had not put up a strong resistance to her.

## Part eight (Sonia's dream)

The new electronic cigarette's battery was still hot, when Sonia put it down on the nightstand next to her bed. She was glad to have been able to smoke, oops!... "Vape" as Damien said, even in her room, without filling the air with that disgusting scent of tar.

She had inhaled a good dose of nicotine for that Saturday night, following a tasty pizza she had delivered to her home, which she had eaten in the company of her favourite TV show: Columbo.

Once she turned off the TV, she checked her bookmark, which indicated that she had another twenty pages to finish the novel she was reading; She shook her head undecidedly, trying to choose between reading or sleeping, took another look at the electronic cigarette, thinking that she could still vape while reading, without having to worry about shaking the ash or not falling asleep with a lit cigarette. Finally she gave up and decided that it would be better to turn off the light, close her eyes and let herself fall sleep without the anxiety of the ringing of the alarm clock. The next day was Sunday; she had already planned a bike ride with Giorgio, her boyfriend.

For almost a year now, Sonia lived alone in a two-roomed apartment that her parents had bought her with the savings of a lifetime, even though that meant they would be separated from their only daughter, who had chosen to live in the city of Florence, which she preferred to Turin, where she was born and raised. She got out of the bed and, as she did every night, she walked through the sixty square meters of her apartment. Every single night, she had to make sure that she had closed the front door, leaving the key in the door, half in and half out, as she had read in a police warning.

She then proceeded to control the windows and the shutters, and finally, with the adrenaline of a scared child who has to cross a dark hallway, she always checked the closet, which required opening the built-in wardrobes to see if anyone was hiding inside it, waiting to jump out in the middle night to attack her as she slept.

She never stopped to wonder, however, what she would do, if she had ever really found someone in the closet.

After carrying out her ritual control, she locked herself in her room. She climbed back into bed and turned off the bedside lamp.

She never fully shut her bedroom window shutter. Sonia always left a few gaps through which the light of the street lamps could pass through. Living on the second floor of an apartment building, the light coming through was enough to reassure her. She didn't like to sleep in complete darkness.

From the upstairs apartment, or from the one below, came voices and music that she had never heard before. Maybe someone was throwing a party. After all it was Saturday night, some preferred to read a good book in peace and others chose to celebrate in their home, inviting their friends. All in all, that noise in the background kept her company and she fell asleep, feeling a little less lonely.

Before she closed her eyes, she saw streaks of light cast from the open gaps of the shutter, shining on the medical records that she had left open on the dresser opposite the bed. The headlights of a car bounced their light onto the windowpanes, (she never quite understood this phenomenon), and the play of reflections it created was sometimes curious, sometimes entertaining. This time, it was ghastly...

She turned the lamp back on, got out of bed and closed the folders, went back to bed and, when she saw the electronic cigarette on the nightstand, she remembered that she had to put it in charge by connecting the battery to its appropriate charger, as Damien had taught her.

Again she turned off her bedside lamp, the LED of the battery charger flashed three times in a bluish colour, then became solid red. To Sonia it seemed like a greeting: "bye, bye, see you tomorrow!"

And goodnight.

The air had cooled, the woollen blanket that the nurse had tucked in tightly under the mattress, was not warm enough. The door opened onto the hallway of the oncology department, in addition to the cold light of neon, let in the voices of the nurses who were joking with each other.

Sonia wished one of them would come into her room, so she could ask for another blanket. Furthermore, a sudden severe chest pain forced her to pull herself up, but she had to be careful not to pull out the needles of the drips in both her arms.

She leaning back on the two pillows behind her, and tried to take some deep breaths, slowly, to see if the pain would subside.

A shadow cast over her bed, it was that of a tall, strong man, wearing a lab coat. He stood in the threshold of the door with the light behind him, and she could not see his face.

She strained to call him, trying to guess his role:

“Doctor?”

She found she had a weak voice, almost feeble, her mouth was dry, her lips glued.

The dark silhouette of the man didn't move. He looked like a mannequin.

“Doctor?”

A cough and a muscle spasm in her chest made Sonia blink her eyes and the menacing figure disappeared.

But then she felt a hand touching her face and she saw the same man near her, who, after stroking her cheek, began to adjust the flow of the IV.

“Don't worry, Sonia. - Said the doctor or nurse, whoever he was - It's all right, it's all under control.”

The voice was fatherly and reassuring. His touch was light and gentle. She felt the warmth of that touch on her face and it cheered her up. The man gently helped her lie down again, arranged the pillows behind her head and when he bent down to wet her lips with a damp cloth, she saw his eyes.

A lightning followed by thunder and in that light his eyes were those of a cat in the dark.

Sonia woke up. She was in her room, she recognized it from the light coming in through the window shutters.

The electronic cigarette LED was green.

“Hi, I'm ready!”

## Part nine (leaves in the wind)

That Saturday afternoon, there had been a lot of VAPE users and beginners at the Clouds of smoke store. Regulars always liked to laze in the store a little more than on other days, to chat with each other and with the owner. Damien enjoyed offering them useful tips and demonstrations on the use of the various systems, spiced up with ironic jokes and wisecracks. In short, the atmosphere was always cheerful and time passed unnoticed.

Some customers even regretted having to go back home, after all, they enjoyed Damien's company; he was a friend, they could tell him all about their lives and he listened with an unlimited patience and curiosity. He treasured everything they told him as if it was a gift. Someone once said to another customer: "This man knows how to listen with so much attention that you expect him to ask you how much he owes you, for what you have given him".

However, many of his customers wondered if Damien was indeed a happy man. This was not a question they could ask him, it was written in Braille on his hand. If he handed you his hand, even though you didn't know how to read the dots of that code, the physical contact with him it was enough for him to get his message across: "Welcome to my house, but don't ask me how much I paid it!".

By the way, Damien's home was big, cosy, warm and full of beautiful antique items, sometimes mixed together with modern pieces.

It reflected his soul, his manners and his qualities. Few people had had the privilege of being invited to that home. Those who had been there, at least once, longed to have the same, some day.

Likewise, his personality was also full of assets, such as kindness, cheerfulness, wisdom, a keen sensitivity to visual arts and music.

In the shop he loved to play jazz, blues and classic melodic music discreetly in the background.

On the walls of the shop he displayed posters of old black and white movies and 50s and 70s colour movies; on certain shelves he placed some comic strips such Alan Ford, Tex Willer, Mickey Mouse and the Italian cartoon Tiramolla.

There was no lack of magazines on topics such as science, politics and economy, resting on a colourful wooden plank, from time to time updated with new issues. Damien had decorated the shop with recycled materials and industrial furniture, revised and adapted to a different use and better suited to the needs of his business. The solid wood counter came from the atelier of a retired tailor; looking at it, one could imagine that craftsman, unrolling measures of precious materials onto it, while he cleverly scissor cut the square footage that the lady in turn chose, following the expert's advice.

When Damien suggested a vape cigarette or a liquid, he perfectly replicated the precision of the tailor to whom the counter had belonged, as if he had also inherited his soul.

The store was beautiful. It was so for new customers and it looked more and more beautiful to those who returned there, because every time they were surprised to discover strange objects that had nothing to do with the items for sale. There was a display case dedicated to small items, souvenirs for friends and family.

If Damien's store was his business card, his house was his curriculum vitae and the world exhibition of his trophies...

That Saturday night, as many other times, it was late. Usually at seven-thirty, Damien pulled down the shutter, whereas that night it was past eight o'clock and inside the store were still two customers: Massimo and Sonia.

Massimo had returned to stock up on liquids; it was already the third time he came back on a Saturday. A bottle of ten millilitres of liquid lasted only three days; therefore he bought at least two at a time.

Sonia, instead, returned that afternoon, following her morning visit. Damien had sold her an electronic cigarette complete with cord to carry it around her neck, while Sonia would have preferred



a small pouch to store it in her handbag, so she decided to return to the store to make that second purchase. That's how the two of them met by chance in the shop and Damien was happy to present them to each other.

At first, Massimo seemed rather intimidated by Sonia's beauty; luckily Damien was able to act as a link between them, involving both in the matters that were brought up during that late afternoon in the store, also encompassing the other customers.

Damien asked Massimo what how he felt about using the steam cigarette and Sonia was very interested in his experience, therefore, from a simple question and answer, he started a conversation between several people that lasted until the evening, and by then they felt at ease in speaking to each other.

When Damien noticed that the two of them already got along well together, although he had just presented them, he was reminded of a scene that he'd already seen several times, during his Sunday walks in the tree-lined streets, particularly in the fall. He had observed a fallen leaf on the ground that was being carried away by a gust of wind, until it reached another leaf that was very far from it, and then, a small whirlwind, suddenly created by the atmospheric conditions, sent the two leaves dancing in a circle, and eventually they fell to the ground, sometimes overlapping each other.

It wasn't essential for those two leaves to be of the same kind or the same size. It was irrelevant how and why they had fallen off the tree, or if they had fallen from different trees. Also irrelevant was their colour and shape. The small whirlwind took them both and lifted them from the ground and, although one of them was blown sideways, while the other was blown from below, they both received the same force to which they resisted in different ways, still meeting at the same height, on the same level.

Just like those two leaves, Massimo and Sonia met, spoke to each other, jumping from one subject to another, then they said goodbye to Damien, who could finally close the store.

Once they left the store and had already walked a few steps away from it, Massimo stopped to look back at the store and saw that he was lowering the shutter.

"Sonia, wait a minute. - He said to the girl who was still at his side, who also turned to look back - See? Damien closed the store but he's still inside!"

"Of course, - she said - he said he had to finish his accounting, tidy up and check his stocks."

"Okay, - said Massimo - but last Saturday I stopped out here to talk to another customer of his, we were out here for at least a half hour, yet he didn't come out. In my opinion, - Massimo's tone became suspicious - Damien will spend the night in there!"

Sonia was baffled by Massimo's words. However she wanted to support him and decided to wait a little longer to see if he was right.

They waited another twenty minutes, chatting about this and that and keeping an eye on the store, mainly keeping their eyes on the thin line of light shining from under the shutter.

After a while the light went off and they waited for the shutter to be raised and for Damien to come out. Instead no one came out. They waited another five minutes, looking at each other drawing their lips and chin together in an expression that in Italy means "beats me!"

Sonia finally decided to go home; she decided to order a pizza. She said goodbye to Massimo, so he shrugged and went on his way, still wondering about that strange behaviour.

## Part ten (closing time)

Damien turned off the store lights from the switches in the rear of the hall, near the small bathroom, which he sometimes let his customers use, if needed.

He pressed his hand against a specific point of the mirror frame, which was attached to the wall at the end of the hallway. After a few seconds, something snapped from behind the mirror and this opened as a door.

“Good evening Damien – Giovanni greeted him, still holding his hand on the handle of the door which was a mirror on one side and a walnut door on the other – you had to work overtime again tonight?”

“Yes Giovanni, the last customers just left, Massimo and Sonia”.

“I know, I saw them. I followed everything from the kitchen monitors, while I was preparing dinner.”

Giovanni proceeded to open the faucets of the hot tub that was encased in a stone base, about one metre high from the ground, surrounded by scented candles which had already been lit.

“Dinner will be ready in thirty minutes. – Giovanni informed him, handing Damien a bathrobe and flip-flops and while heading towards the kitchen, he added – Massimo and Sonia seemed glad to meet each other!”

“Right! - Damien answered as he undressed - Between the two of them, Massimo was the happiest! Ahahahahahahahahaha!” And he let out a big laugh.

The walls of the room with the hot tub were made of stone; the ceiling was clad with beams, the floor around the tub in terracotta tiles and on a wall in front of the bath tub was a fake fireplace, one of those with a LED screen that makes that typical play of light of a burning fire.

This room opened onto a living room with coloured plastered walls, with sides in contrasting colours between them, and spot lights in the plasterboard ceiling. The play of light, very striking, created a warm and friendly environment in the winter and a cool one in the summer. The air conditioners were also recessed into the walls and not noticeable, being masked by fans of the same colour as the walls.

From the living room you could access the kitchen through a large opening in the dividing wall, panelled in wood. On one side of the room, in front of the bath tub, an iron and wooden staircase led to the upper floor, where there were two double bedrooms, two cloakrooms and two bathrooms.

A third bathroom, a guest bathroom, was between the kitchen and the dining room. From a window wall in the living room, one could see the garden, covered by a large pergola on which were woven red vine leaves, which blocked the view of the garden to the surrounding neighbours.

The house was a villa built in the 40s, who had undergone several renovations and some expansions, but which, however, over time had been surrounded and then hidden by more recent buildings, which now conformed to the urban facade of the outskirts of Florence. The shop was once the coach house of the villa, then it became its garage, then a laboratory and finally the business premises that had had more than one sign and type of business.

Just above the floor of Damien's shop, on the first and last floor, was his faithful and inseparable butler Giovanni's bedroom.

A second entrance, (second only for Damien, because he hardly ever used it), was in the garden, a small gate between two columns in polished stone and on which were engraved two letters, one per column, "D" and "G".

Once a guest told Damien that the two letters reminded him of the initials of two famous Italian designers.

The two columns also served to support an iron truss that was part of the pergola structure above the garden. The gate was of wrought iron, and the iron bars drew a series of squares, from the largest to the smallest, one inside the other.

Every night, after closing, Damien allowed himself a bath in the hot tub, letting his skin be pampered by the warm water and bubbles while listening to the music coming from the wired wireless, with speakers distributed in all the rooms. In order to completely relax, he loved to vape with his big battery while he was soaking in the water, usually preferring citrus aromas rather than tobacco. He had commissioned Giovanni, who was a man of great manual talents, a cherry wood cube in which he kept, perfectly fitted, a series of big batteries and atomizers already filled with liquids of various flavours. He always kept this cube near the bath tub, stuck in a customized recess, so that it couldn't overturn accidentally.

That Saturday night Damien seemed very amused, Giovanni could hear him laughing as if someone was telling hilarious jokes and from the kitchen, he could not help but echo his laughter, for it was very contagious.

After a while, he realized that he was the only one laughing and he started worrying about Damien and went to check in on him, finding his friend with his whole body immersed in the bath, with only his head out, rested on the edge, his arms relaxed on sides, eyes closed, the big battery placed in the cube.

The whirlpool had been switched off.

Giovanni returned to the kitchen, made sure to cover the dishes he had prepared, took a book and sat down near the tub, waiting for Damien to awaken.

A few minutes later, what Giovanni was expecting to come about happened, he looked up from the book he was reading and saw Damien open his mouth and say:

"It's all right, everything is under control".

## **CHAPTER TWO**

## **Part one (Damien's power - introduction)**

When Damien woke up from his sleep, he realized it was very late, being able to clearly see the pendulum at the end of the living room. The table in wild pear wood, placed in front of the large window, had been set. The courses were generally served without a tablecloth; Damien liked the feel of the natural wood under his hands. It was a table long enough to comfortably accommodate ten people, five in front of another five and it was always set with no one at the head of the table, (Damien believed that every diner was equal). It had been given to him by one of his dear friends from Armenia, to whom he had done a great favour.

Damien always sat viewing the garden covered by the pergola. Giovanni sat on the opposite side and, if Damien was on the right, Giovanni sat on the left. That evening, Giovanni had already dined and was only waiting for his friend to have a seat so he could serve him dinner.

The whole house had been renovated and furnished according to a meticulous design made by Damien. Every detail had a precise function and its own meaning. The most important elements of life were all represented in the house. Water, fire, earth, air and... The sacred.

The final element was represented by many well-placed objects, representing a particular religious belief. Damien respected each of these objects, but he didn't worship them. He knew their origin, history, meaning, and mystical power.

A large chandelier in Murano glass, hung over the dining area, made up of thousands of crystal droplets which sparkled with wonderful colourful effects. This was also a gift from another friend and anyhow, the whole house was full of objects sent to Damien from all over the world, donated by people who had received great favours from him.

The presence of these objects, some small but very valuable, others large and useful rather than precious, and all reminded Damien of the people they had belonged to and why they had been given to him. He was surrounded, in every corner of the house, by "the soul" of the person who had separated himself from that object.

They represented the spirit of sincere gratitude of the people he had helped.

If Damien could help someone, he asked in return for something that they were particularly fond of, that normally they would never give up. He never asked for money. This never. Damien had so much money at his availability, you couldn't even imagine how much! His family owned some oilfields in Tunisia and he was also a major shareholder of an energy company. However he didn't care to live in luxury. Certainly he had a beautiful home, but still it was just a small villa in Florence and not even in the centre. He had chosen to run a shop, selling items which at that time were met with fierce criticism by the tobacco lobby and as a result, he was burdened with very high taxation, as a deterrent. But whenever the road was difficult and uphill, Damien loved to tackle it, well aware of his extraordinary abilities and endowed by a particular power following a dramatic event.

So for Damien, the store was merely a façade.

He immediately fell for electronic cigarettes, as soon as they appeared on the Western market. His family used to smoke the hookah, rather than cigars or cigarettes. His grandfather was a pipe smoker and at home, Damien had many of them, inherited by the great old man.

Whenever Damien watched them, he remembered his grandfather who, while smoking them, deep in thought, began to speak in metaphors, stating some of the biggest truths of life Damien had ever heard.

As a child, he believed that his grandfather drew that wisdom from the aspiration of those pipes. For this reason he liked to think that these pipes were still impregnated with knowledge, wisdom and other virtues. Every now and then in the evening, when he felt drained of energy, he went to smell their scent; he stored them all in a large handmade terracotta bowl.

Damien stepped out of the tub. His robe was placed on a small reproduction of a Romanesque column with white marble of Carrara capitals, placed near the floor of the tub. Damien's body, naked, next to that column seemed the body of a gladiator. As he slipped on the dark bronze colour terry kimono, his movements showed off the muscles of his biceps and triceps, dorsal muscles, even his pectorals were well-defined and proportionate.

He trained his body every morning with the exercise equipment that he kept in the large wooden room in the garden, part of which he used as a sauna. He took care of his body and, although he had turned fifty-four years old a few months earlier, he had a youthful physique and smooth skin. The brown colour of his complexion, made it appear even more elastic than it already was.

He slipped on his leather flip-flops, walked to the table, while Giovanni was bringing in a tray of appetizers. It was Saturday night, so he deserved a special treatment.

Damien's chair, among the five arranged on one side and the other of the table, was the one with the highest backrest and with the armrests, carved from a master wood craftsman, who had made it look like a throne, with a seat made of padded crocodile skin. Of course, it was at the centre of the table. He used this throne only when he dined without guests and without Giovanni. Otherwise he sat on the same chair as the others.

The times he dined alone were always important and special moments. At last he could give all his attention to food and drinks, without having to focus his senses towards his guests, which assumed the most important role, and he entrusted Giovanni with the cooking responsibilities.

Did I already mention that "guest" in Damien's home was a rare word? In fact he didn't often have guests over. Those who had been fortunate enough to have been invited into that house didn't tell anyone about it. As it was also true that, if he did you a favour, you "really" had to give him in return something that you were really fond of.

Once someone tried to give him something trivial, or something that he could give up easily. But he still remembers the price he had to pay. Damien was strict and adamant on this point. He only helped people who agreed to his conditions: they had to give up their dearest possession. Anyway, they were only things.

The exchange consisted in "objects" one gave in return. But no money and no real estate.

All the people Damien helped couldn't possibly reveal it to others.

Otherwise their problem would immediately resurface and more intensely. Damien always warned about this. He did even more: he gave them signals.

Whenever the people who were being helped felt the intimate need to talk about it to someone, they immediately felt weak and devoid of force, so exhausted they almost felt faint. This phenomenon was a good warning that his powers worked well.

However, his power had a limit. This limit was potentially inborn in the person with whom he interfaced. This person had to be receptive. Damien had, let's say, a sort of "frequency"; if a person was prepared to capture it, then his power was effective. Otherwise Damien appeared to be just a very charming person and full of resources, one of those people that one rarely encounters. That's all.

## Part two (Damien's power)

Giovanni, in addition to being an excellent cook, knew how to shop. "There was no doubt about that!" Damien seemed to confirm, while savouring the appetizer with grilled vegetables and white grape risotto. Giovanni was seventy years old, ten of which he spent at the service of an upper class Florentine family and ten in Damien's home. The lengthy cohabitation of the two had consolidated a relationship of respect and mutual trust, and the knowledge of each other's taste. If Giovanni hadn't met Damien, maybe he would have lived in solitude. When he was fifty years old, he lost his wife, who was the only love of his life, in a car accident in which he also lost his right foot. He wore a prosthesis and walked with a considerable claudication, but he found a tangible help in Damien. However, Damien could only help him in the form of a job offer. Damien's power had no effect on Giovanni.

Between the two of them there was a great conspiracy, sometimes all they needed was a gesture, even the slightest, to communicate something. Their friendship turned into brotherhood. It was as if the thoughts of one were always intercepted by the other. They couldn't hide anything from each other. There were no secrets between them. Not even if they tried. And neither of them would have wanted to keep a secret from the other.

While Damien dined, Giovanni was in a corner of the kitchen which he had equipped with a bench dedicated to the preparation of the VAPE liquids. In a small cupboard were crammed several bottles of bases containing glycerine and glycol with or without nicotine and little bottles of various concentrations of aromas to be diluted.

Giovanni often experienced new tastes, by mixing aromas together and he always created excellent products ready to be vaporized, which invariably met the taste of his friend or that of some "special" customer.

Once prepared, he bottled them, each with its own hand written label. That night he created a special bottle and named it "Ainòs". While closing the cabinet, he saw the label's reflection on the door and smiled.

Damien looked up from his plate and looked out the window door in front of him, the one that led into the garden. What he saw would have scared another person to death.

He rested his elbows on the table, folded his hands, rested his chin on them and he kept his serene and steady gaze on the eyes of Chopin, his black cat, who was sitting on a stool on the other side of the window, stretching his front paws, with eyes that asked: "Please open up and give me a some kibbles!".

They looked at each other for a minute. Damien tilted his head to one side and Chopin imitated him, then he waved him "hello" and Chopin imitated him, then he raised his paw as if to knock on the glass. Finally Damien got up and opened the window to let him in.

"Chopin! All day long you stray away, and then you slowly come back at the end of the day! Come in and have yourself a comfortable stay!"

The cat didn't need to be told twice, he appreciated the rhymes, he jumped in and sat under Damien's chair, who sat back down at the table, and handed him a bowl of kibbles.

Every evening Chopin came back home at that hour. For the whole day he was out in the company of his stray friends with whom he grew up. Giovanni found him wheezing on the ground, with a strong rhinotracheitis, so he brought him to Damien, who healed him with his power.

Giovanni showed up at the house with the cat, a few years ago and all his friend had to do was to touch him to heal him.

Every time it happened to him he felt that same sensation. Giovanni called it a "tinglingstab". A tingling in his right or left hand, depending on which of the two touched the other person, and it almost began to vibrate.

Damien felt as if he had a nest of ants under the skin of his hand which woke up from a long sleep and began to move frantically, trying to get out of his body. Then felt a stabbing of sharp needles. And the stronger his receptiveness of the other person was, the stronger those stabs became. It was a feeling that would have made others scream in pain. Not Damien. He was used to it, since he was a boy.

Although the “tinglingstab” anticipated the effectiveness of his power in connection to those whom he touched, it was still a sad verdict. The pain he felt was strong, although he hid it very well, but he felt it, and how!

Therefore every time he touched a receptive being, he always felt the same pain. Damien never caressed Chopin. Nor did he ever pick him up. If anything, at times, Giovanni placed him on his legs, when he was sitting on the armchair in front of the television. The same thing also happened with people. For this reason, Damien could never have an intimate relationship with a woman (or a man). It was a weird spell. The individuals, with whom he could fall in love with, were always receptive to his power.

When he was twelve years old, among the girls who attended his school in an upscale neighbourhood of Tunis, Karima was his favourite. He fell in love with her and was glad to hear from her girlfriends that she also liked him. He had to tell her, and for a few days he pondered on how to do it, where and when to reveal his feelings for her. One afternoon, he collected his courage and went to the place where Karima and her friends usually played. When he arrived, he saw the most painful scene of his entire life. Karima’s mother was bending over her; she was lying lifelessly on the ground. Her friends were all around her, astonished, and couldn’t understand what had happened; they couldn’t bring themselves to cry nor scream. The girl was dead. An aneurysm had taken her away without notice. That condition had declared itself before Damien could, it proved to be quicker and less shy.

Damien sank to the floor near Karima and stroke her hair. In that moment he could no longer hear her mother’s cries of pain, he didn’t even hear the ambulance siren that had stopped next to him, he felt nothing but a strong pain in the hand that he rested on the girl’s head and in his head instead, he heard a persistent and deafening sound, he felt as though he had wasps inside his ears.

He got up, and saw that everything around him seemed to freeze. He ran away, far away, desperately, with his fingers in his ears, turning back to see if he was being chased by the lion that had bitten his hands, for they ached so much, but it was all in his mind. He ran far away and since then, he learned to live with those wasps in his ears and that lion’s bite on his hands. Forever.

The night that followed Karima’s death, she appeared to Damien in a dream. She was dressed in a white tunic and was luminous. Even her face radiated an unreal light. She wasn’t in a physical or recognizable space. Rather she was within a beam of sunlight and all around her, in the clear blue sky, the air shimmered, like the flickering on a hot tarmac in August, or in the desert with the sun at its zenith. Karima was speaking to him; her voice was a chorus of voices of different qualities, every word she said, seemed to be sculpted into his hands, as if they were indelible notes to be stored for the rest of his life. Karima brought him a gift and she left with Damien’s solemn promise not to tell anyone.

### Part three (anonymous letter)

That Saturday night, the starry sky and the cool air were good reasons to go for a walk outdoors. An Arabian moon, cut out with precise definition, allowed a glimpse of the rest of the moon which was in the shade, just as a beautiful woman wearing a robe, reveals her figure through a fine silk fabric. The neighbourhood had already been asleep for a while.

The streets were going to be cleaned at three o'clock in the morning; therefore the area was clear of the cars that usually parked there. A summery wind, which carried a faint sea fragrance, played with a tin can on the ground, causing it to tumble from time to time with a metallic sound, which was the only sound in the silence of the night, when Damien opened the gate and walked out of his property.

Chopin walked silently at his side, turning his nose to the right and to the left, but in a distracted and bored manner, with no desire to go hunting.

Giovanni had already gone to bed. He cleared the table and rearranged the kitchen before going to his room; he said goodnight to Damien and told him that he had prepared a new flavour "Ainòs".

"Tzu tusk!" Damien made a sound to call back the cat.

"Miaooooo!" Chopin replied, turning his head back toward his friend who was already a little far away from him.

"Come here! Stand by Me! Pssssst!"

The cat stopped and waited for Damien, yawning. Then, together, with the same quiet step, they made their way to the store, just around the corner of the street.

Once they arrived in front of the closed door, Damien observed that the security guard had already passed by, for he noticed the white slip that proved he had passed by the store placed in a track of the shutter.

Next to that track, on the ledge, was the store's mailbox. From the opening protruded a yellow envelope.

How strange... a letter, "why didn't the mailman bring it to the store this morning?" he thought as he pulled it out with guarded curiosity.

Attracted by the colour of the paper, lit by the light of a nearby street lamp, a plump but still hungry mosquito went to lie on Damien's hand. And it died right then and there.

He felt, with a certain pain, the stab that pierced his muscle between his thumb and his forefinger.

"Well... I no longer can do anything for you!" speaking to the small insect that was already in the cat's mouth.

Taking advantage of the street lamp, he opened the envelope, which was addressed simply to: "Mr Damien G.", and was written and delivered by hand, because it had no postage. Inside the envelope was a chequered sheet of paper, the kind that can be pulled from a small notebook and in fact, it had tear marks on the top edge.

If that mosquito had not had the arrogance to bite his hand, Damien would have been able to feel, although slightly, if the sender could be a potentially receptive individual.

But, since his hand was sore, he put the paper in his left hand. He didn't feel anything.

"What a shame!" He said to Chopin, who looked at him with his little head tilted sideways, and then, as if he understood him, (and indeed he had), he shook his head and sat down, waiting for the rest of the comments on the letter.

"Dear Mr Damien,

You sold an electronic cigarette

and a liquid refill with nicotine to my daughter,

who it is still a minor.



I'm sure It's not the first time that you break  
the Law and therefore I warn you that soon you'll receive the visit of the Anti-Adulteration Squad, I'm sure that they will find something for which they'll fine you.

Indeed, I hope so.

A pissed off parent”

A slow motion movie played fast in Damien's memory, who tried to remember who that girl to whom he had sold cigarettes and nicotine could be, although he was convinced of the absurdity of those accusations. Surely it had to be something recent, less than a month ago. Could it be that he had sold a cigarette to a minor? No, it wasn't possible, when he had doubts he always asked for a document. What if a friend bought it for her? This could be the most conceivable explanation.

How much time passes before a good parent realizes that his daughter vapes or smokes?

Oh God... it's not hard to understand that your child smokes. Their breath, clothes, hair, everything is saturated with the smell of smoke. But it's hard to notice that they vape! Of course the electronic cigarette is not a tool that comes on its own. It has a battery charger, a bottle of liquid, perhaps even a box, or a strap. A lot of things that need to be hidden, “Don't you think so Chopin?” He questioned the cat by thought alone.

The animal stood up on its feet, walked around itself, as if he was chasing his tail and resumed the direction from where they had come. Damien folded the paper, put it in his jacket pocket and continued walking towards the main street.

He turned just a moment to see if the cat had actually taken the road home.

## Part four (Massimo)

While Damien folded the anonymous letter, not far from him, Massimo put the letter he had received from the Italian Social Security Service in a drawer. In it was written that he was granted the attendance allowance he had requested for his elderly and disabled mother. That long-awaited financial help had finally arrived, and Massimo was to show up on the following Monday at the specific offices to formalize everything.

The letter, made up of just a few valuable lines, arrived on Friday morning. That Saturday night, before falling asleep, he read it over again. Good news usually heralds a good dream, as bad news brings bad ones. Without even thinking about it that much, Massimo related the many positive things that had happened to him in that short lapse of time, to his meeting with Damien. Not that he thought that Damien had some kind of special power; rather he credited the events in his favour to his courageous decision to quit smoking. And he had made that decision prompted by Damien's encouragement. Something in his mind had changed.

In re-reading the letter, in Massimo's head happened the same thing that happened to Damien. Just like two people sitting in a movie theatre at the same time, watching two different movies, in two different theatres at the same cinema: Memory Cinema.

Following his father's death, when Massimo was just eighteen years old, the world had become a hostile place to him. Finishing school and graduating as a surveyor had involved considerable sacrifices. His father was the only one who had a steady job, but he didn't even accrue the minimum of his pension contributions, while his mother, a housewife who did a little domestic work here and there, was able to earn just enough money for their daily expenses. They needed to pay their mortgage. When they signed the papers with the bank for the purchase of the apartment, they didn't even consider insurance in case of death. "Who'll kill me?" Massimo's father asked. But in the 90s, cancer killed a lot of people.

So Massimo had to find an evening job and found one in a bar in the historic centre of Florence. One of those bars that closed at two in the morning, if all went well. Therefore, he worked the shift from seven p.m. to two a.m., got home at two thirty in the morning, slept five hours and went to school. After lunch, he napped for an hour, studied, had a snack and ran off, back to the bar. When he was twenty years old, he was so skinny, he seemed ill. Immediately after graduation things seemed to get better. An established engineering agency was looking for a technical designer and Massimo found his ideal job for ten years. Then came the moment when his pride beat his rationality. He decided to take the plunge and open his own Studio as a Surveyor and try to become a self-employed professional. And that's when his problems began. The construction crisis, the few customers who paid him, did so late or at a very low price; the weight of bureaucracy, the thousands of complex rules which limited his project ideas and, finally, his mother was stricken with Alzheimer's disease. This combination of circumstances triggered a steady and progressive dissatisfaction in Massimo, which turned into a state of depression, from which, however, he now seemed to be slowly coming out of. The decision to quit smoking and the fact that he was succeeding; his meeting with Sonia, (and the fact that he liked her!); having found a new world, the "VAPE" world, which led to new acquaintances, such as Damien's shop and other Vapers that he had met in the meanwhile; these events were, in Massimo's mind, giving a new sense to his life. Maybe it wasn't that bad at all.

In his room, when he turned off the light and went to sleep it was pitch dark.

Unlike Sonia, he preferred to sleep in absolute darkness. Two years of evening work at the bar made him adopt these sleep habits. After the natural light of day, and the artificial lights of the long night at the bar, once he got home, it was nice to be able to close his eyes and stay in the dark. It was also nice to open his eyes for a second and still be in the dark. He had few hours to rest at night, and those few hours had to be "night." Deep night.

But until then he had never felt that unsteadiness, in his sleep; that feeling of being precariously balanced on the edge of a rock, like a very high trampoline on a black and wavy sea, which he felt but couldn't see, because it was totally immersed in the dark night, no moon, no stars.

He could distinctly hear the roar of the waves, he felt his face being whipped by the wind and he knew that his body was wavering on an unstable surface, insecure over that horrible abyss.

He couldn't open his eyes. He was trying to move the muscles of his eyelids, which were so heavy they overcame all his efforts. He was aware of the fact that, if he opened his eyes, he would still be in the dark, but in his room. He knew it, therefore he was between sleep and wakefulness, but he felt as though he was hypnotized. Surrendering to that feeling, he felt the urge to let himself fall into space, for he realized that it would be an imaginary jump, and he was sure that through that leap he would finally wake up. But could he be sure of it?

At last, a man from behind took his hand, held it and miraculously pulled him back, saving him from falling off the cliff. Massimo didn't have time to see his face because he woke up.

Good news doesn't always herald good dreams. And even the opposite isn't true.

## Part five (Giorgio)

When Sonia went back to sleep, that same Saturday, her nightmare was soon followed by other thoughts and dreams, luckily less troubling, and it vanished like a vague and clouded memory.

Sunday morning she woke up in a good mood, and she switched the alarm button on to radio mode, already tuned to her favourite frequency: Radio Italia solo Musica Italiana [a radio channel which plays only Italian music]. In doing so, she felt the usual satisfaction, for she beat the clock, anticipating the ring. Maybe she had never even heard that sound, except for the first time, in order to set the volume.

Sonia had an inner timer, if she had to get up at a certain hour; she did it automatically, as if she had set within herself a very reliable and accurate mental alarm.

The radio seemed to make fun of her, for at that moment they were playing Venditti's song: "...What a nice Sunday, spent at home waiting, but the phone won't ring anymore, and your boyfriend ran off..."

"That's not true, my boyfriend will call me, you can be sure of that!" Said Sonia, yawning.

As a matter of fact, she didn't have time to finish her breakfast and the phone rang, contrary to the singer Venditti's predictions.

"Good morning!" Giorgio greeted her from the other end.

"Hi Giogì, did you sleep well?" Answered Sonia, almost choking on the toasted bread she was chewing.

"Yes... I'm leaving the house now; I'll be at your place in twenty minutes, start inflating the wheels of your bike!"

"Hmm... No, I'll wait for you. I don't feel like pumping so early in the morning!" She laughed mischievously.

"Hahahaha! It wouldn't hurt you! All right, I'm on my way!" He hung up, already excited.

Twenty minutes for Giorgio were five minutes for Sonia. A ridiculously short time to dress, put her make-up on, make her bed and clear away the breakfast table. The morning was sunny. Being so warm already at that hour in the morning, she could wear a pair of khaki-coloured shorts, a green polo, of a fairly consistent fabric, so her breasts wouldn't show, a pair of tennis shoes and a colourful clip to hold her hair back. A little eye shadow to contrast with her brown eyes, a dab of foundation and mascara, a coat of lip gloss, a spray of Bulgari perfume on her neck, wrists and she was ready.

Her bike was on the terrace. She checked the condition of the wheels and they seemed okay. She had already prepared a couple of sandwiches and drinks and put the parcel in her front basket.

She pulled the bike onto the landing, while Giorgio rang the intercom.

"Giorgio, can you come up and get my bike please?" Sonia pleaded as she opened the door.

With his athletic physique, Giorgio climbed the four flights of stairs taking the steps two by two. His lock of long golden blond hair, swayed at every hop. He wore sportswear, shorts and a white shirt with an unbuttoned Korean collar, ankle socks, running shoes, and on his wrist a gold Rolex. He had locked his Mountain Bike to the light pole in the street. "Just to put the lock on, (Sonia thought), it must have taken him five minutes", knowing him, the lock and his precious Giant bike.

Sonia could smell the scent of the Armani fragrance *Acqua di Giò*, while he was still on the third flight of stairs.

Giorgio knew how to dress, but always exaggerated with perfumes, deodorants and aftershaves. Anyhow he had no intention to save on such products. His parents were the owners of one of the most sought after perfume shop in Florence.

They made a lot of money. Giorgio was used to a worldly life since he was a boy, for he grew up between private parties in prestigious villas, fashion shows where his father's company logo

was omnipresent as official sponsor and important gatherings to which the whole family attended, including Buddy the bulldog that everyone feared, not for his bite but for his drool.

Giorgio was a handsome guy. He was rich, (and this made him even more handsome), well-educated, (sometimes unbearably so), gracious, (sometimes...).

But he was empty. Yes, empty like an empty Nutella jar. Or rather, like an already labelled jar, left-over by Nutella's manufacturer.

Sonia often wondered if she had ever even gotten a whiff of that chocolate hazelnut cream. However, she was content. It was a nice jar after all, she would have filled it with something, and she would find a way to do it.

The jar tumbled into her house, while Sonia was putting her electronic cigarette into her backpack.

"I'm here!...What's that?" The jar... Giorgio asked Sonia, (without panting).

"My electronic cigarette! I bought it a while ago, from that shop nearby. It works, you know."

"Does that mean that you've decided to quit smoking?" Giorgio asked, intrigued to the point that he stuck his head into the backpack to see "that thing" better.

"Well, at least I'll try. Shall we go?" Meanwhile she kissed him on the lips.

"Bring the bike downstairs, then we can talk, I have some things to tell you".

Actually, Sonia was not so sure she wanted to tell Giorgio of her tests, not today at least, not during a nice bike ride.

But she had to do it anyway. It was her boyfriend's right to know about it. Giogio, (as she called him), would have been hurt if she had kept it hidden from him, even just for a few days, or even worse if he had heard it from someone else.

They had been going out for about six months, since they met in his father's perfume shop, where she shopped every once in a while. He liked her for her kindness and her refined elegance; it was almost as if she belonged to another era. She was testing the new Cavalli line, when he came up to her to suggest a fragrance, (which she ended up buying). So he was a man who knew her tastes. They spoke only two words, maybe three, one by her and two by him. Giorgio was the most loquacious between the two of them. It took only a lunch date at the Sushi bar in the centre, then a dinner date in Greve in Chianti. A candle and a good bottle of Chianti wine was enough to bring them together, eye to eye, hand in hand.

Their first dates were sweet. They often dined together in the evening, at her house, or at his house, sometimes out, in fantastic places: by the sea, on a hill, all places with breath-taking views.

But not very often at his home, though. Giorgio lived in an annex of his parents' villa. To enter one had to go through the main gate that opened onto the driveway that ended in front of the entrance to his parents' home. Every time, coincidentally, they were awake. Either because they were giving a party, or because they were playing Buraco with friends, or a business chat with agents that had come to dinner, well... Sonia was always a little reluctant to participate in those presentations and (formal) cordialities.

When they went to Giorgio's house, she had to dress in a certain manner and, "oh my God, what a bore!", that was something she had soon discovered to be a burden with which she had to learn to live with.

When you fall in love as kids, in the other person you see the image of the love you've dreamt of, and you love the idea that the feeling perfectly matches your expectations. Often, these love affairs end because you discover that they were simply "teenage crushes," so, once you get over that sense of disappointment that dissolves in a pint of tears, you jump into another affair.

At twenty years old, things become more serious, but they are just like cartoons that change the theme: first they are frogs and princesses, then they become Minnie and Mickey Mouse and Fiona and Shrek. The love affairs of twenty year old people are heroic because they have to fight against the

prejudice and criticism of parents and friends; they are lived as passionate adventures with moments of romance which, I'm sure, will never come back again.

In your thirties, your heart has already built a shield. It's the time in which your rationality wakes up and, after all the beatings it's taken, it starts hitting back. So on the one hand there's your heart that tells you to follow it, because it became so strong that it doesn't believe it can be wrong, on the other hand there's your mind that continuously places limitations, painstakingly trying to sabotage you, because it wants to protect itself from deception, and be the only one at the centre of your universe. Our mind is jealous, terribly jealous of our heart.

Four months into their relationship, Sonia realized that the Giorgio's beauty was nothing more than a golden mask that hid the weakness of his personality. At thirty-six years old, one is a grown man, he can't depend on his Mom. But he revealed himself to be a boy who never made a decision without his mother's approval. For him it was unthinkable to manage his life in total independence. Sonia should have realized this, when she saw that he still lived in an annex of his parental home. But we all know that, when we fall in love, we tend to see and enhance just the things we like about the other.

Thus she felt let down one day, when they argued about which dress she should wear for his brother's wedding.

That quarrel had irritated her very much. Up until then she had appreciated the fact that Giorgio knew her tastes, be it perfume, flowers or jewellery. At first, to calm herself down, she blamed her disappointment on the particular circumstance that this was an occasion concerning "Giorgio's very respectable family", so she held her prejudice responsible, since she disliked his mother. Then her anger escalated, when she saw Giorgio calling "his mother", for advice. In the end Sonia had to surrender and wear a wide mesh net dress, which she never wore again following that ceremony, during which everything bothered her and made her feel uncomfortable; although it was one of her favourite dresses, that day she wanted to wear something different, more in tune with her mood.

She forgave him, though it took a week for her to digest it; a session of wild sex was enough to make her forget about it, one of those moments in which Giorgio brought out the real man, the handsome macho that he was, at least in bed.

However, since that day, Sonia began to see Giorgio under a different light. She removed the glasses of the girl engaged to Prince Charming, the ones with a tortoise butterfly shaped frame and with fuchsia-coloured lenses, and was now able to see her boyfriend through the naked eyes of a mature woman who knows what she wants. She watched him pedalling in front of her, on his Mountain Bike, she nodded to him when from time to time he turned back to make sure she was following him at a safe distance. She studied him. Undoubtedly he had a beautiful body. His nimble legs, with muscular calves, broad shoulders and the sweaty shirt clung to his back highlighting the well-sculpted backbones. When he got up from his seat to push harder, Sonia could see his butt. Small but firm and round. She was proud of having such a handsome boyfriend; she thought that any woman would want him, and some of her girlfriends had also told her so. She could smell his scent, mixed with the acrid smell of sweat and it was a pleasant mix that intoxicated her.

"Slow down, Giogio!" She called breathlessly, from behind.

"Excuse me darling, come on, let's ride together now!" And he let her catch up with him.

"I have a city bike, I can't keep up with you if you go so fast!" Sonia pleaded.

"Okay, I'll slow down. In this stretch of road there are less cars, we can ride close to each other", he reassured her.

They were going through Via del Barco, towards Cascine Park. Damien's shop was in that street: "Clouds of smoke steam cigarettes". Obviously, it was closed on Sunday. Sonia saw it and pointed it out to Giorgio.

"Look, that's the store in which I bought my electronic cigarette!" She said, pointing to the sign.

“Come on! - He exclaimed, surprised – do you know that there was a small perfume shop here which belonged to customer of my father’s?”

Without getting off their bikes, they both put a foot on the ground to steady themselves and stared at the shutter for a few seconds. He tried to remember how the perfume shop that used to be there had been and she thought of Damien, wondering what he was doing at that moment and how he spent his Sunday mornings.

Sonia gazed at the first and last floor of the building; she saw two windows with closed blinds. At first it seemed strange that she instinctively compared the two closed windows with the closed shutter of the shop, as if they were connected with each other. She remembered Massimo, who the night before told her “Damien spends the night in there!” For a moment, a thought crossed her mind and made her guess that Damien lived there.

It lasted a second, in fact. She didn’t think it was important. However, wherever Damien lived, she doubted that at ten o’clock in the morning, he could still be sleeping. He didn’t seem like a guy who sleeps in on Sunday. He was probably out, taking a walk. Or he was at home, with his wife and children. Maybe even his grandchildren. Could he be a grandfather?

“What are you thinking of?” Giorgio asked.

“About Damien”, Sonia said, without taking her eyes off the two windows.

“Who is Damien?” Asked Giorgio nervously.

“He’s the owner of this shop. A very exceptional man”. Sonia said with conviction.

Too much conviction for Giorgio, who at first was curious, then became grumpy.

“An exceptional man. What does that mean? What’s so exceptional in a man that sells electronic cigarettes? He’s a tobacconist 2.0! That’s what he is!”

“Okay, you’ll explain it to me later” Giorgio said, starting to pedal again.

“Come on Giogio! He’s twenty years older than me, he could be my father!” Sonia mocked him, starting to ride her bike, too.

## Part six (the pace of time)

Not every day is lived with the same emotional intensity; not necessarily does every day give us a particular event to be kept in mind. Every day is unique, another gift to our existence, but only some of them are really significant, or sometimes just a few rare moments of the day, or even just one moment on a certain day which can change our fate.

What you are reading is a story, told in the past, as it will also be read by someone in the distant future. It's not the diary of someone in particular. Here you read a story that has its own rhythm. The rhythm is given by important events, or at least considered as such, that happened over time. This story has a rhythm, such as a music sheet of a song: within it you won't find all the music arrangements, not even all the words in a dictionary; there are the notes that are needed, the right pauses, and the right words.

This story has the same rhythm that we give our lives, beating the rhythm to every true emotion.

Damien's shop was one of the most popular of its kind in Florence. VAPE, however, had not yet been recognized as a viable alternative to traditional cigarettes; it wasn't advertised. Following the laws in force for tobacco products, the tobacco lobby made strong pressure on the Government to ensure that the e-cigs didn't get good publicity.

The financial laws of the year 2014, furthermore, brought the entire sector onto its knees, because of the taxation on inhalation liquids, regardless of whether they contain nicotine or not. The tax which weighed on the liquids was so high that many of those who were willing to switch to electronic smoke gave up.

Therefore, as a result of the false and alarming information given by the media, and because of the rise in the price of the liquids up to twice their initial cost, the closures of electronic cigarette stores multiplied with the same extent and speed with which they had opened two or three years earlier.

As if all this wasn't enough, the e-cig market wasn't controlled by the municipal "neighbourhood" rules. In the same street of a small province, you could find the signs of two if not three VAPE shops.

The uncontrolled openings of these stores, one next to the other, were due to the fact that there were vacant shops in abundance due to the strong economic crisis that was crossing the country and the prices of rent had lowered significantly.

The boom of the electronic cigarettes, and the low initial investment needed to open this type of activity, encouraged people to reinvent a new job, for they could start with a very low amount of money; sometimes the money resulting from a severance pay. For all these reasons, several shops were run by incompetent staff or improvised traders.

Damien instead kept up well. His shop wasn't in plain sight for it was located in an unfrequented suburban street; however, whoever came across it came back and spread the voice. Even in a big city rumours get around. Maybe they take a little longer to reach those interested, however, sooner or later they do.

Damien's customers became regulars and whether they purchased or not, it was indifferent to him, for he already had a lot of money, (and a lot!). But he didn't show it off. Damien wasn't the type who liked to flaunt his wealth. He lived a private life, home and shop, as they say in these cases.

He hardly ever left his environment, which was composed of the neighbourhood in which he had settled since he came to Italy.

When he left his area, he went very far away from it. He returned to Tunis, to visit his family. Every summer he went back for at least a month.

Thus, also during that summer of August 2015, Damien closed the shop for the summer holidays, wished Giovanni a nice vacation, gave him a conspicuous cash bonus and left him the house keys.



Even with his customers he behaved like the gentleman he was. Already starting in July he had begun giving away small gifts like bottles of good wine, t-shirts and caps with the store logo. Therefore Clouds of smoke was being carried on tour throughout Italy and this made him happy.

From April to the end of July, Massimo and Sonia visited the store more frequently and often the two happened to meet in the store. They both seemed to consume their e-liquids in the same time period. Furthermore, Massimo had taken a mnemonic note of the days and hours in which Sonia attended the store. Whenever they met in the store, they both were visibly happy. It was a chance for them to chat, exchange their vape experiences, recommend what liquid to buy and talk about many things. Massimo was a Surveyor, Sonia was an Architect and the passion for their work, their many common notions, was their point of contact.

Once, towards the end of May, Damien gave Massimo a small VAPE lesson. He was grateful, not so much for having learned the right way to puff an electronic cigarette, but for having guessed the right way to attract a girl's interest, and Sonia was the girl he wanted to attract with a great passion.

"You see, Massimo, - Damien said to him one morning during a VAPE lesson - the electronic cigarette must be puffed with a certain method. It's not a burning tobacco roll. You probably also learned to puff cigarettes the right way, so they wouldn't turn it into a fireball that couldn't be smoked! You must also learn to master the electronic smoke, which in the end is only steam."

"Teach me, Damien, - asked Massimo, as if he were addressing a master of martial arts - I want to know all the secrets of the e-cigs. I want to become an expert like you!"

Damien looked at him smiling, with those eyes that Massimo felt like a paternal pat on his head:

"All right, then listen to me. With this tool it's important to learn the rhythm of the puffing time. The pause between a puff and the other must not be too long or too short. It's up to you if you want to take a lot of puffs during a VAPE session, or just a few. You have to give the resistance time to glow enough to atomize the liquid in order to savour its aroma. You must then give it time to cool, before taking a second puff; you have to let it unwind. Then you can puff, long but gently, without haste; and you will see a lot of steam coming out of your mouth."

These words reminded Massimo of Sonia. While he tried to inhale, release the steam, waited to puff again, he thought that even with women he had always used the wrong method. He was being too pushy. He was trying to "pull" her to him too fast. He needed to learn the right timing, a steady pace but precise and constant, like a drop falling on a rock, day after day, year after year, until it digs a hole in the hard stone. He wanted to dig a hole in Sonia's heart.

He wanted to enter her heart and stay there, shelter her with his love and comfort her with his constant presence.

You might think that Massimo considered Sonia's heart as hard as stone, and as a matter of fact, sometimes he did. Because by now he knew that she had another man and that her heart was off limits to others.

Sonia seemed impossible to conquer, like a fortress which enclosed trunks filled with gold and jewellery, but they were already assigned to another keeper.

He didn't know, however, that she was going through a rough time with Giorgio. If he had known, he would have discovered that the music was changing for him, another rhythm, and another time.

## **Part seven (black spots at the rest area)**

September tiptoed in. Actually, towards the end of August there had been a hint that it was on its way, but it was not enough to beat the high temperature of its predecessor. The African heat brought by the anticyclone persisted undaunted.

The Italian beaches swarmed with the blue, green and white colours of thousands of open umbrellas. The sight from above was baffling; the Beautiful Country, as Italy was named, was a contradiction of highways clogged traffic and, at the same time, beaches still crowded by swimmers.

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