

Flavio Soriga

# Come loose your dogs

*To Donatella, Antoine, Federica, Carlotta,*

*to those mad as hatters,*

*to their light steps.*

He walks through the city fighting mutely against the March cold, he's tall and thin, with wide cheekbones and deep-set eyes, people stop to look at him, he's handsome and knows it, his name is Elias and at eighteen he fled from an island in the South and, today, his father called him for the first time in years, after a century of silence between them, and hatred from the boy for that man who one September evening, wounded him forever, he fled from a land of sunshine and now he battles with seven million souls in a metropolis-world.

He's been to see a Mexican film in the little cinema at the Angel, a story of dogs and betting and life which scratches and makes you bleed, a story of people as desperate as he was when he arrived here, in a dirty wicked city the likes of which he'd never seen before, nor imagined - You can't catch me - he says to his father in his thoughts - I'm not yours any more, I'm nobody's - he's twenty-three and it seems a lot to him, he's got a weekend job and a bed-sit on the border between the bohemian quarter and the tower block suburbs bursting with Turkish and Indian and Pakistani families - I'm coming to see you, I'm coming tomorrow - his father had said on the phone, Elias draws tight his coat, lifting the lapel

to cover his ears, he likes the restaurants on this street and the Arsenal flags outside the old pubs that never change, he's learnt to be alone as you can only be when home is at the other end of the continent and your cousin lent you the money to escape and your father gave you up for dead, he's learnt to die of exercises and gizmos and runs and stretches in the gym and he's studied twice as much as the others and got better grades than anyone and worked night and day and shared rooms with four others, he's learnt not to think of the people he left behind and to forget his city of sunshine facing Africa, the summer mornings on the virgin beaches of his land, he walks in the March frost and doesn't even feel the rain which, at the beginning, used to drive him mad, made him scream, die, the greyness of the sky and the absence of stars, he likes the smell of a hundred kitchens of the hundred countries at this crossroads of restaurants and cafés and the burble of languages at his school, he likes greeting the ticket collectors in their tatty jumpers with a nod of the head, he's learnt their English, the language of raw immigrants and of silent curses against the British and their fucking money, he walks down Upper Street and he knows this place is everything, it's the whole world, fun and sweat, the exploited and the millionaires, just like thousands of other streets in this city, in this whole Kingdom.

- I am master of my pain - the words of a song heard a thousand times and seemingly written for him - I am master of my own memories - he thinks of his father, of their voices on the phone, aged, broken up, at how confused he always feels at the start of difficult conversations - I'd like to see you, Elias, really, I'd like to see you and talk to you - and he hadn't been able to say anything, his strength seemingly gone, a

captain without control, his memories thrusting to come out - I'm coming tomorrow, we'll talk a bit, alright? - and he hadn't said anything, and now it's evening and he's alone, sitting at a corner table in a French café done up in warm wood, leafing through a magazine for health addicts in love with the Mediterranean and olive oil, a friendly café where he sometimes takes refuge from the shopping frenzy outdoors, to calm his thoughts or escape from the cold of the streets, it's evening and he's alone and orders fruit juice and croissant, the owner comes to serve him, she's a blonde divorcee with big eyes and a fine voice and she likes to talk, they've looked at each other and spoken a few times, in the evening, always of an evening, before closing time, when the place is almost empty and she has the time to sit with him, as she's doing now, she's good company and has nice legs, she has something to drink too, fizzy wine, they talk of poverty and new social classes, of art and how it should be brought to the suburbs, of Béjart and Almodovar, the woman smiles, she fidgets constantly with her hair, suggests he drop by at her place, after closing, they might watch a film, he accepts - You shouldn't be coming - he tells his father into the cold night, he walks fast up the avenue looking for tobacco and cigarette papers.

Often he kills time in the evenings wandering where his feet take him, one hour of pool with the Stoke Newington Turks, a few hands of cards with the Neapolitans at the Circolo Vesuvio, rootless types like him who haven't learnt to cancel out their old life, to forget the voices and the faces - I am master of my own pain - Elias bears the weight of distance without complaining, thoughts of the future are enough for him, the knowledge that one day he will make a great ballet dancer, that the future

will redeem everything, he thinks of the day to come and of the train to the airport, at what they might say to each other, he and that stranger who gave him his name, he thinks of the day to come and of their eyes and hands, an embrace which might cancel everything out, which might not change anything - You shouldn't be coming - he thinks - You should've forgotten me, just as I have you- he's forgotten, cancelled out, mastered the memories that scratched away inside and hurt him badly, so badly, every day, every evening, every hour, he's gone beyond the borderline, it seems to him he's managed it, at least it's as if he'd never lived that other distant life.

The last April of that life, a century ago, it's hot on the island, the kids skip class to run around in the parks, along the long and still deserted beach, Elias is eighteen and about to take his exams, then the holidays, real summer, the end of school, high school, the train to catch each morning, it's April and they're lying on the sand, they're alone on that stretch of beach and his cousin embraces him kissing his neck - What will you do now? - he doesn't know how to respond, he doesn't want to think about what's next for him, about university, choices to make, he'd like to enjoy the sun and these shy furtive kisses - I don't know, I'm going to Rome for an audition, a good school, in London - his cousin looks at him and says nothing, he knows Elias has no money, that his father will never agree, he says nothing, goes on kissing him, stroking his arms, whispering in his ear - I care about you - he says.

- I've cancelled it all out - thinks Elias - It took me years and now he's coming and making it all come true again, painful and close again -

they're on a rug he reckons is Indian, worth a couple of months' rent to him, they've got no clothes on and this blonde is smiling at him and stroking his hair - You're so handsome - she tells him, and repeats it and sighs, they've made love and Camden Town is a riot of noises and faces beyond the windows of the big shadowy living-room, she looks at him and smiles, she asks him to tell her about his country, his sea, about how it felt at the start in this city - It must have been tough - she says - But also wonderful, I guess, to live like that, like a bet, with no money, without anyone, only ballet and art, in some ways you're lucky - Elias doesn't answer, he's lost in the pictures and the African masks on the walls, Oriental ceramics and Mexican tapestries, he'd like to talk to her about his school, about the company which will take him on some day, he'll be the best of the lot, the best looking, he'd like to tell her about his classmates and the rivalries that destroy every hint of friendship, of the choreographers who invite you to dinner and you can't say no, of the primi ballerini who keep going on coke and alcohol, anorexics with broken mucous membranes and frayed nerves, he isn't able to talk about all this, of these years and what they've cost him - No, it wasn't really too tough - he thinks of his father and what they will say to each other, of how it will be.

What saved him when he first came to the city was a walkman, the dark voice of Nick Cave, Italian films behind Leicester Square in the afternoons, when he first arrived in the city he found a room-share for four in the middle of nowhere, two tube lines to take every morning, whole days spent seeking work, hours and mornings and afternoons walking through the greyest suburbs, miles of identical terraced houses, gardens

ranked onto the street, reggae music played to the max and the Arab and African faces cooked by far-away suns, when he came to the city he met some guys from his country on the Jubilee line, on their way back from the usual round of interviews and CVs stopping off at caffs and pubs, five boys from his island who invited him to their house, pizza-boys and barmen and an assistant chef with a huge house in Kilburn, evenings off blown on electronic games, on rented videos, evenings off lost in getting drunk on gin sitting around the rug, nostalgic chats about the island and plans for mad home-comings, off-road jeeps and designer clothes to amaze relations and friends, he hasn't got anyone to go back to, nobody to amaze, he's cancelled it all out, for him there was nothing before this city, before today.

His mother strokes his hair singing a song that only she knows - My little boy, my little boy - she whispers in his ear, he's not a little boy, he's sixteen with long strong legs, he cries hiding his head in the pillow, his mother has long blonde hair and the sad face of a woman who knows her son is growing up and is no longer hers, but belongs to the world and to life and to new and painful loves, if his father were to see them, him crying and her comforting, he'd get angry and rant about balls needing to drop, about what a man must be and what he can't do, his father is good but he never cries, his father tells him he doesn't look like a man with those skinny legs, shaved chest and light movements, as if undecided, as if dancing, his father yells when Elias doesn't want to eat meat - Who's ever heard of anyone upset by steak, who thinks blood's disgusting, and what's in our veins if not blood, and haven't we always eaten meat? - he yells when he hears talk of theatre and poetry, his father works hard and

goes out to the bar every evening, he'd die for his wife and the family, he says so all the time, he doesn't talk to his son, he says he's unable to, that he doesn't understand him, that they're too different, his mother listens to the secrets, his tangled love affairs and bitter boy's betrayals and she strokes his hair and calls him little boy, my little boy.

When he first arrived in the city he learnt not to ask himself questions, to sleep as little as possible and stay alert, to talk little and to cancel out his father and that evening in September, to seek out a woman who might love him without asking for anything, he found and lost these women, one a month, one a day, he found men from countries further South than his own, loaded Orientals and Caribbeans with infinitely long legs, in the hours wasted with the guys from home he studied their love for the black nights in the furthest suburbs, he saw them leaving home lightly made up, laughing from garage to garage until late morning, one tab and a shot of rum, a wrap passed from hand to hand, snort and pass it on, snort and pass it on, wraps bought in bulk with a month's money, he's changed room and home a thousand times, after furious rows for reasons which make him laugh to remember, and maybe it was always just the burden he'd brought with him from the Island, an inability to talk to anyone, an inability to find anything to talk about, only dance and pounds sterling, nothing else.

He was alone for weeks and months, music on the walkman and lessons and heavy rain, a starless sky and some dark verses to keep him company - My God - he said to himself a thousand times in front of the mirror - I don't want anything except to exist and to dance, to move my

arms to the music and invent steps for the stage and make the audience  
mine - and every time the mirror showed him the face of a boy who was  
slimmer and more handsome, quicker and livelier and more alone, far  
from the beaches and sunsets over the port, a man with neither mother  
nor father, without women who know how to love him for more than one  
night, dreams and rage, his heart harder every evening, the border behind  
him, far away.

- Stay over - says the woman, she holds him tight by the shoulders, her  
mouth on his neck, he frees himself slowly, doesn't kiss her or look at  
her -Come on, stay over, stay here - he doesn't kiss her or look at her, he  
writes his mobile number on a piece of paper, leaves it there on the rug,  
under her knickers, goes to the bathroom, washes, thinks of a plane from  
the Island and the stranger it will bring, returns to the living room, looks at  
her, she seems to be sleeping - You're sad, my love, too sad for your age  
- she's talking to him but as if in her sleep, as if lost in her thoughts - Stay  
with me tonight, you're too sad, you can't manage, not on your own, so  
young, how old are you? - Elias says nothing, he goes out into the street  
breathing hard, it's raining, he pulls up his coat to cover his head but gets  
wet all the same - I'm not sad - he tells himself - I'm alone and I'm fine the  
way I am, I'm not sad.

His mother knows his secrets and his loves but she doesn't have the  
strength to defend him against his father, against his fury at the gossip  
about his son, the titters which reach his ears in the village bars, his  
mother seems suddenly older, she doesn't stroke his hair and talk to him  
any more, she asks him what he wants to do when he leaves school and

why he goes into town every night, he doesn't tell her about the lessons or his cousin, he feels she wouldn't understand, that his choices bring pain he can't share, that he must keep to himself, to protect his mother and this father who doesn't understand, his mother pledges her love but she doesn't want to lose him - What do you want to study, Elias? - he doesn't reply, it doesn't seem important to him.

It wasn't just the beginning that was tough, it was always tough, at every moment, because of money and time, school which enslaves you, six seven eight hours of lessons and tests, every day Monday-Friday, even Saturdays sometimes, Sundays dying on an easy chair in front of the TV, lying on the floor staring at the wall and gathering strength, it's always been tough, Elias is at school one evening, everyone's left, he's the only one there, two hours more than the others of stretches and exercises, trying out some steps from a piece he's got in his head - Come loose your dogs - he'd like to call it, like a snatch from his night-time singer - Come loose your dogs upon me- goes the song - And let you hair hang down, you are a little mystery to me, every time you come around- the boy imagines the music and plays out love and jealousy in front of the mirror, he works hard, happy to tire himself out, he showers and changes, has a sandwich with Max, the night watchman, two metres of muscle and tattoos - But you - he says to the boy - You're foreign, what do you do in the evening? - and he talks about his nights as a teenager in discos and clubs, about his new love, of how he doesn't feel like going out now, of a low-cost home at the North end of town and of mortgages and banks, ten and twenty year plans, Elias finishes his sandwich without a word, says goodbye to his friend of one evening - We're the same age, me and you

- says Max with a smile, he nods.

It's his last September in his country, the last day of that life, night is falling, his cousin's apartment is small and bare, big rain-clouds race across the sky, they've eaten and smoked, they're wearing boxers and T-shirts, it's hot in the living room, Indian music on the stereo, they look out of the window, the bay and the lagoon, the sea is dark already, only the lighthouse pierces the blackness, they are clasped in an embrace they can't control, maybe they don't want to, his cousin is called Fabio and has a job and is ten years older than him, Elias likes his face and his hands but all this has like a bitter taste, he doesn't understand why but he feels it, in his mouth and in himself, Fabio kisses his ears and his neck, claws at his skin claspng him tighter and tighter, it feels sweet, though, this strength - I love you - he says softly, Elias doesn't know what to say, he lets himself be kissed.

He answers the phone, the woman asks him what he's doing, if he wants to see her, he says yes, he suggests she come with him to the airport, if she has the time and feels like meeting a plane arriving from across the border with a piece of his past on board - Maybe I'll explain later, if I'm up to explaining anything - she doesn't understand but accepts, they meet in Camden, in a café near her house - Let's grab something to eat at my place, is there time? - Elias nods, orders some wine, looks at her: she's beautiful, always smiling without ever seeming vacant - Why did you call me? - he asks kissing her, the woman squeezes his hands in hers, looks in his eyes, dark as if from barely held back tears, she tells him he seems so young, that he's just a boy, he's quiet, tracing his memories.

The night is warm and it's raining, Fabio is holding his cousin in a mute embrace - Don't cry - he tells him - Please don't cry - Elias's lips are split, bleeding, one of his legs is half-broken, sore bones and swollen eyes black with bruising, he's crying and clenching his fists in rage and fear, he hears Fabio telling him again to calm down, to stop crying, to stop being afraid, he feels his gentle hug and his kisses on his closed eyelids, light so as not to hurt him, caresses on his cheekbones and his cheeks - It's over - says Fabio trying to smile, he dabs at his bruises with ice cubes, disinfects his wounds with cotton wool and antiseptic, gently, so gently - It's over, it's all over, don't think, don't cry, forget, right away, now, as if it never happened, forget and flee - Elias can't stop sobbing, he hurts everywhere, inside, deep down, aching eyes and pulsating head, he can't move without nausea and stabbing pain - I'll sort it out - Fabio whispers in his ear, like a murmur - You have to go away, cancel out tonight, what's happened - I'll give you the money for the journey, I'll give you whatever you want, leave and start again, go far away and forget your father and me too - and he kisses and caresses him, he holds his hands and swears his love, he blesses him and forgives him, he calls him my little one, my dear heart, my great love, my impossible love.

He's no good at letting go, at explaining and remembering, for years he's killed his memories and now suddenly it seems important to him to go back, to reckon up and really understand - My father shouldn't come - he can't say anything else, he doesn't know how to speak of his mother and of her phone calls, of having sensed her age and suffer more each time, year after year, Christmas after Christmas - When you've crossed

a border you should never go back - he has thoughts like these but he doesn't know how to explain, they're in her living-room again, he loses himself in the Mexican tapestries again, he looks at this woman whom he hardly knows and he's happy to have her by him, he'd like to tell it all, to free himself, to reckon up with her help - My mother left him, she went off, she ran away from my father, she left him alone and lost, I never believed it possible, that's how it goes - he's telling it, at last, he holds her, lets himself be held - He became another man, in the bar till late or in front of the TV, evening after evening, as if she wasn't there, and I know that it happened because of me, in some way, because of that night when he followed me and found me there, in a dark room with a guy who was my relative, naked and alone together, I know it wasn't my father who beat me, who wounded me for ever, it was the man who has to do certain things, who won't allow everything, the man with rules, I know that night's over, for me with them and for him with her, I know he never forgave her for giving me money, for still calling me and for still loving me, I know I hated him to death, not for the hurt, but for what he broke, for the humiliation without hope, I don't know what'll happen now, what might happen, I don't know if we'll be able to embrace, if we'll manage to be something better than just two losers who hate each other, I don't know why he's decided to come, to make me cross the border once more, to take me back - he goes silent, lets himself be kissed, whispers in her ear - Don't leave me, whoever you are, when you take me to him, hold me close, hold my hand.

They're walking in silence and it's raining, the grey rain of every afternoon, on March days in his country the pretty girls show off their legs at the

tables in the centre of town, German tourists trudge up the narrow lanes of the Medieval quarter, emerging onto Piazza del Bastione blinded by the light and beauty, the sea sparkles like it's summer and the sun doesn't give a damn about the time of year, strong and arrogant like a needy youth, in his country you wait months for rain, then it beats down hard, flooding the fields and painting the sky coal black, dark powerful rattling water, relentless gunfire from the clouds, it makes you throb and feel alive, the rain of this city seems dirty and dead, they wait for the train to the airport, the boy walks back and forth, nervous, agitated, afraid the border will trap him again – How're you doing? - the woman asks him, he looks at her, she's beautiful, slim and all in black, they hold hands and look into each other's eyes - Everything's fine - answers Elias, his voice trembling a little.