

**From ITALIANI SI DIVENTA  
BEPPE SEVERGNINI  
Translated by Giles Watson**

**Under the Bathing Hut  
1966**

We were at the Bagni Paola bathing center, which had pink huts. She was next door at the Bagni Nord-Est, where the huts were blue and white. We came from Crema. She was from Cremona. We had a difficult surname: all consonants. Hers – Mazzini, like the nineteenth-century political thinker who fought for Italian independence – was odd, more suited to a city-center street than a young woman at the beach. It seemed logical to a nine-year-old that these coincidences should lead to more intimate acquaintanceship, and perhaps to some shared activity. Going for a swim, starting a marbles race, putting on a musical entertainment at the Pineta al Mare, the *pensione* (boarding house) where we were staying.

So one afternoon, a delegation of us called at the beach umbrella of the singer Mina, aka “The Tiger of Cremona,” whom we had seen on television. Once, so we’d been told, Mina was known as a “shouter”, but now others shouted more than she did. Mina had settled down, she was singing at a local nightspot – the Bussola – and she’d even had a baby. When we were in the great star’s presence, we gave her a quick once-over. She was wearing make-up, and she didn’t look like a tiger – from Cremona or from anywhere else. We made our request. She gazed out to sea and said, “Why not?”

I remember that we waited for ages at the Pineta al Mare on the day of the show. All our relatives had been forced to attend, and pay for the privilege. Mina, for whom we had prepared a suitable stage entrance through the laurel and the oleanders, failed to turn up. The grown-ups said “She’ll be with her boyfriend, Corrado Pani,” as if that were a reason. When it was clear that we were going to have to do the show on our own, it occurred to me that when she was starting out our absent guest star used to call herself Baby Gate. A name like that was, of course, one explanation for her behavior.

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We would arrive at Forte dei Marmi in our second series Lancia Appia, the one with the front-opening doors that clicked shut with the precision of bank vault. There were six of us, five members of the family – Dad, Mom, and three kids– plus the nanny, which is what babysitters were called when they could still understand Italian. We had baggage in back, baggage inside, and baggage on top. Nowadays, refugees from Albania travel in greater comfort than notaries used to in 1966. The holidays began many days before our departure as suitcases, bags, rucksacks, packages, baggage racks, and travel rugs steadily materialized. The travel rug, a hairy blanket with a check pattern, was an essential ingredient of the trip. Totally unsuitable for summer, it served to wrap the three of us – nine, seven and three years old – before we were deposited on the rear seat. My father loved these blankets dearly. If he had been forced to choose at the start of the trip between his wife and his travel blanket, I think Mom might have been in trouble.

We would leave the house two hours before sunrise. I never knew why. The official excuse was to avoid the heat for in those days, the only cars with air conditioning belonged to James Bond. But looking back, I reckon our dark-enshrouded departure was really a way of celebrating the event, and lending it the significance it deserved. You leave for a short trip at ten o’clock; eight o’clock if you’re going away for the weekend. But for the summer holidays, with Dad, Mom, sister, brother, nanny, baggage, emergency supplies, and travel rug, four a.m. was the only conceivable departure time. Immutable. Dramatic. If Shakespeare had holidayed in Versilia, he too would have left home at four in the morning.

A sociologist investigating the middle classes of the day could have set up an observation post in the dark of Saturday morning at the tollbooths of Guardamiglio, near Piacenza, and Binasco, just south of Milan. The lines that formed – the mass departures of yesteryear were as predictable as the intelligent ones of today – contained a representative sample professionals, small businessmen, shopkeepers, and successful quantity surveyors. These sedan car Marco

Polos had, without exception, a full tank of petrol and a pair of driving gloves on the dashboard. They demanded strict discipline from their crews, and usually got it, the family being exhausted by the preparations for the trip. Dad went farther. He had arranged a complicated system of transfers from road to rail so that we started the journey by road, continued by train, and arrived in the car.

Obviously, we did not simply put the car on a train. That would have been too straightforward. The Severgnini system was as follows. We started out from Crema and drove about forty kilometers to the railway station in Piacenza. The first transfer was effected, still in darkness. Children, Mom, and nanny were put on a train that went under the Apennines to Versilia. Dad carried on alone in the Appia, tackling the awesome Cisa mountain pass, a name that has always engendered fear and respect in our family. Our rendezvous was at the station in Pietrasanta, whence we would drive the last few kilometers to Forte dei Marmi together.

The motives for this Baroque arrangement have long been the subject of debate in our family. Even today, the topic is controversial. My sister – a little self-centeredly, perhaps, but with some justification – argues that she was the reason for all this. In those days, the mere sight of a road sign warning of bends ahead was sufficient to make the young Paola throw up: the Cisa pass has no shortage of sharp turns. My mother's theory was baggage-centered. If we only had to drive forty-five kilometers (forty from Crema to Piacenza plus five from Pietrasanta to Forte dei Marmi), then we could load the Appia to the gunnels. If the car had to transport six of us for hours on end, we would have to cut down on the baggage. Dad had an epic theory of his own. He gave us to understand that only a man could tackle the fearful Cisa pass and descend, unharmed and triumphant, to the coast. There was a note of pride in his voice that, as I leaf through photographs of the fully laden Appia, I find entirely justified. But people can be cruel at nine years old. When we arrived, we had no praise for the driver. We gave him the rubber dinghy to blow up.

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In those years, Forte dei Marmi was a popular seaside resort – I think that's what people called it – and it had social pretensions: Sardinia was still only for English tourists, artists, and mosquitoes; Romagna was very much a second choice. Convertibles cruised past carrying the very first yuppies in Italy's history, former 1950s toughs who had served their apprenticeships, and girls of a certain age – none younger than eighteen – with white teeth and black headbands. Not far away were the Bussola and Capannina clubs. The nannies would take us kids to watch rehearsals in the afternoon, and dream of coming back in the evening without children. One book on the 1960s – *La grande illusione* [The Great Illusion] by Marta Boneschi – notes that “those months ushered in a new chapter of dissolute living. Girls danced in high-heeled boots and miniskirts, thighs and buttocks exposed to the winds of Versilia, or in hot pants with bare feet, imitating popular singers like Françoise Hardy and Sandie Shaw”.

All this, I have to say, was of no interest to us. For a nine-year-old from the Po Valley, nightlife in Versilia simply didn't exist. We were asleep. We only had our evening stroll, games of geometrically precise minigolf, the unreal blue of a Popsicle, and the restraint of an ice cream. We were the generation of six or eight flavors, children of the two or three-flavor generation and future progenitors of the forty to fifty-flavor kids. Selection was effected by peering into melancholy industrial cylinders from which the bar staff would extract one or more scoops. The ice cream was sold “loose,” a disastrous description, if you think about it. Rather like selling milk as “sour” or fruit as “rotten.” Lemon, strawberry, cream, and chocolate were sometimes joined by exotic substances like chocolate chips or nougat. Asking for apricot was considered a symptom of moral decline. I remember my puzzlement the first time I saw *malaga* (the one with raisins): I thought the ice cream was crawling with chubby little insects.

Cone in hand, we would sometimes be taken – this was a special treat, preceded by promises and wild imaginings – to drive a cart pulled by a donkey, with all the family on board. Handing the reins to a nine-year-old, or even a child of three, was no great risk. The donkey had an air of resignation, and would not have raised an eyebrow if the bomb had dropped. Every so often, a photographer leaped out in front of us, took a few snaps, and extended a business card. I still have some of those photos. The donkey is dazzled by the flash, the child is dazzled by the donkey, and the parents are dazzled by their little boy. Those were dazzling evenings. It was a pity they ended at ten o'clock.

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Our daytime universe was even more restricted. It couldn't have been more than one square kilometer. There were walks beneath circular cotton Popeye-style hats, or perhaps blue hats with little anchors like the one Jean Gabin used to wear. Wool and sponge-cloth bathing costumes rose up over our navels and were tight in the crotch. Bathing robes were decorated with Chinese motifs, and our blue leather sandals had two bean-shaped holes for the toes. Not content with dressing us up like this, our parents took advantage of our wet hair and summer-induced indolence to comb us and take our photographs. Our family had a Leica with an exposure meter that kept us standing for ages in the full glare of the sun. Dad would busy himself with the camera, and give us a running commentary on what he was doing. We sensed he needed reassurance, and said nothing. There were also cine cameras – with handgrips – that were stored in a plastic carrying case and used parsimoniously. A 60s dad would shoot the same amount of film in a month as a 00s father does in three hours. And the 60s dad had more kids to film.

Then there were the bathing huts. These were the hub on which the entire holiday hinged. We spent very little time actually inside them; just long enough to change our swimsuit (I remember the smell of wood and brine, and the shafts of light through the wooden slats). We preferred to be behind, underneath, or in front of the huts.

In front we played marbles, racing our plastic spheres round circuits or along straights, and noting the results on a pad of squared paper. After a summer rolling over the sand, the names became illegible. You had to lick the marble to find out if it was Dancelli or his rival cyclist Anquetil. We deliberately raced at the hottest time of day. Torrid heat was our best insurance against the distraction of adults, who strolled past and destroyed the race tracks excavated by the round buttocks of reluctant younger sisters. When disaster struck, we would gaze in shock at the enormous adult footprints, and protest with the few words at our disposal. Even then, for us Italy was a place where people didn't look where they were putting their feet.

We moved behind the bathing huts in late afternoon, when the sun was over the sea. This shaded no man's land, with its slightly grubby sand, was much more interesting than the neatly raked beach we found in the morning under the umbrellas. Overhead were lines for hanging wet swimwear out to dry. Inflatable mattresses and dinghies leaned against the huts, out of the wind. Our rubber dinghy was called Pinta. It was small, egg-shaped, and faded. Every day, we hoped somebody or something – a storm, a thief, another little boy – would take it away so that we could buy a bigger, prettier one. But no. Pinta was a boomerang dinghy. From time to time, it disappeared, but it always turned up again. Pinta was lent to our cousins, humiliated by the cats in the cellar, punctured, and mended. Today, we use it to cover stuff in the garage. Pinta is our only antique dinghy. All the others were just bought to be used.

But the deeper fascination of the bathing huts was not inside, or in front, or even behind them. It lay underneath. We would slide into the space between the floor and the sand, rooting around like pint-sized spelunkers in sponge-cloth swimsuits for things that fell through the slats, such as coins, trinkets, or combs. No one said anything. Not the attendant, a lanky individual who wore long trousers and rollneck sweaters in July, for we saved him the trouble of retrieving lost property. Not our mothers, who were resigned to our pallid tans. And certainly not the occupants of the huts, who after some initial consternation got used to the sound of kids slithering under their feet. We had no particular preferences. We would snake from hut to hut, indifferent as to whether there was a well-proportioned female or a retired colonel overhead. It all goes to show we were slim, young, and innocent.

My notes from the underground do not end there. Sand, in whatever shape or form, held an irresistible fascination for us. We organized ladybird races through the beach umbrellas. We made traps and tunnels near the sea, digging for water, the goal of any self-respecting well. Sometimes, we took pity on our fathers and let them build a sandcastle. They would get excited, and be slightly less vigilant. We would drag our little nets through the sand for cockles, which we would leave in a bucket in the bathing hut (you couldn't actually lose them: after a couple of days, the stench would tell you where they were). Then in the evening, we would patrol the beach, after the last bather had left but before the attendant arrived. Our dream was to find some lost toy, and we would. But it was usually one we had lost.

When we weren't exploring the terrain, or sliding around under the bathing huts, or digging holes, we were looking at the sky, which in those days was pretty crowded. It was crisscrossed by light aircraft trailing advertising banners, although this was of little interest to us. But some of these airplanes dropped small gifts attached to tiny parachutes, such as creams, inflatable balls, and cushions, or fans of dubious quality. Whisked away by the wind, the gifts unfailingly ended up in the sea, where they collapsed like sad jellyfish. To us beach children, they were magnets. We had no time for creams or inflatable cushions, but the fact that they fell from the skies lent them a special appeal. As soon as the airplanes appeared on the horizon, we would begin to scamper like refugees when unexpected humanitarian aid turns up. And if the parachutes fell into the sea, we would hurl ourselves into the waves after them. I imagine that many of my contemporaries must have learned to swim that way.

The mothers watched us from the beach, smiling indulgently. I like to think that Mina was also watching us, from her beach umbrella at the Bagni Nord-Est. I wonder if it ever occurred to her that one of those tiny kamikaze swimmers – a skinny one, who usually collected parachutes with nothing attached – would write about her one day. Maybe not. Otherwise she might not have kept us waiting for nothing at the Pineta al Mare garden swings.

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The Pineta al Mare *pensione* was a fascinating place. I've tried to go back several times when I've been passing through Versilia but I've always had difficulty finding it. The Pineta al Mare seems to have retired into the self-effacing seclusion of the side streets that lead off the main *provinciale* road and stretch away between the low houses and plants overhanging the sidewalk. Now, I don't know whether the road that separates the beach from the town really is a provincial one. But the Severgnini family has never acknowledged the existence of national or local roads. Any dangerous, traffic-filled thoroughfare that we had to be escorted across by a parent was automatically a *provinciale*.

I'm going to have to rely on my memories, which are few but clear. First of all, the Pineta al Mare was neither on the sea (*sul Mare*) nor did it stand in a pinewood (*Pineta*). It was, however, a proper *pensione*. To qualify as such, an establishment had to have a minimum of discomfort, offset by the family atmosphere and the smiles of the waitresses, preferably local, vaguely maternal and no longer young. Pineta al Mare offered all of the above, and much more.

It was a long building with white walls and green roller shutters. Around it was a hedge which provided the protection our parents desired, and which we liked because it meant we could run wild. I also remember a shadowy hall near the main entrance, but this wasn't the kind of place that held any attractions for a nine-year-old, or where a child was welcome. In the garden, there were tables and swings, which we used like the ones in the park. Rows of bicycles and impressive, sturdily wheeled pushchairs stood against the walls. Meals were served twice a day under a veranda from which the current state of our games could be monitored. One of the most popular was called "ugly statues," which was face-pulling elevated to a competitive sport. We had no DVDs or videogames, so we had to invent our own monsters. Other pastimes were more traditional and were essentially different names for racing back and forth across the bare earth courtyard. Like nineteenth-century duels, our games were interrupted at the first sight of blood.

Playmates were as unchanging as the cluster pines. Families with young children tended to come back to the same spot year after year. There were the three sons of a diplomat, and during the year, I exchanged philosophical letters with the eldest on P.G. Wodehouse and the challenging art of marbles. There was a little chestnut-haired girl from Tuscany who knew every corner of the place, since she was the owners' daughter. She was marvelous, because when we were up to mischief, she would ensure we had information (beforehand), protection (during), and excuses (afterwards). And there was another little girl from Milan who looked just like one of the dolls they made in those days. She had a radiant smile and an attractively autocratic air. In between games of marbles, I imagined I was seriously in love with her, and it worried me. She was taller than I was, and came from Milan. Doubly unattainable.

Time passed slowly at the Pineta al Mare. A month went a long way in 1966. The things to do were carefully stretched out across the day to occupy the hours we would not be spending at the Bagni Paola. I remember interminable breakfasts, slow-motion conversations, and

afternoons with the roller shutters to enforce a mandatory, but not unpleasant, silence. Those afternoon siestas, and the timetable for swimming (three hours after you last meal), schooled me in the art of waiting. I don't want to imply that children nowadays don't know how to wait. I'm just saying that we were professionals, and knew how to squeeze a few drops of pleasure from the mash of expectation. That's my impression. Still, what can you do? It's never too late to have a happy childhood.