

GIACOMO SARTORI

from Bug

Translated from Italian by Frederika Randall

LOGO TOOK ME out climbing again today. On a path as smooth as a concrete dam this time, because I'm very good at it, she says. Papa is convinced that a kid as twitchy as I am can only end up a heap of shattered bones, that my real specialty from early childhood has been cutting myself and accumulating holes in my head. But Logo insisted, she says it's very good for me.

He needs to vent the tensions he has inside, she told him, twisting her bread-colored curls around her index finger.

I don't think he deserves a reward outing, said Papa, short of better arguments. *It will help him move forward*, she replied. *Let's hope so, he needs to*, said Papa in return. People always think he's my brother. And when he gets testy about something, he seems even less like a father.

A magnificent sun was blazing on the pale gray rock face, and the sky was as blue as the deep blue sea. It seemed like summer, but it was the end of winter. As we climbed, the huge lake beneath us became more and more beautiful. It looked like a sheet of turquoise pasted there for advertising purposes. I was happy to be on that skyscraper of clean rock, far from the arbiters of who's allowed to go to school and who's not.

Pay attention to what you're doing, said Logo, who seemed a little worried. *You seem more distracted than usual today*, she said.

Far from blackboards and quizzes, I thought, and I felt the gratitude tickle my ribs from inside. The hours this angel devotes to me—Logo burst into my life right after Mamma's accident—are countless grains of sand, far beyond her two contractual lessons a week.

She was climbing ahead of me in her red helmet with grissini-colored curls poking out, and now she stopped and turned to look down, smiling to let me know I should follow. I'm swift as a cat; for me climbing is easier than talking, even though climbing, too, demands you find something to grasp onto and pay attention so as not to plunge into the void. Rock is solid; it doesn't play dirty tricks on

you the way words do, and if anything bad should happen, the rope keeps you from crashing. It's so nice when things come easy and are actually pleasurable.

Don't get distracted, it takes an instant to fall, wild man, Logo said again. I usually don't put on the helmet with the smart hearing aids that IQ designed and built because it sends my red blood cells into orbit, but I have it on today to make her happy.

I HAVE A LONG WAY TO GO, I know that, but in spite of school, I've learned a lot of new words with her, I thought. It had taken some heavy hammering, but they made it into my head, like nails in hardwood. The name of this, the name of that, the name of this other thing. It's hard to believe how many names there are, each one different from the other but also similar enough to foment every sort of error and misunderstanding. And that's not all, because those naughty fellows then have to be linked up to one another, with all niceties and the intricacies that apply, otherwise no one will understand anything.

Logo says if I keep going like this I'll be able to say whatever I want whenever I want, the way she can. People won't think I'm retarded, they'll realize I'm anything but stupid. *Life isn't all that easy for us hearing-impaired, but it's not impossible*, she says. *We have to show them what we're worth.*

You're going to wake up soon and you'll see how much progress I've made, I said to myself, and to my precious Mamma.

I told you, pay attention and stop daydreaming, Logo said again. She knows me inside out. *You mustn't rely too much on automatic reflexes*, she said, sometimes taking her usual care to let me see her lips, sometimes not. She thinks my fundamentalist refusal to wear the helmet with the non-invasive cortical interface is wrong, I have to get used to putting it on all the time. I reply that with smart hearing aids, all I can hear is bothersome neuron noise, but she said I was talking bull, it was a brilliant invention, and I do hear something.

Sure, once in a while some small incident gets blown up into a Greek tragedy, I said to myself, but let's not despair, there's always a solution. Even the crazy ones back down and everything is as it was before.

Yep, I was imagining the principal calling home to say that what had happened was now water under the bridge, and it was pointless to keep dredging up the past. *Anyway, he's a good kid*, he said.

I said, take it slowly and think about what you're doing, Logo warned. So for a while I paid attention only to my hands and my feet, in charge of every nuance like an orchestra conductor. But then my neurons would lead me off to you again, as I climbed lightly, like a spider. I wished that you, too, could drown in that ocean of inky blue, that you could stroke this rock that winter has cleaned, this rock with the dry smell, and here and there a fearless weed struggling to grow.

PRETTY SOON you'll begin to move and talk, it can't be much longer, I said, floating in the sky-blue sky. You were listening and answering me back. *Sure*, you said.

The doctors don't hold out much hope, they think the chances are slim if all the noises they made in your room didn't budge you. They even tried to sweet talk you with classical music, I tell you. But they don't know you, they don't know that you're used to deciding for yourself when you do things and how, you don't like being spoon-fed. Papa's most aware of it, but even IQ and I have noticed. Not to mention Grandpa, who knew it when you were too small to reach his knees.

One morning you'll have had enough of lying around, and you'll get up, I said. Like when a person's in that lovely warmth under the sheet and they decide it's time to get moving. *You can't spend the whole day flat on your back like some deadbeat*.

Everything must come to an end, you say to yourself. And maybe you have to repeat that a few times, but you finally screw up your courage and rip off the sheets and blankets, a fearless samurai unsheathing his sword. Your heroism is soaring, you push yourself out of bed and aim your feet at the floor.

There we go, now I'm almost up, you think, even though to tell the truth, the hard work is still to come, and the temptation to lie down again is strong. Your eyelids weigh a ton, they want to come crashing down like old shutter blinds. Life is like that, sometimes even the smallest things become difficult and you need a lot of determination and cool.

Now concentrate, Logo broke in, so that I nearly freaked. *This is the most difficult point*, she added. Her words traveled lightly through my head, like the shrieks of the buzzards wheeling in circles beneath us.

What are you doing, put that phone away, she said, seeing I'd dug it out to read the message that had just arrived.

It'll be great when you're back home again, I told you, my fingertips stroking the rock warmed by the sun, reviving after a harsh winter. When everything is going well, it's natural to be happy, I thought. The bees will make a ton of honey, and you won't have to worry about money anymore. Logo will have taken off for her trip to Australia and we'll send her messages to keep her up to date.

IT HAPPENED in a millisecond, a millisecond that lasted about a quarter of an hour. My foot slipped off the minuscule ledge it was resting on, and I lost my foothold. My chest banged against the rock face. For an instant the fingers of my left hand clutched the nub like a piece of wooden fluting, and then they didn't anymore, and let go. There was nothing at all holding me up now and no time to react. It was too late to try to protect myself, I was plummeting. Slowly, with all the time in the world to think, but also very fast. In far less than a second I was going to be smashed to pieces.

The jerk of the rope arrived just above a ledge; if the rope had been a meter longer, the impact wouldn't have been pleasant. My head was now very clear, and I could see I had screwed up. And that I always fooled myself thinking I had everything under control, and then reality would deliver one of its mighty slaps in the face.

I was hanging in midair like a salami, wondering if the rope was going to hold. Below me, the rock face was dour, and the lake didn't look at all friendly either. Fear had worked its way under my skin, and it felt cold. I thrashed around for a while, then grabbed onto the rock again.

Logo was terrified. She was at my side in two seconds, prodding me all over the way you poke a doll to see whether it's still in one piece after falling from the third floor. Just when I needed someone to shout at me, all she did was say, don't let go, don't move.

Now we'll go down slowly, she said, after adjusting my ropes and my helmet. She was terribly nervous, and with each step she paid out only a tiny stretch of rope. But I knew nothing bad was going to happen now. Fear had turned my legs to jelly, but I wasn't worried.

SURE, THERE'S STILL a ways to go, but you'll be proud of me when you see me, I told you, looking down at the lake, which had turned very dark. I know I haven't given you great satisfaction up to now, but just as soon as your eyes start up again following people's faces and flies when they

move, you'll understand at first glance that the picture has changed. *Hey, this smart and positively seraphic kid is my son, you'll say.*

Move slowly, and watch where you put your feet, Logo cautioned, her blue eyes nailed on me constantly.

You won't have those worry lines on your forehead, the ones I don't like one bit, and you won't live in terror that I'll crack my skull again, or hurt someone, I said to you silently. You won't get discouraged, as sometimes used to happen. In short, we'll be able to live in peace.

Put that telephone away instantly, Logo screamed, pretty exasperated.

When we got down to the bottom of the rock face, the sun was in pajamas, a fiery red getup with lighter stripes. And suddenly it was very cold, because winter hadn't really gone away yet. The lake had become a well of pitch, deep in nocturnal musings.

You were fabulous, Logo said. The way she told it, I hadn't taken a false step all day, apart from that little fall; I'd been magnificent. Climbing did me a world of good; it would teach me to keep my legs still and not bother other people. She didn't actually say that Papa was dead wrong, but the silences between her words screamed it.

Certainly, having to sit still at a desk is tougher than a climb ranked Very Hard–Severe, she said with a smile. She didn't specify that no one would hear of my plunge, but for certain purposes there's no need to traffic in words. In short, I slept like a log in the car, full of emotions and sensations, my head on her jacket smelling of violets and wind.

When IQ got home he came to my cell, flash drive in hand, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down like it does when, under his taciturn titanium armor, he's dying to surprise you. Wagging it like a pendulum in front of my face, he told me he'd finished the voice translation program.

I can't believe it, I said, playing the Kid Who's Completely Blown Away.

It hasn't dawned on him that from my portable I can see everything he does on his supercomputer. As far as he's concerned, I'm an IT loser, just like I'm a loser at school. Which is true, but I do have some memory because when he was using my PC and needed to bypass his own gargantuan defense system, I copied everything.

And even though I knew the translation program was just about finished, I was actually very pleased, and I threw my arms around his neck. *You're the world champion of brothers,* I told him. He made a sick face and wiped his cheek with the back of his hand. He hates smooching.

Now he uploaded the deep-learning translation program on my PC and we tried it out with a TV series. This new version works with fifty-six different languages, including Malaysian and Kyrgyz, even if maybe there aren't very many Kyrgyz TV series. In any case you don't need to identify the language, the translator takes care of that. And there are many fewer errors because the complex-valued neural networks use advanced systems like those Papa can tap into to find terrorists. He doesn't know they've been borrowed, and if he even suspected it, he would pass out, but that's how it is.

If you miss something, you can rewind, or you can slow the actors down, if that allows you to read the translation better. And of course, you can do all this with vocal commands; you just say *slow down a little* and the program slows down. I know these marvelous tricks were actually invented for the robot IQ is working on, but for now it's the undersigned who gets to take advantage.

We tried it out and found it also works well when it's me speaking. Which is fabulous, considering that when I speak, people listening usually look puzzled. IQ was puffed up like a rooster to see that his super-smart trickster already understood me without any problem. We put on a soccer game, and the written translation was perfect there too.

You're some brother, I said.