

# The Solitude of Prime Numbers

Paolo Giordano

Translated by Shaun Whiteside

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Extract

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*The*  
SOLITUDE  
*of*  
PRIME NUMBERS

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Her old aunt's richly ornamented dress was a perfect fit for Sylvie's slender figure, and she asked me to lace it up for her. 'It has tight sleeves; how ridiculous!' she said.

Gérard de Nerval, *Sylvie*, 1853

The Snow Angel  
(1983)

# 1

Alice Della Rocca hated ski school. She hated getting up at half past seven in the morning during the Christmas holidays. She hated her father staring at her over breakfast, his leg dancing nervously under the table as if to say hurry up, get a move on. She hated the woollen tights that made her thighs itch, the mittens that kept her from moving her fingers, the helmet that squashed her cheeks and the boots that were always too tight and made her walk like a gorilla.

‘Are you going to drink that milk or not?’ her father said.

Alice gulped down three inches of boiling milk that burned all the way down to her stomach.

‘OK, today you can show us what you’re really made of.’

He shoved her outside, mummified in a green ski suit dotted with badges and the fluorescent logos of the sponsors. It was minus ten degrees and a grey fog enveloped everything. Alice felt the milk swirling around in her stomach as she sank into the snow. Her skis were over her shoulder, because you

had to carry your skis yourself until you got good enough for someone to carry them for you.

‘Keep the ends facing forwards or you’ll kill someone,’ her father said.

At the end of the season the Ski Club gave you a pin with little stars on it. One star every year, from when you were four years old and just tall enough to slip the little disc of the ski-lift between your legs, until you were nine and you managed to grab the disc all by yourself. Three silver stars and then another three in gold: a pin every year to tell you you’d got a bit better, a bit closer to the skiing competitions that terrified Alice. She’d already started thinking about it when she only had three stars.

The rendezvous at the ski-lift had been arranged for exactly half past eight, when it opened. The other kids were already there, standing in a loose circle like little military recruits, wrapped up in their uniforms and numb with sleep and cold. They stuck their ski-poles into the snow and leaned on them, wedging them in their armpits. No one felt like talking, least of all Alice. Her father tapped her twice on the helmet, too hard, as if trying to plant her in the snow.

‘Pull out all the stops,’ he said. ‘And remember: keep your bodyweight forward, OK? Bo-dy-weight for-ward.’

‘Bodyweight forward,’ Alice echoed.

Then he walked away, blowing into his cupped hands. Two steps and the fog swallowed him up.

Alice clumsily dropped the skis on the ground and slapped the bottom of her boots with the ski-pole to knock off the

clumps of snow. If her father had seen her he would have slapped her right there, in front of everyone.

She was already desperate for a pee; it was pushing against her bladder like a pin stuck in her belly. Yet again, she wasn't going to make it. It was the same every morning. After breakfast she would lock herself in the bathroom and push and push to get rid of every last drop, contracting her abdominal muscles until the effort gave her a headache and she felt as if her eyes were going to pop out of their sockets. She would turn the tap on as far as it would go so that her father couldn't hear the noises, pushing and pushing, clenching her fists, to squeeze out the very last drop. She would sit there until her father knocked hard on the bathroom door and called all right, Miss, have we finished? We're late again.

Reaching the bottom of the first ski-lift she would be so desperate that she would have to crouch down in the fresh snow and pretend to tighten her boots in order to have a pee inside the ski suit while all her classmates looked on. It's such a relief, she thought each time, as the lovely warmth trickled between her shivering legs. Or it would be, if only they weren't all there watching me.

Sooner or later they're going to notice.

Sooner or later I'm going to leave a stain in the snow and they'll all make fun of me.

One of the parents walked over to Eric and asked him if it wasn't too foggy to go to a high altitude. Alice pricked up her ears hopefully, but Eric just smiled broadly.



‘It’s only foggy down here,’ he said. ‘At the top the sun is warm enough to split stones. Come on, let’s go.’

On the chair-lift Alice was paired with Giuliana, the daughter of one of her father’s colleagues. They didn’t talk to each other on the way up; neither had anything against the other, it was just that, at that moment, neither of them wanted to be there.

They could hear the wind brushing the summit of the mountain, punctuated by the metallic rush of the steel cable from which Alice and Giuliana were suspended, their chins tucked into the collars of their jackets so that they could warm themselves with their breath.

It’s only the cold, you don’t really need to go, Alice said to herself.

But the closer she got to the top, the more the pin in her belly pierced her flesh. Perhaps this time she was seriously close to wetting herself. Then again, it might even be something bigger. No, it’s just the cold, I can’t need to go again.

Regurgitated rancid milk suddenly surged into her mouth and Alice swallowed it back down with disgust.

She needed to go; she was desperate to go.

There were two more stations before the shelter; she couldn’t hold it in for that long.

Giuliana lifted the safety bar and they both shifted their bottoms forward to get off. When her skis touched the ground Alice shoved herself away from her seat. You couldn’t see more than two metres ahead of you, let alone the sun splitting the

stones. It was like being wrapped in a sheet, all white, nothing but white, above, below, to right and left. It was the exact opposite of darkness, but it frightened Alice in exactly the same way.

She slipped off to the side of the piste to look for a little pile of fresh snow to relieve herself in. Her stomach made a noise like a dishwasher. Turning around, she couldn't see Giuliana any more, which meant that Giuliana couldn't see her either. She climbed a few metres up the hill with her skis in a fishbone shape, as her father had forced her to do when he had taken it into his head to teach her to ski. Up and down the nursery slope, thirty to forty times a day, sidestepping up and snow-ploughing down. It trained your legs and, anyway, buying a ski-pass for just one piste was a waste of money.

Alice unfastened her skis and took another few steps. Her boots sank into the snow halfway up her calves. At last she could sit. She stopped holding her breath and relaxed her muscles. A pleasant electric shock spread throughout her body, finally settling in the tips of her toes.

It was the milk, of course it was. And the fact that her bum was freezing from sitting in the snow at two thousand metres. It had never happened before, at least not as far as she could remember. Never, not even once.

But this time it wasn't pee. Or, not only. As she leaped to her feet she felt something heavy in the seat of her pants and instinctively touched her bottom. She couldn't feel a thing through her gloves, but it didn't matter – she had already worked out what had happened.

Eric called her but Alice didn't reply. As long as she stayed up there she would be hidden by the fog. She could pull down the trousers of her ski suit and clean herself up as best she could or go down to Eric and whisper in his ear and tell him what had happened. She could tell him she had to get back to the village, that her knees hurt. Or she could just ignore it and carry on skiing, making sure she was always at the back of the queue.

Instead she simply stayed where she was, careful not to move a muscle, shielded by the fog.

Eric called her again. Louder now.

'She must have gone to the ski-lift already,' a little boy said.

Alice heard murmuring. Someone said let's go and someone else said I'm cold from standing here. They could have been down below, a few metres away or even at the top of the ski-lift. Sounds are deceptive: they rebound off the mountains; they're absorbed by the snow. 'Damn . . . let's go and see,' Eric said. Alice slowly counted to ten, suppressing her urge to vomit as she felt something sliding down her thighs. Having got to ten, she started over again, and this time she counted to twenty. Now there wasn't so much as a sound.

She picked up her skis and carried them under her arm to the piste. It took her a little while to work out how to get the skis at right angles to the steepest bit of slope. With fog like that you couldn't even tell which way you were facing.

She put on her boots and tightened the buckles. She slipped off her goggles and spat inside them because they had misted

up. She could go down to the village all on her own. She didn't care that Eric was looking for her at the top of the mountain. With her tights caked in shit, she didn't want to stay up there a second longer than she absolutely had to. She thought of the journey. She had never gone down on her own, but after all she had taken the ski-lift by herself and she'd been down that slope dozens of times.

She began to snowplough. Just the day before, Eric had said if I see you doing one more snowplough turn, I swear I'm going to tie your ankles together.

Eric didn't like her, she was sure of it. He thought she was a coward and events had proved him right. Eric didn't like her father either, because every day, at the end of the lesson, he pestered him with endless questions. So how is our Alice coming along, are we getting better, do we have a little champion on our hands, when are we going to start these competitions, on and on. Eric always stared at a spot somewhere behind her father and answered yes, no or maybe when she's gone up a size, etc.

Alice saw the whole scene superimposed through her foggy goggles as she gently edged down, unable to make out anything beyond the tips of her skis. Only when she ended up in the fresh snow did she understand that it was time to turn.

She started singing a song to herself to feel less alone. From time to time she ran a hand under her nose to wipe away the snot.

Weight upwards, pole in, wheel. Rest on your boots. Now

with your bodyweight forward, OK? Bo-dy-weight for-ward. The voice was partly Eric's and partly her father's.

Her father would probably fly into a complete fury. She had to prepare a lie, a story that would stand up without gaps or contradictions. She wouldn't dream of telling him what had really happened. The fog, that was it, it was the fog's fault. She was following the others on to the big slope when her ski-pass had come off her jacket. Or no, not that, no one's ski-pass ever blew away. You'd have to be really stupid to lose it. Let's say her scarf. Her scarf had blown away and she had gone back a bit to find it and the others hadn't waited for her. She had called them a hundred times but there was no sign of them, they had disappeared into the fog and then she had gone down to look for them.

So why hadn't she gone back up? her father would ask.

Quite right, why hadn't she? When you thought about it, it was better if she lost her ski-pass. She hadn't gone back up because she'd lost her ski-pass and the man at the ski-lift wouldn't let her back up again.

Alice smiled, content with her story. It was flawless. She didn't even feel all that dirty any more. She would spend the rest of the day in front of the TV. She would have a shower and put on clean clothes and slip her feet into her furry slippers. She would stay in the warm all day. Or she would have, if only she'd looked up from her skis long enough to see the orange tape with the words *Piste Closed*. Her father was always telling her look where you're going. If only she'd remembered that in

fresh snow your bodyweight shouldn't go forwards and if only Eric, a few days before, had adjusted the fastenings better and her father had been more insistent in saying but Alice weighs 28 kilos, won't they be too tight like that?

The drop wasn't very high. A few metres, just long enough to feel a bit of a void in your stomach and nothing beneath your feet. After which Alice was already face down on the ground, skis bolt upright in the air, leaving her fibula broken.

She didn't really feel that bad. She barely felt a thing, to tell the truth. Only the snow that had slipped under her scarf and into her helmet and burned where it touched her skin.

First of all she moved her arms. When she was little and had woken up to find it had snowed, her father had wrapped her up tight and carried her downstairs. They walked to the middle of the courtyard and then, holding one another by the hand, counted to three and let themselves fall backwards like a dead weight. Then her father told her to do an angel and Alice moved her arms up and down and, when she got up and looked at her outline carved in the white cloak, it really did look like the shadow of an angel with its outspread wings.

Alice made the snow angel like that, for no reason, just to prove to herself that she was still alive. She managed to turn her head to one side and start breathing again, even though it felt as if the air that she breathed wasn't going to wherever it was supposed to go. She had the strange sensation of not knowing which way round her legs were. The very strange sensation of no longer having legs at all.

She tried to get up, but she couldn't.

Without that fog someone might have seen her from above, a green stain squashed at the bottom of a gully, a few steps from the spot where a little waterfall would start flowing again in the spring. When it turned warm the wild strawberries would come out, and if you waited long enough they'd become as sweet as candy and you could fill a whole basket with them in a day. Alice cried for help, but her thin voice was engulfed by the fog. She tried to get up again, or at least to turn over, but it was no use.

Her father had told her that almost everyone who died of cold was found in their underwear. People who froze to death felt very hot and, just before they expired, felt an urge to get undressed. To make matters worse, her knickers were dirty.

She was starting to lose the feeling in her fingers. She took off one glove, blew into it and then put her clenched fist back in to warm it up. She did the same with her other hand. She repeated this ludicrous gesture two or three times.

It's your extremities that get you, her father always told her. Your toes and fingers, your nose and ears. Your heart does everything in its power to keep the blood to itself and leaves the rest to freeze.

Alice imagined her fingers turning blue and then, slowly, her arms and her legs. She thought of her heart pumping harder and harder, trying to keep in all the remaining warmth. She would go so stiff that if a wolf passed by it would snap one of her arms off just by stepping on it.

THE SNOW ANGEL

They're looking for me.

I wonder if there really are any wolves.

I can't feel my fingers any more.

If only I hadn't drunk that milk.

Bo-dy-weight for-ward, she thought.

But no, wolves would be hibernating.

Eric will be furious.

I don't want to do those competitions.

Don't talk rubbish, you know very well that wolves don't hibernate.

Her thoughts were growing more and more circular and illogical.

The sun sank slowly behind Mount Chaberton as if nothing was the matter. The shadow of the mountains spread over Alice and the fog went completely black.