

THE STORY  
OF A NEW NAME



Elena Ferrante

**THE STORY  
OF A NEW NAME**

BOOK TWO  
OF THE NEAPOLITAN QUARTET

*Translated from the Italian  
by Ann Goldstein*

  
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INDEX OF CHARACTERS AND NOTES ON THE EVENTS  
OF VOLUME I.

**The Cerullo family (the shoemaker's family):**

*Fernando Cerullo*, shoemaker, Lila's father.

*Nunzia Cerullo*, Lila's mother. She is close to her daughter, but doesn't have the authority to support her against her father.

*Raffaella Cerullo*, called Lina, or Lila. She was born in August, 1944, and is sixty-six when she disappears from Naples without leaving a trace. A brilliant student, at the age of ten she writes a story titled *The Blue Fairy*. She leaves school after getting her elementary-school diploma and learns to be a shoemaker.

*Rino Cerullo*, Lila's older brother, also a shoemaker. With his father, Fernando, and thanks to Lila and to Stefano Carracci's money, he sets up the Cerullo shoe factory. He becomes engaged to Stefano's sister, Pinuccia Carracci. Lila's first son bears his name, Rino.

*Other children.*

**The Greco family (the porter's family):**

*Elena Greco*, called Lenuccia or Lenù. Born in August, 1944, she is the author of the long story we are reading. Elena begins to write it when she learns that her childhood friend Lina Cerullo, called Lila only by her, has disappeared. After elementary school, Elena continues to study, with increasing success. Since childhood she has been secretly in love with Nino Sarratore.

*Pepepe*, *Gianni*, and *Elisa*, Elena's younger siblings.

The *father* is a porter at the city hall.

The *mother* is a housewife. Her limping gait haunts Elena.

**The Carracci family (Don Achille's family):**

*Don Achille Carracci*, the ogre of fairy tales, dealer in the black market, loan shark. He was murdered.

*Maria Carracci*, wife of Don Achille, mother of Stefano, Pinuccia, and Alfonso. She works in the family grocery store.

*Stefano Carracci*, son of the deceased Don Achille, husband of Lila. He manages the property accumulated by his father and is the proprietor, along with his sister Pinuccia, Alfonso, and his mother, Maria, of a profitable grocery store.

*Pinuccia*, the daughter of Don Achille. She works in the grocery store. She is engaged to Rino, Lila's brother.

*Alfonso*, son of Don Achille. He is the schoolmate of Elena. He is the boyfriend of Marisa Sarratore.

**The Peluso family (the carpenter's family):**

*Alfredo Peluso*, carpenter. Communist. Accused of killing Don Achille, he has been convicted and is in prison.

*Giuseppina Peluso*, wife of Alfredo. A former worker in the tobacco factory, she is devoted to her children and her imprisoned husband.

*Pasquale Peluso*, older son of Alfredo and Giuseppina, construction worker, militant Communist. He was the first to become aware of Lila's beauty and to declare his love for her. He detests the Solaras. He is engaged to Ada Cappuccio.

*Carmela Peluso*, also called *Carmen*, sister of Pasquale. She is a sales clerk in a notions store. She is engaged to Enzo Scanno.

*Other children.*

**The Cappuccio family (the mad widow's family):**

*Melina*, a relative of Nunzia Cerullo, a widow. She washes the stairs of the apartment buildings in the old neighborhood.



She was the lover of Donato Sarratore, Nino's father. The Sarratores left the neighborhood precisely because of that relationship, and Melina has nearly lost her reason.

Melina's *husband*, who unloaded crates in the fruit and vegetable market, and died in mysterious circumstances.

*Ada Cappuccio*, Melina's daughter. As a girl she helped her mother wash the stairs. Thanks to Lila, she will be hired as salesclerk in the Carracci's grocery. She is engaged to Pasquale Peluso.

*Antonio Cappuccio*, her brother, a mechanic. He is Elena's boyfriend and is very jealous of Nino Sarratore.

*Other children.*

**The Sarratore family (the railway-worker poet's family):**

*Donato Sarratore*, conductor, poet, journalist. A great womanizer, he was the lover of Melina Cappuccio. When Elena went on vacation to Ischia, she is compelled to leave in a hurry to escape Donato's sexual molestations.

*Lidia Sarratore*, wife of Donato.

*Nino Sarratore*, the oldest of the five children of Donato and Lidia. He hates his father. He is a brilliant student.

*Marisa Sarratore*, sister of Nino. She is studying, with mediocre success, to be a secretary.

*Pino, Clelia, and Ciro Sarratore*, younger children of Donato and Lidia.

**The Scanno family (the fruit-and-vegetable seller's family):**

*Nicola Scanno*, fruit-and-vegetable seller.

*Assunta Scanno*, wife of Nicola.

*Enzo Scanno*, son of Nicola and Assunta, also a fruit-and-vegetable seller. Lila has felt a liking for him since childhood. Their friendship begins when Enzo, during a school competition, shows an unsuspected ability in mathematics. Enzo is engaged to Carmen Peluso.

*Other children.*

**The Solara family (the family of the owner of the Solara bar-pastry shop):**

*Silvio Solara*, owner of the bar-pastry shop, a Camorrist tied to the illegal trafficking of the neighborhood. He was opposed to the Cerullo shoe factory.

*Manuela Solara*, wife of Silvio, moneylender: her red book is much feared in the neighborhood.

*Marcello and Michele Solara*, sons of Silvio and Manuela. Braggarts, arrogant, they are nevertheless loved by the neighborhood girls, except Lila, of course. Marcello is in love with Lila but she rejects him. Michele, a little younger than Marcello, is colder, more intelligent, more violent. He is engaged to Gigliola, the daughter of the pastry maker.

**The Spagnuolo family (the baker's family):**

*Signor Spagnuolo*, pastry maker at the Solaras' bar-pastry shop.

*Rosa Spagnuolo*, wife of the pastry maker.

*Gigliola Spagnuolo*, daughter of the pastry maker, engaged to Michele Solara.

*Other children.*

**The Airola family:**

*Airola*, professor of Greek literature.

*Adele*, his wife.

*Mariarosa Airola*, the older daughter, professor of art history in Milan.

*Pietro Airola*, student.

**The teachers:**

*Maestro Ferraro*, teacher and librarian.

*Maestra Oliviero*, teacher. She is the first to notice the potential of Lila and Elena. When Lila writes *The Blue Fairy*, Elena, who likes the story a lot, and gives it to Maestra Oliviero to read. But the teacher, angry because Lila's parents decided

not to send their daughter to middle school, never says anything about the story. In fact, she stops concerning herself with Lila and concentrates only on the success of Elena.

*Professor Gerace*, high-school teacher.

*Professor Galiani*, high-school teacher. She is a very cultured woman and a Communist. She is immediately charmed by Elena's intelligence. She lends her books, protects her in the clash with the religion teacher.

**Other characters:**

*Gino*, son of the pharmacist.

*Nella Incardo*, the cousin of Maestra Oliviero. She lives in Barano, on Ischia, and Elena stayed with her for a vacation at the beach.

*Armando*, medical student, son of Professor Galiani.

*Nadia*, student, daughter of Professor Galiani.

*Bruno Soccavo*, friend of Nino Sarratore and son of a rich industrialist in San Giovanni a Teduccio, near Naples.

*Franco Mari*, student.



1.

In the spring of 1966, Lila, in a state of great agitation, entrusted to me a metal box that contained eight notebooks. She said that she could no longer keep them at home, she was afraid her husband might read them. I carried off the box without comment, apart from some ironic allusions to the excessive amount of string she had tied around it. At that time our relationship was terrible, but it seemed that only I considered it that way. The rare times we saw each other, she showed no embarrassment, only affection; a hostile word never slipped out.

When she asked me to swear that I wouldn't open the box for any reason, I swore. But as soon as I was on the train I untied the string, took out the notebooks, began to read. It wasn't a diary, although there were detailed accounts of the events of her life, starting with the end of elementary school. Rather, it seemed evidence of a stubborn self-discipline in writing. The pages were full of descriptions: the branch of a tree, the ponds, a stone, a leaf with its white veinings, the pots in the kitchen, the various parts of a coffeemaker, the brazier, the coal and bits of coal, a highly detailed map of the courtyard, the broad avenue of *stradone*, the rusting iron structure beyond the ponds, the gardens and the church, the cut of the vegetation alongside the railway, the new buildings, her parents' house, the tools her father and her brother used to repair shoes, their gestures when they worked, and above all colors, the colors of every object at different times of the day. But there were not

only pages of description. Isolated words appeared, in dialect and in Italian, sometimes circled, without comment. And Latin and Greek translation exercises. And entire passages in English on the neighborhood shops and their wares, on the cart loaded with fruit and vegetables that Enzo Scanno took through the streets every day, leading the mule by the halter. And many observations on the books she read, the films she saw in the church hall. And many of the ideas that she had asserted in the discussions with Pasquale, in the talks she and I used to have. Of course, the progress was sporadic, but whatever Lila captured in writing assumed importance, so that even in the pages written when she was eleven or twelve there was not a single line that sounded childish.

Usually the sentences were extremely precise, the punctuation meticulous, the handwriting elegant, just as Maestra Oliviero had taught us. But at times, as if a drug had flooded her veins, Lila seemed unable to bear the order she had imposed on herself. Everything then became breathless, the sentences took on an overexcited rhythm, the punctuation disappeared. In general it didn't take long for her to return to a clear, easy pace. But it might also happen that she broke off abruptly and filled the rest of the page with little drawings of twisted trees, humped, smoking mountains, grim faces. I was entranced by both the order and the disorder, and the more I read, the more deceived I felt. How much practice there was behind the letter she had sent me on Ischia years earlier: that was why it was so well written. I put everything back in the box, promising myself not to become inquisitive again.

But I soon gave in—the notebooks exuded the force of seduction that Lila had given off since she was a child. She had treated the neighborhood, her family, the Solaras, Stefano, every person or thing with ruthless accuracy. And what to say of the liberty she had taken with me, with what I said, with what I thought, with the people I loved, with my very physical

appearance. She had fixed moments that were decisive for her without worrying about anything or anyone. Here vividly was the pleasure she had felt when at ten she wrote her story, *The Blue Fairy*. Here just as vivid was what she had suffered when our teacher Maestra Oliviero hadn't deigned to say a single word about that story, in fact had ignored it. Here was the suffering and the fury because I had gone to middle school, neglecting her, abandoning her. Here the excitement with which she had learned to repair shoes, the desire to prove herself that had induced her to design new shoes, and the pleasure of completing the first pair with her brother Rino. Here the pain when Fernando, her father, had said that the shoes weren't well made. There was everything, in those pages, but especially hatred for the Solara brothers, the fierce determination with which she had rejected the love of the older, Marcello, and the moment when she had decided, instead, to marry the gentle Stefano Carracci, the grocer, who out of love had wanted to buy the first pair of shoes she had made, vowing that he would keep them forever. Ah, the wonderful moment when, at fifteen, she had felt herself a rich and elegant lady, on the arm of her fiancé, who, all because he loved her, had invested a lot of money in her father and brother's shoe business: Cerullo shoes. And how much satisfaction she had felt: the shoes of her imagination in large part realized, a house in the new neighborhood, marriage at sixteen. And what a lavish wedding, how happy she was. Then Marcello Solara, with his brother Michele, had appeared in the middle of the festivities, wearing on his feet the very shoes that her husband had said were so dear to him. Her husband. What sort of man had she married? Now, when it was all over, would the false face be torn off, revealing the horribly true one underneath? Questions, and the facts, without embellishment, of our poverty. I devoted myself to those pages, for days, for weeks. I studied them. I ended up learning by heart the passages I liked,

the ones that thrilled me, the ones that hypnotized me, the ones that humiliated me. Behind their naturalness was surely some artifice, but I couldn't discover what it was.

Finally, one evening in November, exasperated, I went out carrying the box. I couldn't stand feeling Lila on me and in me, even now that I was esteemed myself, even now that I had a life outside of Naples. I stopped on the Solferino bridge to look at the lights filtered through a cold mist. I placed the box on the parapet, and pushed it slowly, a little at a time, until it fell into the river, as if it were her, Lila in person, plummeting, with her thoughts, words, the malice with which she struck back at anyone, the way she appropriated me, as she did every person or thing or event or thought that touched her: books and shoes, sweetness and violence, the marriage and the wedding night, the return to the neighborhood in the new role of Signora Raffaella Carracci.

## 2.

I couldn't believe that Stefano, so kind, so in love, had given Marcello Solara the vestige of the child Lila, the evidence of her work on the shoes she had designed.

I forgot about Alfonso and Marisa, who, sitting at the table, were talking to each other, eyes shining. I paid no more attention to my mother's drunken laughter. The music faded, along with the voice of the singer, the dancing couples, and Antonio, who had gone out to the terrace and, overwhelmed by jealousy, was standing outside the glass door staring at the violet city, the sea. Even the image of Nino, who had just left the room like an archangel without annunciations, grew faint. Now I saw only Lila, speaking animatedly into Stefano's ear, she very pale in her wedding dress, he unsmiling, a white patch of unease running over his flushed face from his fore-



head to his eyes like a Carnival mask. What was happening, what would happen? My friend tugged her husband's arm with both hands. She used all her strength, and I who knew her thoroughly felt that if she could she would have wrenched it from his body, crossed the room holding it high above her head, blood dripping in her train, and she would have used it as a club or a donkey's jawbone to crush Marcello's face with a solid blow. Ah yes, she would have done it, and at the idea my heart pounded furiously, my throat became dry. Then she would have dug out the eyes of both men, she would have torn the flesh from the bones of their faces, she would have bitten them. Yes, yes, I felt that I wanted that, I wanted it to happen. An end of love and of that intolerable celebration, no embraces in a bed in Amalfi. Immediately shatter everything and every person in the neighborhood, tear them to pieces, Lila and I, go and live far away, lightheartedly descending together all the steps of humiliation, alone, in unknown cities. It seemed to me the just conclusion to that day. If nothing could save us, not money, not a male body, and not even studying, we might as well destroy everything immediately. Her rage expanded in my breast, a force that was mine and not mine, filling me with the pleasure of losing myself. I wished that that force would overflow. But I realized that I was also afraid of it. I understood only later that I can be quietly unhappy, because I'm incapable of violent reactions, I fear them, I prefer to be still, cultivating resentment. Not Lila. When she left her seat, she got up so decisively that the table shook, along with the silverware on the dirty plates; a glass was overturned. As Stefano hurried mechanically to cut off the tongue of wine that was heading toward Signora Solara's dress, Lila went out quickly through a side door, jerking her dress away whenever it got caught.

I thought of running after her, grabbing her hand, whispering to her let's get out, out of here. But I didn't move. Stefano

moved, after a moment of uncertainty, and, making his way among the dancing couples, joined her.

I looked around. Everyone realized that something had upset the bride. But Marcello continued to chat in a conspiratorial way with Rino, as if it were normal for him to have those shoes on his feet. The increasingly lewd toasts of the metal merchant continued. Those who felt at the bottom of the hierarchy of tables and guests went on struggling to put a good face on things. In other words, no one except me seemed to realize that the marriage that had just been celebrated—and that would probably last until the death of the spouses, among the births of many children, many more grandchildren, joys and sorrows, silver and gold wedding anniversaries—that for Lila, no matter what her husband did in his attempt to be forgiven, that marriage was already over.