

Katarina West

absolute truth,
for beginners

*Loving a woman
who lived in a world of numbers*

Absolute Truth,
For Beginners

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‘Theory... is all that matters. The rest is stamp collecting.’
J.H. Shapiro cited in *Nature*

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Truth of all Truths

1. *Everybody is a Nobody*



Nobody *n.*

No person, no one, the lowest of the low.



Here's my first truth for you. You're a **Nobody**. I'm a Nobody. She's a Nobody, he's a Nobody, and they are Nobodies. At the end of the day we are all Nobodies, and just as insignificant as empty Coke cans on a never-ending beach.

In order to prove that you're a Nobody, let's imagine that you will live to be a hundred years old. For the sake of argument let's also assume, as traditional African religions do, that you'll exist not as long as you live, but as long as your kinsmen will remember you. This will give you, say, an additional fifty years. I'm being generous here: even a day is a long time in the age of Twitter and smartphones.

But this thought experiment will also give Aristotle, who died at sixty-two and is still alive in history books, two thousand, three hundred and ninety-nine years, which means that he'll remain around sixteen times older than you. Some might argue that this shows that Aristotle is a Somebody, whereas you're a Nobody. But nothing could be further from the truth.

Why?

Because if we set side by side your one hundred and fifty years and his two thousand, three hundred and ninety-nine years with the thirteen-point-seven billion years of the universe, we'll realise that the universe is nearly six million times older than Aristotle and some ninety-one million times older than you. As you can see, the relative difference between you and Aristotle is small, so infinitesimally small, that in calculations of, say, the life of stars, such differences fall into the margin of error. It makes no difference whether we're remembered for centuries or forgotten immediately. In both cases our age pales into insignificance in comparison with the history of time.

So the odds are that you're a Nobody. And if you aren't a Nobody, then you are married to a Nobody, or dating a Nobody, or your parents are Nobodies, or your children are Nobodies, or your friends are Nobodies. Or you are a Nobody and your partner is a Nobody and your parents are Nobodies and your children are Nobodies and your friends are Nobodies. It happens, you know.

Whatever you are though, I've dedicated my story to you. I know that many of you are like I used to be, dissatisfied with the cards Destiny has dealt you, regretful about the lost opportunities, bored with the daily grind, bored with yourselves, and waiting for a sea change you fear will never come. This book is my plain-spoken confession about love and life and what I learned about both, after losing my mind and heart to one of the sharpest minds of our time: it's my one-woman manifesto, urging you not to give up hope. Because change is possible, miracles do happen, absolute truth does exist, and life is wonderful, despite the fact that all of us fumble in the darkness.

We Nobodies have nothing to lose but our self-doubt. We have a world to gain.

Nobodies of the world, unite!

Beginner

2. *Half-Naked, Chocolate-Stained*



Elisa's Words *n.*

A dictionary inside my head, cataloguing all things big and small.



All my life I have believed that I'm a Nobody.

Ever since my parents died when I was three years old and I moved to my aunt's, I've feared that I'm not quite worthy of anyone's affection. I'm a normal person, ordinary in every sense: I'm the girl in Levi's and leather boots who sat reading opposite you in the underground this morning, and I'm the mysterious young woman with the salmon-pink dress and pearls at your cousin's wedding – and yes, I was the girl in the tweed jacket, the one who stole your place in the library queue last week. I'm anyone, and everywhere around you. Still, there's that secret stain within me, chiselled in my heart: that I'm not good enough, no matter how much I try. Maybe that's why I've always studied hard and behaved well, and rarely disagreed with anyone, and tried to please everyone around me. Because otherwise people might not like me. They might see the stain in my heart.

Usually the feeling of Nobody-ness comes and goes, so that there are periods when I feel pretty nearly sure of myself, and others when my confidence has frozen into sub-zero levels.

Last year, when I was standing in front of the gate of The Shapiro Foundation and buzzing the intercom, my confidence was again close to zero. I was their new assistant, and desperate to make something out of my monotonous existence.

You can picture me easily, standing there, on a golden September afternoon. Just think of some lovely old Hollywood film where the hero and the heroine are motoring on a lonely country road in the heart of Tuscany. Sort of Cary Grant and Grace Kelly, even if I don't know whether they ever shot a film in Tuscany. They're driving a convertible Alfa Romeo, and the wind has untied her scarf.

Still with me? Good. Now imagine cypresses, silhouetted dark against the cloudless sky. And vineyards, lush and harmonious, running from hilltops to valleys, and again to hilltops. Add a few

farmhouses and churches, and sleepy villages looming on the horizon, and transform the entire scenery into a wonderful riot of Technicolor.

Now you've got me: that's where I am. Even if there's no Cary Grant with me, and my car is not an Alfa Romeo, but a green Fiat so old that even car thieves leave it alone. And I don't look as elegant as Grace Kelly. I'm all sweaty, and my white linen dress is rumpled, stuck to my back.

I'm standing in the hinterland of Chianti, an hour's drive from our home in Florence, on a country road zigzagging on top of a hill. In front of me soars an ancient gate of monumental dimensions; the kind you'd think exists only in fairy tales. It is ochre-coloured, majestic and worn, and so high that I have bent my head backwards to see the pointed wrought iron bars outlined against the sky. It makes me feel Lilliputian, and very, very nervous.

Above the intercom is a small, modest sign that says, *The Shapiro Foundation*. The epitome of academic understatement, as is to be expected from a deadly prestigious science institute. I buzz, and look beyond the gate. A cypress-lined access road descends to a valley and then ascends to the opposite hilltop, thus offering a breath-taking view of not only the grassy avenue but also of the ochre-coloured villa standing at the end of the road. I buzz again.

Minutes pass. I buzz and buzz: nothing happens. Nobody answers the intercom. The gate doesn't open. The villa seems deserted. Or perhaps The Shapiro Foundation people have forgotten that I'm arriving today.

After pressing the intercom button for well over ten minutes, in the end without lifting my finger, so that I'm ringing uninterruptedly, I start to panic. My mind is working furiously, assessing the situation, calculating various possibilities. That's how my brain is, like a computer, endlessly analysing, investigating, categorising and dissecting, just as if life was nothing but a never-ending university seminar. I even have a game of mine, **Elisa's Words**, and it means that I try to explain in my own way those words that mean something to me. At times my head is nothing but a gigantic encyclopaedia full of weird definitions.

Finally I stop buzzing. I take out my mobile and call The Shapiro Foundation office in Florence. But all I get is voicemail. I leave a message, my voice a notch too shrill for an assistant of such a distinguished foundation. I feel a stubborn lump in my throat. The intense early-September sun is burning my back. I call again after a few minutes, and leave another message. Then I don't know what to do.

I stand there, staring ahead, paralysed. There's an undisturbed silence all around me. It's the torpid silence of a hot summer day, and it doesn't help me one single bit.

The thing is, I must get in. I must get this job. I can't go back to Florence, to Auntie Fanny's. I take a step back and stare at the thick row of cypresses, ilexes and other lofty trees separating the villa's park from the country road. As luck would have it, there is a smaller gate further ahead, for pedestrians. And... it's ajar! Oh thank you, thank you, thank you, my guardian angel! I run towards it. I push it open, but it doesn't move. I push and push. But it's stuck.

At last I inhale as deeply as I can. I pull my stomach inwards, just like a sylphlike model does in a low-fat yoghurt advertisement. I've been macerating my body and soul in a crazy, seven-hundred-calories-per-day diet for two weeks now – ever since I got this job, really. I feel exceedingly slim, and so hungry it's verging on sickness.

So I squeeze myself through the door.

But maybe I'm not slim enough. Maybe I need to torture myself some more. Because halfway through all that squeezing I get stuck. For a few long minutes I can move neither forward nor backward. The pain is excruciating. I can't breathe. I panic even more. I'm going to die, right here. An overweight art historian found dead in the heart of Chianti.

With all my force I pull myself out, and fall back on to the country road. Thump! Crash! I hear a terrible ripping sound. Lying there on the asphalt road, I see that my rumpled linen dress is torn from where my floral-patterned cotton undies start down to the hemline. Now my undies are there for everyone to see. Not that there's anyone watching. But still.

Just then my mobile rings in my cardigan pocket. I fish it out with trembling hands. The Shapiro Foundation office! I think, so relieved I'm close to tears.

'Guess what,' a thrilled voice says.

All right, so it isn't The Shapiro Foundation. It's my cousin Linda. Besides, you might already know her, because the chances are that the two of you have partied together. Or are Facebook friends; for the entire world is Linda's friend.

She's perfect, Linda, she really is. Half Italian, half Finnish: blue-eyed, self-confident and smart, a direct descendant of fair-skinned milkmaids and golden-haired peasant girls; the Italians' dream blonde. I, on the other hand, am dark-eyed and brown-haired: one hundred per cent Italian, one hundred per cent Mediterranean, miles away from her blonde curls.

Obviously she isn't a bookworm like me. Instead she's an activist incarnate in an hourglass body, constantly rushing somewhere, full of energy, warding off admirers, attending parties and meetings, organising campaigns to end some faraway war, passionate and combative, the social conscience of our family.

A twist of irony, perhaps, but ever since my life has been going down, hers has been in rapid upward trajectory, professionally speaking at least. (And the funny thing is, she has never cared much about studying.) First she became a media and communications student at the University of Bologna, and then, a few months ago, she was taken on as an apprentice to a Mediaset talk show. Now Linda lives and works in Rome, and such is the power of television that Auntie Fanny flushes with pride every time she talks about her daughter's glorious life in Rome, even if the Mediaset company is Berlusconi-owned, and therefore diabolical by definition.

Plus, as if all that wasn't enough already, the producer of the show, Max Something, is mad about Linda. He texts her all the time, sends flowers to her bedsit, asks her out. In the last weeks my cousin has been updating me daily about her budding affair, and hearing about it seems like reading the gossip pages of *Grazia*.

'Guess what happened,' she repeats. 'We were coming from that sushi restaurant –'

'Linda,' I interrupt her. 'This isn't a good time.'

'And he parked his car, and we sat there and talked about everything, and I was like, ohmigod, he knows so many people –'

'Linda.' I'm close to tears now. 'I start my new work today. Remember?'

'Oh,' she says sheepishly. 'How is it?'

'It's –' I start. I glance at my rose covered H&M underwear, and feel a pang of despair in my heart. 'I'm just going inside.'

'I'll call you tomorrow,' she says, breathless. 'I can't believe this is happening!'

Well, I can't believe this is happening, either. For a moment I stand there, comatose, clenching my mobile. Then I muster all my remaining dignity, and walk slowly to my ramshackle Fiat, parked on the other side of the road. I sit behind the steering wheel and stare out of the windscreen. A dog barks in the distance; then it's silent again. For once my head is quiet.

All of a sudden I bury my face in my hands and start to cry. First I do it out of duty, worrying if anyone can hear me or whether my mascara has got smudged. But then it strikes me that this is it. I've failed again. There's no other option left than to drive back to Florence and continue my old life.

But that's the last thing I want, because ever since I graduated one and a half years ago, my life has been nothing but a series of setbacks. Once upon a time my professors hailed me as a great, bright promise, but for some reason my supposed university career died out right after my graduation day, before it had even started. For the last months I've drifted from one temp job to

another, receiving tons of rejections, knocking on closed doors, giving up my dreams and ambitions, and hating life in general and myself in particular. I have suffered from each and every blessed existential crisis a freshly graduated arts history major can possibly suffer, from Nutella Neurosis and Unemployment Blues to Ego Anxiety, Egorexia Nervosa and Thesis Postpartum Depression.

For more than a year I have suspended living altogether. I've stopped studying, stopped hoping, stopped dreaming, stopped trying. I have avoided friends and parties (so that they won't ask about my future plans), and instead spent my days hiding at home, brooding over my life, feeling sorry for myself, and drifting from one day to another. I've become an expert in Nutella sandwiches and Italian talk shows, the latter well stocked with bellowing politicians, pneumatic showgirls, peroxide transvestites, do-gooder priests rambling on about world peace, and ordinary folk shedding tears and hugging each other every five minutes.

And now I must go back to my loser's lair. Nothing will ever change. I'll be depressed for another five years (Ten years! Thousand years!), after which I might as well jump into the Arno river, my coat pockets filled with misery and brimstones. And that will be the end of me.

Amen to that.

I imagine myself lying at the bottom of the Arno River, my eyes listless and wide open, my mortuary-white hands billowing in the greenish water. I weep openly, loudly and sincerely, no longer caring if someone hears me.

I cry and cry. Oh, how I cry! My face feels wet, hot and swollen. I can't find a handkerchief so I blow my nose into a parking ticket. Then I wipe off my tears with the back of my hand. Instantly it becomes black with mascara.

All of a sudden I remember that there might be some Baci chocolates inside the glove compartment. True enough, they're still there – all melted and shapeless, but nonetheless reasonably edible. I open the wrappers, one after another, even if the melted chocolate has got attached and I have to lick the chocolate from the paper. Still, I swallow the contents as quickly as I can, feeling malevolently satisfied. That's it, my diet is over. I can imagine Destiny watching me from above, perplexed. Like hell am I going to please her any longer, as she so obviously doesn't give a hoot about me. Tit for tat, and all that jazz.

When there are no Bacis left, I simply sit staring at the chocolate stains on my linen dress, my head empty once more. I check my face in the rear-view mirror, only to realise that I've been transformed into a Halloween witch with a drinking problem. My eyes are puffy and red, and there are stains of mascara and chocolate all over my face.

I'm just about to start polishing up my appearance when I hear someone knocking on the car window. I glance sideways and see an old man watching me. He's tall and gaunt with silvery hair, wrinkled face, and kind eyes that are carved deep in his face, right under his furry eyebrows. There's something wise and melancholic about his face, and in a flash of recognition I realise that it is exactly the same kind of pensiveness that the old, bearded saint has in Elisabetta Sirani's *St. Jerome*. Ever since I discovered the art of Elisabetta Sirani (the Italian Baroque painter who died young in mysterious circumstances) and wrote a thesis on her, I've been classifying people's looks according to their resemblance to her paintings, with zero being the lowest and ten the highest score you can get. It's another secret game of mine, ES number.

Yet the old man's ES number is a mind-blowing eight. Wow.

'Is everything all right?' he shouts through the closed window. 'Have you hurt yourself?'

I gape at him, frozen. I look behind him and realise that the gate is now wide open. In all likelihood the old man has opened it, which means that he has something to do with The Shapiro Foundation. This realisation makes me jump out of the car, all the while holding my dress so that he can't see my floral-patterned undies, only a euro ninety-nine at an H&M summer sale.

Who knows, maybe he's a Meyhoff scholar! Or a visiting professor! Or...

'Hello,' I say eagerly, offering my free hand. 'I'm Elisabetta Mancini, Paul Goncourt's new assistant.'

That's my real name, Elisabetta (just like Elisabetta Sirani, my idol) – although my family calls me Elisa. And maybe it is only fair that I reveal my own ES number, which is somewhere between one and two, though closer to one than to two. I have long hair that is exactly the colour of the hardened rye bread my aunt buys in IKEA, big dark eyes, straight nose, a bit too generous for my taste; and a pallid skin that luckily has never given me problems in the pimple department. All these qualities (together with the fact that unless I'm starving on a perennial diet, my body tends to be round the way women were in the Baroque period) might make you think of certain allegorical figures in Elisabetta Sirani's paintings, such as the women in *Justice, Charity and Prudence*. But admittedly you have to stretch the truth to see the resemblance.

'And I'm the gardener,' the old man replies, trying his best not to stare at the rip in my dress.

'Oh,' I say, mortified.

'Did you just ring the intercom?'

'Yes I did,' I say, now holding the rip with both hands.

'I'm sorry.' He waves his hand, frustrated. 'We had a power failure this morning. Couldn't get the gate working.'

Silence. Then he looks at me. His face is serious, but his eyes are smiling.

'Let's go inside,' he says, motioning his hand again. 'I saw dottor Goncourt arriving just a few minutes ago.'

He doesn't have to ask twice. I walk fast to my Fiat, relieved that good old Destiny hasn't abandoned me after all. I switch on the engine, and drive through the gate, chocolate-stained, mascara-smudged, and half-naked from my hips downwards.

But at least I'm going in.

