

I

I dreamt again of the burning. The first one, when I was seven years old, the sky above Piazza Oberdan stained blood-red, the flames hissing, the men in black shirts dancing and shouting, ‘Viva! Viva!’ as though the fire were a product of their demented energy, a strange creature come alive to drive the Slavs out of Trieste. I saw again the faces of the people at the open windows and on the balconies – rows and rows of them in the tall white building of the Narodni Dom, the Slovene national home. I heard the jeers of the mob, the scream of the sirens, smelt the smoke that filled the evening sky.

Only, in my dream, I was no longer a child clutching my mother’s hand, but the young woman I am now: solid, sensible, apparently capable. Yet I made no movement to help, no attempt to stop the *squadristi* as they poured on petrol, barred the doors; no attempt to make the police do something, to yell in their faces, to beg them to help, to clear a way for the firefighters who were blocked by the baying Blackshirts. I stood as I did then, transfixed, horrified – only now, as an adult, I understood what they were doing and I knew what would come next. I longed to cry out, to scream, to stop them,

but my mouth was clamped shut and my feet refused to move so that I remained helpless, shaking, as powerless as a child. I woke then, relieved to find myself in my narrow bed, but disturbed that the dream had come again.

People say I couldn't possibly remember as much as I do, as I was only a child when the *squadristi* burned the Slovene cultural centre, a symbol of all that they hated: the foreigners who contaminated *la città Italianissima*, the most Italian city. But memory is a strange and fluid thing. Sometimes we remember everything precisely. Sometimes we remember nothing at all. The memory of that night is captured for me in time as a fly in amber – the sound of the glass in the windows shattering; the desperate cries of the people in the apartments, the cafe, the restaurant, the theatre, as they realised the doors were locked from the outside and that they would have to jump; the pathetic sound of my own mother's muted and baleful weeping. I remember it all because that was the moment I understood that everything I knew was about to be destroyed, and that I would have to hide who I was. That was the beginning of my journey to becoming an all-Italian girl. It was how I became not Iva Valentich, but Eva Valenti.

But it's not that fire I wanted to tell you about. It is the second one.