

Seven Floors by Dino Buzzati

One morning in March, after a night's train journey, Giovanni Corte arrived in the town where the famous nursing home was. He was a little feverish, but he was still determined to walk from the station to the hospital, carrying his small bag.

Although his was an extremely slight case, in the very earliest stages, Giovanni Corte had been advised to go to the well-known sanatorium, which existed solely for the care of the particular illness from which he was suffering. This meant that the doctors were particularly competent and the equipment particularly pertinent and efficient.

Catching sight of it from a distance- he recognised it from having seen photos in some brochure--Giovanni Corte was most favourably impressed. The building was white, seven storeys high; its mass was broken up by a series of recesses which gave it a vague resemblance to a hotel. It was surrounded by tall trees.

Following a brief medical visit, the preliminary to a more accurate and complete examination, Giuseppe Corte was put in a cheerful room on the seventh and uppermost floor. The furniture and upholstery were bright and shining like the wall paper; the armchairs were made of wood, the pillows covered with multicolored fabrics, and the view from the window swept out over one of the most beautiful areas of the city. Everything was peaceful, hospitable, and reassuring. Giuseppe Corte put himself right to bed, turned on the over-head light, and began to read a book he had brought with him. Shortly, the nurse came in to inquire if there was anything he needed anything.

Giuseppe Corte didn't need anything, but he began to chat freely with the young woman, asking for information about the clinic. In this way, he learned about the hospital's unique practice of assigning its patients to different floors in accordance with the gravity of their illness. On the seventh floor, the top floor, only the very mildest cases were treated. Those whose forms of the illness weren't grave, but who certainly couldn't be neglected, were assigned to the sixth floor. More serious infections were treated on the fifth floor, and so on and so forth. Gravely ill patients were housed on the second floor; and on the first floor, those for whom all hope had been abandoned.

Not only did this unique system speed up service, it made it unlikely that mildly ill patients would be upset by the unnecessary proximity of other patients who might be suffering agonies, and it guaranteed a homogenous atmosphere on every floor. In addition, treatment could be perfectly graded to offer the best possible results.

Each floor was like a small self-contained world with its own particular rules and special traditions that had no validity on other floors. And since each ward was under the direction of a different doctor, there were precise differences, some absolutely minimal, in methods of treatment: this, despite the fact that the institution's General Director had engraved a single address on the building.

After the nurse left, Giuseppe Corte felt as though his fever had disappeared, and he went to look out the window. He had no interest in the city's panorama, which was completely new to him; instead, he was hoping to catch sight of other patients through the windows on the lower levels. The building's structure of large recesses allowed this type of observation. Giuseppe Corte concentrated most of his attention on the first-floor windows, which seemed very far away and could only be perceived laterally. But he couldn't see anything of interest. Most of the windows were hermetically sealed by gray metal shades, completely lowered.

Corte noticed a man looking out of the window next to his. The two patients eyed each other for a time with growing sympathy, but neither knew how to break the silence. Finally, Giuseppe Corte plucked up his courage and asked, "You too have only just arrived?"

"Oh, no. I've already been here for two months." He was silent for a few moments and then, not knowing how to continue the conversation, he added, "I was looking down at my brother."

"Your brother?"

"Yes," explained the stranger, "we came here together. It's really odd, but he kept getting worse, and, just imagine, now he's already on the fourth."

"The fourth what?"

"On the fourth floor," the man explained, and he pronounced his words with such an expression of commiseration and horror that Giuseppe Corte was almost frightened.

"Are the illnesses so grave on the fourth floor?" he asked cautiously.

"Oh, God," remarked the man, slowly shaking his head. "They're not desperate yet, but there isn't much to be happy about."

With the quizzical ease of people who hear about tragedies that don't concern them, Corte asked, "Well, if they're so grave on the fourth floor, then who gets put on the first?"

"Oh," he said, "the dying are on the first floor. There's nothing for the doctors to do down there. The priest is the only one who works. And of course"

"But there's hardly anyone on the first floor. Almost all the rooms down there are closed up," Giuseppe Corte interrupted, as though expecting confirmation.

"There's hardly anyone, now. But this morning there were many," answered the stranger with a faint smile. "Where you see the shades lowered, it means someone has just died in there. Don't you see that all the shutters are open on the other floors? But,

you'll have to excuse me," he added, withdrawing slowly, "I think it's beginning to get cold. I'm going back to bed. Good luck, good luck."

The man disappeared inside and the window was shut with some force. He saw a light switch on inside the room. Giuseppe Corte remained immobile at the window, staring at the lowered shades on the first floor. He stared at them with morbid intensity, trying to imagine the secret funerals of that terrible first floor where patients were interred before their death; and he felt a sense of relief knowing that it was so far away.

Shadows of night descended on the city. One by one, the thousand windows of the sanitarium were illuminated. From the distance, it must have looked as though there were a party underway in a great palace. Only on the first floor, down there at the bottom of the precipice, dozens and dozens of windows remained blind and dark.

Giuseppe Corte was reassured by his general check-up. Usually inclined to expect the worst, he had been prepared for a severe verdict and wouldn't have been surprised if the doctor had recommended that he be put on the floor below. In fact, despite his overall good condition, the fever had shown no sign of abating. Instead, the doctor spoke to him with polite, encouraging words. The illness was lingering, he said, but it was only very mild; everything would probably be over in two or three weeks.

"And then I'll stay on the seventh floor?" Giuseppe Corte had asked him anxiously at this point.

"But, of course!" the doctor answered, amicably patting him on the shoulder. "And where did you think you should have gone? To the fourth, perhaps?" he asked laughing, as if to indicate the absurdity of the idea.

"All the better, all the better," said Corte. "You know, when you're ill, you always imagine the worst."

In fact, Giuseppe Corte stayed in the room that he had originally been assigned. On those rare afternoons when he was allowed to get up, he met some of his fellow patients. He scrupulously followed his treatment and did his best to recover rapidly, although his condition seemed to remain stationary.

About ten days had gone by when the head nurse came in to see Giuseppe Corte. He wanted to ask a kindness, in a purely amicable way: a lady with two children would be arriving at the hospital on the following day; the two rooms right next to his were free, but they needed a third. Would Mr. Corte agree to be transferred to another room, just as comfortable? Giuseppe Corte, of course, didn't cause any difficulty. One room or the other was all the same to him. And, who knows, perhaps a different, more gracious nurse would be assigned to him.

"A heart-felt thank you," said the head nurse with a slight bow. "I confess that I'm not at all surprised by your kindness and gallantry. If you have no objection, we'll proceed with the transfer in an hour." In a mollifying tone, as though he were mentioning an

absolutely negligible detail, he added, "By the way, it'll be necessary to go to the floor below. Unfortunately, there are no other rooms free on this floor. But it's a temporary arrangement," he stipulated, seeing that Corte, suddenly sitting up, had started to open his mouth in protest. "It's an absolutely temporary arrangement. As soon as a room becomes free, and I believe that will be in two or three days, you can come back up."

"I confess," said Giuseppe Corte, smiling to show that he was no baby, "I confess that I don't like this move at all."

"But there's no medical reason for the move. I understand very well what you mean. This is only being done as a courtesy to this woman who prefers not to be separated from her children. For heaven's sake," he added, laughing openly, "don't think that there are other reasons!"

"I'll do it," said Giuseppe Corte, "but it feels like a bad omen."

Thus, Corte moved to the sixth floor. And even though he was convinced that the move had nothing whatsoever to do with the deterioration of his condition, he felt discomfited at the thought that an undeniable obstacle had arisen between him and the normal world of healthy people. On the seventh floor, the port of entry, one still had, in a certain way, contact with the society of people; it could almost be considered an extension of the normal world. But on the sixth floor, one had already entered the real core of the hospital; here, the doctors, nurses, and patients already exhibited a slightly different mentality. It was already understood that those who were indeed ill, although not gravely so, were put on that floor. From the first conversations with his neighbors, the general staff and physicians, Giuseppe Corte became aware that, in that ward, the seventh floor was considered a joke, reserved for dilettante patients who were affected by mere fancy more than anything else. Only on the sixth floor did one, so to speak, begin in earnest.

Nevertheless, Giuseppe Corte understood that in order to return upstairs, to the place where the nature of his illness indicated that he should be, he would certainly encounter some difficulties. In order to return to the seventh floor, he would have to do some complicated maneuvering, even if he made the smallest effort. There was no doubt that if he didn't open his mouth, no one would think to return him to the upper floor of the "pseudo ill."

For this reason, Giuseppe Corte made up his mind not to compromise his rights or allow himself to be enticed by habit. He took great care to assure his fellow patients that he would be visiting them for only a few days, that it had been he who had wanted to come downstairs for a few days as a courtesy to a lady, and as soon as a room became free he would be returning upstairs. The others nodded, hardly persuaded.

Giuseppe Corte's conviction was fully confirmed by the new doctor. Even he admitted that Giuseppe Corte could very well be assigned to the seventh floor. His illness was absolutely negligible – and he enunciated this in order to underscore its importance.

But, come to think of it, perhaps Giuseppe Corte might be served just as well on the sixth floor.

“Let’s not start that again,” the patient interjected at this point. “You told me that I belonged on the seventh floor, and I want to go back there.”

“No one has said anything to the contrary,” responded the doctor. “I offer you this advice, purely and simply, not as a doctor, but as an authentic friend! Your illness, I’ll say it again, is extremely mild. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that you’re not even ill! But, in my opinion, it distinguishes itself from similar forms of illness because of a certain expansion. I’ll explain myself: the intensity of the illness is minimal, but its magnitude is considerable; the destructive process of your cells is absolutely just beginning. Perhaps it hasn’t even begun, but it tends, I only say tends, to strike vast portions of the organism simultaneously. For this reason alone, it’s my professional opinion that you could be cured more efficiently here, on the sixth floor, where the therapeutic methods are more exemplary and intense.” For the first time, Giuseppe Corte felt the horror of that sinister expression – the destructive process of his cells.

One day Corte found out that after lengthy consultations with his colleagues, the hospital's General Director had decided to change the way that patients were subdivided. Everyone’s level – so to speak – would be downgraded by a half a point. Patients on each floor would be divided into two categories depending on the gravity of their illness. This subdivision would be done essentially by their respective doctors and would be strictly confidential. The inferior of the two groups would be officially transferred to a lower floor. For example, half the patients on the sixth floor – those whose illnesses were slightly more advanced – would pass down to the fifth floor; and the more indisposed residents of the seventh floor would pass to the sixth. The news pleased Giuseppe Corte because such a large number of transfers would make his return to the seventh floor much easier.

When he mentioned his hope to the nurse, however, he was in for a bitter surprise. That is, she knew that he was to be transferred, but not to the seventh floor, rather, to the floor below. For reasons the nurse couldn't explain, Corte had been included in the group of sixth-floor guests whose illness was “grave” and, for this reason, he had to descend to the fifth floor.

As the initial shock wore off, Giuseppe Corte flew into a rage. He screamed that they had swindled him despicably, that he didn’t want to hear any talk about other transfers to the floor below, that he was going to go home, that rights were rights, and the hospital administration could not so openly neglect the physicians’ diagnoses.

While he was still screaming, the doctor arrived, out of breath, to calm him. He advised Corte to compose himself if he didn’t want to see his fever go up. He explained that there had been a misunderstanding, at least, in part. Once again, he admitted that Giuseppe Corte would be in his proper place if they had put him on the seventh floor; but he added that he had a slightly different, if only a very personal, concept of the case.

When one comes to think of it, given the pathological manifestations of his illness, it could – in a certain sense, you understand – also be attended on the sixth level. He himself couldn't begin to explain how Corte had been catalogued with the lower half of the sixth floor. More likely than not, the secretary in management – who had telephoned him only this morning requesting Giuseppe Corte's precise clinical position – made an error in writing. Or perhaps management had slightly "darkened" the prognosis of an expert, but overly concerned, physician. Finally, the doctor advised Corte not to upset himself, to submit to the transfer without protest. After all, the most important thing was the treatment of the illness, not the placement of the patient.

In regard to his treatment, the doctor added that Giuseppe Corte would have nothing to complain about. The physician on the floor below certainly had more experience; he was almost dogmatic in his insistence that the abilities of the doctors continued to increase, at least in the area of management, the lower one descended. The room was just as elegant and comfortable; the panorama was equally grand. It was only from the third floor down was the view cut off by the belt of trees.

Giuseppe Corte, in the grip of a heightening fever, listened and listened with increasing exhaustion to the doctor's meticulous justifications. At last, he realized that he lacked the strength and, above all, the desire to react further to the unjust transfer. And he allowed himself to be taken to the floor below.

Once he was on the fifth floor, Giuseppe Corte's only consolation, although small, was that, in the judgment of the doctors, nurses, and fellow patients, his illness was the least grave in that ward. In short, he could consider himself, for the most part, the most fortunate individual on the fifth floor. But, he was tormented by the thought that two barriers had now arisen between him and the world of normal people.

Spring was advancing, the air becoming warm. But Giuseppe Corte no longer enjoyed leaning from his window as he had during the first days. Even though his fear was pure foolishness, he was stunned by a strange shiver at the sight of the first-floor windows, the majority of which were always shut and whose proximity was much too close.

His illness seemed stationary. Then, after three days on the fifth floor, a discharge appeared on his right leg and showed no sign of abating in the days that followed. It was an infection, the doctor told him, absolutely independent of the principal malady; a disturbance that could happen to the healthiest person in the world. In order to eliminate it as quickly as possible, an intense gamma-ray treatment would be needed.

"And are they able to give me these treatments here?" asked Giuseppe Corte.

"Certainly! Our hospital has everything," responded the doctor, delighted. "There's only one inconvenience."

"What?" asked Corte with a vague presentiment.

“Inconvenient, as a form of expression,” the doctor corrected himself. “I meant that the only treatment unit is on the fourth floor, and I wouldn’t advise you to make the trek three times a day.”

“So, then, nothing?”

“Well, it would be better if you would be so kind as to go down to the fourth floor until the eczema has passed.”

“Enough!” screamed Giuseppe Corte. “I’ve already gone down enough! I would die. I’m not going to the fourth!”

“As you wish,” remarked the doctor, conciliatory so as not to irritate him. “But which one of us is in charge here? Mind you, I prohibit you to go downstairs three times a day.”

The ugly fact was that the eczema, instead of abating, was slowly spreading. Giuseppe Corte could find no rest and continually tossed and turned in his bed. He held out, furious, for three days until he had to give in. Of his own accord, he begged the doctor to send him for the treatments and, thus, to be transferred to the lower floor.

Once down there, Corte noted with unexpressed pleasure that he represented an exception. The other patients on the ward were decidedly in very serious condition and couldn’t leave their beds even for a minute. Instead, accompanied by the nurses’ compliments and expressions of marvel, he had the luxury of going by foot from his room to the treatment room. He spoke to the new doctor, insisting on his very special position: a patient who, in point of fact, had every right to be on the seventh floor had found himself on the fourth. Just as soon as the eczema passed, he intended to return upstairs. He absolutely would not permit any new excuses. He, who should legitimately still be on the seventh floor!

“On the seventh, on the seventh!” exclaimed the doctor smiling. “You patients are always exaggerating! I’m the first to say that you should be happy with your status. From what I see on your medical chart, there have been no great reversals. But all this talk about the seventh floor – excuse my brutal sincerity – there is a certain difference! You’re one of the less worrisome cases, I agree, but you’re still a patient!”

“So, then, then,” remarked Giuseppe Corte, his face lighting up, “which floor would you put me on?”

“Oh, God, it’s not easy to say. I’ve only had a short visit with you. In order to decide, I’d have to follow you for at least a week.”

“Okay,” insisted Corte, “but roughly, what do you think?”

In order to pacify him, the doctor made believe for a moment that he was pondering the question; then, he nodded to himself and slowly said, "Oh, God, just to make you happy, we could, hmmm, put you on the sixth!" And, as if he were persuading himself, he added, "Yes. Yes, the sixth would do very well."

The doctor thought the patient would be pleased. Instead, an appalled expression spread across Giuseppe Corte's face as he realized that the doctors on the other floors had fooled him. Here was this new doctor, obviously more able and honest, who, in his heart, had assigned him – it was obvious – not to the seventh, but to the sixth floor, and perhaps to the subjacent fifth! That evening his fever rose considerably.

His stay on the fourth floor marked the most tranquil period for Giuseppe Corte since his admission to the hospital. The doctor was a very nice person, solicitous and cordial. He often lingered for hours chatting about a variety of subjects. And Giuseppe Corte conversed willingly, finding many things to talk about concerning his everyday life as a lawyer and man of the world. He tried persuading himself that he still belonged to the society of healthy people, that he was still tied to the business world, that he was interested in public affairs. He tried, but without success, for the conversation invariably fell on his illness.

He became obsessed with the idea of making any improvement whatsoever. Unfortunately, although the treatments had succeeded in arresting the spread of the discharge, there hadn't been enough to eliminate it. Every day, Giuseppe Corte spoke at length about it to the doctor, and he forced himself to appear strong – ironically, without success.

"Tell me, Doctor," he asked one day, "How is the destructive process of my cells?"

"Oh, such ugly words!" the doctor jokingly admonished him. "Where did you ever learn them? It's not good; it's not good especially for a patient! I never want to hear you talk like that again."

"Okay," objected Corte, "but you haven't answered my question."

"Oh, I'll tell you right away," the doctor remarked politely. "The destructive process of the cells, to repeat your horrible expression, is minimal in your case, absolutely minimal. But I would tend to define it as obstinate."

"Obstinate, meaning chronic?"

"Don't make me say what I haven't said. I only mean obstinate. The majority of cases are like that. Infections, even very mild ones, often need aggressive and protracted treatments."

"But, tell me, Doctor, when can I hope to see an improvement?"

"When? Predictions in these cases are rather difficult. But listen," he added after a meditative pause, "I see that you have a sincere and genuine desire to get well. If I weren't afraid of making you angry, I'd give you some advice."

"But tell me, just tell me, Doctor."

"All right, I'll present the problem in very clear terms. If I, struck by this illness, even in its weakest form, were in this sanitarium, which is perhaps the best one in existence, I would have assigned myself of my own accord, and from the first day, from the first day, you understand, to one of the lower floors. I would put myself right on the . . ."

"On the first?" suggested Corte with a forced smile.

"Oh, no! on the first, no," responded the doctor ironically, "this, no! But certainly on the third or even on the second. The treatment is much better on the lower floors, I guarantee. It's a much more complete and robust system; the personnel are more able. Do you know who the soul of this hospital is?"

"Professor Dati, right?"

"Exactly, Professor Dati. He invented the treatment here; he designed this entire establishment. And yet, he, the Master, remains, so to speak, between the first and second floors. His directive effort radiates from there. But, I guarantee, his influence does not go beyond the third floor. Above that point, his very orders are diminished, lose their consistency, deviate. The heart of the hospital is below, and in order to have the best treatment possible, it's necessary to remain below."

"In short," said Giuseppe Corte with a trembling voice, "you're advising me . . ."

"You might add one thing." continued the doctor, "You can add that in your particular case they would be able to look after the eczema. It's nothing of importance, I agree, but it's rather annoying, which after a while could depress your morale; and you know just how important the serenity of the spirit is to one's recovery. The treatments I've given you have only been partially helpful. Why? It could be pure chance, but it could also be that the rays aren't intense enough. The machines are much more potent on the third floor and the likelihood of curing your eczema would be much greater there. You see? Once your recovery is underway, you will have taken the most difficult step. Once you begin to go up, it's difficult to turn back again. When you really feel better, nothing will stop your ascent, either from here or from the floors below, to the fifth, sixth, even, I dare say, to the seventh floor – in accordance with your 'merit'."

"And you believe that this could accelerate the treatment?"

"But there can be no doubt! I already told you what I would do were I in your place."

He and the doctor had these talks every day. Finally, the moment came when the patient, tired of suffering from the eczema, and despite his instinctive reluctance to descend to the realm of more serious cases, decided to follow the doctor's counsel and transfer to the floor below.

He noted immediately that a peculiar gaiety reigned over the doctor and the nurses on the third floor; this, despite the fact that the most severe cases were being treated down there. Indeed, he discovered that their happiness increased by the day. His curiosity aroused, having become somewhat friendly with the nurse, he asked why on earth they were so happy.

"Oh, you don't know?" responded the nurse. "We're going on vacation in three days."
"What do you mean, 'we're going on vacation'?"

"Oh, yes. The third floor will be closed and the staff will be gone for two weeks. Every floor has its turn."

"And the patients? What are they supposed to do?"

"Well, since they're relatively few in number, we make one floor out of two floors."

"How? You put the third and fourth-floor patients together?"

"On, no," corrected the nurse, "we put the second- and third-floor patients together. Those of you on this floor will go down below."

"Go to the second?" said Giuseppe Corte, pale as a dead man. "I would have to go down to the second?"

"But of course. What's so strange about it? When we come back to work in two weeks, you'll come back to this room. I don't think that's anything to be afraid of."

Instead, Giuseppe Corte, warned by a mysterious instinct, was overtaken by fear. But, having understood that he couldn't stop the personnel from going on vacation and convinced that the new treatment was helping him (the eczema had almost completely disappeared), he didn't dare oppose the new transfer. Nevertheless, he required — despite the nurses' teasing — that a sign be posted on the door of his new room: "GIUSEPPE CORTE OF THE THIRD FLOOR. PASSING THROUGH." In the entire history of the hospital, there had never been a precedent for this, but the doctors didn't object for they were convinced that even small aversions could provoke a crisis in nervous temperaments such as Corte's.

After all, it was a matter of waiting two weeks, not one day more, not one day less. Giuseppe Corte began to count them with stubborn eagerness, remaining in bed, immobile for hours on end, his eyes fixed on the furniture, which wasn't so modern and bright on the second floor as it was on the upper floors. Instead, it assumed large

dimensions and more solemn, severe lines. Once in a while he would listen intently and he seemed to hear vague gasps of agony coming from the floor below, the floor of the dying, the “condemned” ward.

Naturally, all this contributed to his decline. His diminished serenity seemed to encourage the illness, his fever began to rise, and his weakness became more intense. From the window – it was already full summer and the windows were almost always open – he could no longer glimpse the roofs or even the houses of the city, only the green wall of trees encompassing the hospital.

After a week had passed, one afternoon toward two o’clock, the head nurse and three other nurses suddenly entered the room and switched on a little round light. “Are we ready for the transfer?” asked the head nurse in a good-natured, jesting tone.

“What transfer?” asked Giuseppe Corte in a strained voice. “What sort of joke is this now? They aren’t returning to the third floor for seven days.”

“What third floor?” said the head nurse as though he hadn’t understood. “I have orders to bring you to the first. Look here.” And he showed him an official form for the passage to the lower floor signed by none other than Professor Dati.

Giuseppe Corte’s terror, his consummate anger, exploded in a long scream that echoed throughout the entire ward.

“Quiet. Quiet. For heaven’s sake,” pleaded the nurses. “There are patients here who aren’t well!”

But that wasn’t enough to calm him. Finally, the doctor who ran the ward arrived. He was extremely kind and very well mannered. He asked what had happened, looked at the form, and asked Corte to explain. Then he turned to the head nurse, furious, declaring that there had been a mistake; he hadn’t given any such order; for some time there had been an intolerable confusion, and he had been kept in the dark about everything. At last, having said his peace to his subordinate, he turned politely to the patient, excusing himself profoundly.

“Unfortunately, however,” the doctor added, “unfortunately, Professor Dati left just an hour ago for a short break; he won’t be back for two days. I’m absolutely distressed, but his orders can’t be disobeyed. He would be the first one to complain about this sort of error, I guarantee. I don’t understand how this could have happened.”

By this time a dreadful trembling had seized Giuseppe Corte’s body. His ability to take control over himself had abandoned him entirely. Terror overwhelmed him as though he were a child. His sobs resounded through the room.

Thus, because of that accursed error, he had arrived at the final station. He was in the ward of the dying. He, who, after all, considering the gravity of his illness and according to the judgment of much more severe doctors, had the right to be assigned to

the sixth, if not the seventh floor! The situation was so grotesque that there were moments when Giuseppe Corte sobbed almost uncontrollably.

Stretched out on the bed as the hot summer afternoon passed slowly over the city, he looked through the window at the green of the trees. He had the impression of having arrived in an unreal world made of preposterous, sterile tiled walls, icy mortuary passages, and white human-like figures without souls. He even began to believe that the trees that he perceived through the window were not real: indeed, he convinced himself of it, noting that the leaves didn't move at all.

The idea so agitated him that Corte rang the bell for the nurse and asked her to bring his eyeglasses. Only then did he calm down a little. With the aid of his glasses, he could reassure himself that they really were green trees and that the leaves did move, if only slightly, with each stirring of the wind.

When the nurse left, he passed a quarter of an hour in complete silence. Six floors, six terrible barriers – even though it was technical error – now hung over Giuseppe Corte with implacable weight. How many years – yes, he had to think in terms of years – how many years would it take for him to rise again to the edge of that precipice?

But, why was the room suddenly so dark? It was still early afternoon. With supreme effort, Giuseppe Corte, who felt himself paralyzed by a strange torpor, looked at his watch on the night stand next to his bed. Three-thirty. He turned his head to the side and saw that the shades, obeying a mysterious command, were slowly lowering, blocking out the passage of light.