

ELISA CASTIGLIONI

Yellow primrose



ELISA CASTIGLIONI

Yellow primrose

Yellow Primrose
By Elisa Castiglioni

Original Title *Giallo Primula*

© 2020 Editrice Il Castoro Srl
viale Andrea Doria 7, 20124 -Milano
www.editriceilcastoro.it
info@editriceilcastoro.it

English Translation by Amber Faith Cassese

Cover Image © Shutterstock

To all the girls and boys
of La Vallata dei Libri Bambini
and their families

6 march 2020

Covid-19. It sounds like the name of a mobile phone model. Not that I even get that stuff since I'm the only twelve-year-old I know who doesn't have one. The reason I don't is very simple: Mum. She thinks having a mobile phone at my age would make me cease to exist. That's right, that's exactly what she said. And she said it with her teacher voice. Mum maintains – or perhaps I should say maintained since she isn't that sure anymore – that mobiles make your loved ones disappear, replacing them with their virtual presence, a long way from nature or exercise. Basically, the embodiment of true evil.

Well, these things did happen to me.

And not because of a mobile phone.

If I have to be honest – in a diary you do have to be, or why else would you even have one? – in the beginning, it seemed like a holiday.

I don't have to get up at six in the morning to go to the breakfast club, I don't have to endure maths in the flesh, or

Matteo, who sits next to me and, at thirteen years old, still picks his nose (Matteo I'm only saying this because I love you. Grow up because you're not even bad looking!). I don't have to eat plastic food at the canteen, or be self-conscious or frightened of oral exams. When the teachers call me to the front of the class, my brain freezes, my tongue swells, and even though I studied, I open my mouth and nothing comes out.

I haven't left the house in two weeks. And it's not just because my parents won't let me: I'm staying home because I'm terrified.

I built a fort in my room with the curtains from the French doors. I pulled them up and over my desk and clipped them to the back of a chair with clothespins. The wall is on one side and my bed on the other. I moved my desk to the back of the room so I even have room to lie down. There's even space for my dog Cleo, and there would be for Micky too. Even though she obviously can't come over. I covered the floor with a blanket and all the pillows I could find in the house. I put my markers for Manga, my favourite graphic novels, some Oreos, a bottle of Coke, and a diary. If it were up to me, I would never leave.

Today the alarm Mum put in my room blasted *Born in the U.S.A.* at eight on the dot. A rock song per day to get me out of bed. Yesterday it was Metallica and who knows who it will be tomorrow. I turn it off and stay in

bed though. I only get out of bed when Mum calls me from the kitchen.

“Nico, are you up?”

“Getting there.”

I drag myself to the kitchen still half asleep, stretch, and almost trip over Cleo, who’s sprawled out in the patch of sun shining on the floor. Cleo has the soul of a cat. She never seeks approval like dogs do. She’s independent and the only thing she wants is to be showered with attention and fed like a queen.

Mum is already at her computer, wearing her headphones. “Hi, Nico. Good morning. Did you sleep well?” She said quickly. I was about to respond, but she put her hand up. “Sorry, sweetheart, I can’t now. I’m at a crucial point in a tutorial about how to use the *live lesson* function on Moodle.”

I throw my hands up in defeat and make my breakfast. It’s the first time. I usually find everything ready. I put a scoop of cocoa powder in the milk I warmed in the microwave and taste it. It tastes like nothing. I add two more spoonsful of cocoa and one of sugar, hoping Mum doesn’t see. According to her, sugar is humanity’s second greatest enemy. Daddy would approve though, because he likes his milk this way too. Actually, he taught me how to make it.

I miss my dad. He hasn’t been home in weeks because he’s been sleeping at the hospital. He’s the head nurse of the

A&E in my city. I'm proud of him, but sometimes I'm also a little cross with him. He's always there for everyone else, but not for us.

Mum takes her headphones off and smiles at me. "I think I got it." Then she looks at the clock and then at me, then at the clock again. "Nico, you're still in your pyjamas. Go get ready. Your classes are about to begin."

"But Mum, what's the big deal if I stay in my pyjamas? It's not like I'm going out."

She glowers at me with her teacher glare. "What do you mean what's the big deal?! You aren't getting dressed for the others. You dress for yourself, for respect for your studies." And then she quotes Leopardi, who didn't leave his house, but always dressed up before he went to "labour" over his "pages."

I refrain from groaning. But sometimes it's hard having a mum who's a teacher.

She looks at me regretfully. It's like she can read my mind. "I know I'm a little strict, but it's for your own good. Even now, it's important to maintain some structure, some routine.

"I know, Mum."

She nods and looks at me seriously. "Do you know how to do a PowerPoint presentation?"

"Yes, if you want, I can show you how, it's really easy."

Relieved, she thanks me..

In my room, I put on a t-shirt and pair of leggings and pull my hair into a high bun. I'm about to go back to the kitchen when I bump into Mum in the hallway who hands me her mobile. She's on the land line. "It's Grandma." She puts her right hand over the receiver. "Could you talk to her please because I'm on the phone with the headteacher."

Resigned, I answer the video call.

"Ciao Nico! It's so great to see you!"

"Ciao, Grandma."

"Can you see me?"

"No, I see the ceiling. There's a spiderweb up top on the right."

"What'd you say?"

"If you lower the phone, I'll be able to see you better."

"Now?"

"Now I see the fridge."

"Oh well, it's not important, I can see you."

She tells me that her neighbour brings her groceries and leaves them on her doormat. She rings the bell and scurries away. Then she calls her on the phone to see if she's okay and if everything's there. She quizzes me about my online classes and asks me if I ever talk to my friends. She suddenly gets quiet and tells me she's lonely.

"I miss my friends."

"Who? You mean the ladies you play cards with?"

"Yes, them."

“But you couldn’t stand them.”

“I know, but now I miss them.”

She says she’s very worried. This virus hits old people hardest, and she says her friends send her distressing articles and news. Grandma hangs up and I feel so bad for her. She lives in another town and it’s not easy to be alone. I search for reassuring posts to send her, but I can’t find any. Just disturbing things. So, I draw a Kawaii rainbow and clouds and a sun. It’s not my genre, but it would work for my grandma. I snap a picture and send it to her.

I spend the rest of the morning at the kitchen table in front of the computer. It’s not a bad substitute for a school desk. Even though I’m starting to miss my classmates. My English teacher says we have a listening exercise and a true-or-false quiz. The dialogue is set in London. For geography, I have to research Saint Petersburg. Mum said I should visit the Hermitage online. I told her I would, but I won’t. I want to go in person. But when will we even get to travel again?

I want to ask her, but she’s still on the phone. This time, with a parent. Some of the mums are worried, asking if we’ll be able to finish the whole programme, questioning the quality of distance learning. Mum is always calm and polite, but from her expression, it’s clear she’s very worried too. And it’s sort of true that distance learning is hard. School is about the faces and voices of the teachers and your classmates. Even Matteo.

By the time Mum hangs up the phone, it's lunchtime. She peeks in the kitchen. "Feel like cooking with me?"

I take my books and computer off the table and it looks like a kitchen again.

Mum beats eggs with milk, adds flour, and starts making crepes. I make tomato salad. "I didn't know you knew how to make those," I say.

"There's never enough time." She looks at me sternly and points a silicon spatula at me. "But you know what? From now on, we're always going to make time to cook together."

She starts singing *Memories* by Maroon Five and I sing along.

This is one thing I hope we keep doing when things go back to normal.

10 march 2020

Today is Tuesday but it doesn't feel like it. There's no pizza in the canteen, no volleyball after school. Today is just another day in quarantine. Today Mum set my alarm to *Nessun Dorma* which is more jarring than any heavy metal song. I make my way into the kitchen half asleep and find her already working at the computer. She's correcting grammar homework.

"Did you have breakfast?"

"No."

"I'll make it for you."

I don't think she heard me.

"Yea, sure these are complicated concepts...who knows if I was clear. It's different in class, but what can I do?" She mumbles to herself.

I take the espresso pot and fill it with water, then I put coffee in the filter. I press it down with a spoon. It's the first time I've ever made coffee and I didn't even know I knew how. I must have learnt watching Mum. When the coffee starts dripping, its aroma begins to fill the room

and Mum looks up from her screen. “You made me coffee?” She smiles.

I hand her a cup. “Here you go, madame.”

She takes a sip. “It’s the best coffee I’ve ever had.” She looks at the time and is about to say something.

“I know. I’ll get ready. And if you want, after my class, I’ll show you how to use PowerPoint.”

She thanks me and hands me her mobile. “You have messages.”

I read them. Micky is complaining about her brother who monopolizes the television; Grandma asks me for another drawing she can show her friends; my aunty wants to know if I can draw something for my cousins. If I do, they would be so happy to colour them and at least they would stop systematically destroying the house. Knowing them, I know she’s not exaggerating. I get my sketchbook and draw a Tyrannosaurus and a Brontosaurus. I send them right away and even answer Micky. I draw some Kawaii tulips for my grandma. I’m really stretching it!

At nine, it’s my turn at the computer and Mum sits down to correct some literary research papers. This is going to be a hard day for me. Today I have maths, geometry, science and history. All my least favourite subjects.

After lunch, I show Mum how to make a PowerPoint presentation. She takes notes as I explain. When we finish, she gets to work straight away on slides for a grammar les-

son and, just as I'm about to retreat to my fort, the home phone rings, and I answer. It's Zia, my aunt. Mum asks me to put her on speaker.

She tells us she's so tired and, the factory where she works isn't closing. She's working more than before and without a mask. I imagine her hunched over a conveyor belt, plugging away. Her long brown hair pulled back into a white hairnet. Zia is an amazing artist, but when she was young, there wasn't enough money for both her and Daddy to study. Since she's older, she went to work in a factory. Her house is full of beautiful watercolour paintings that she does at the weekend. She loves painting yellow primroses. She says they remind her of the fields she would see when she was a little girl. Grandma's house was full of them.

Aunty's phone call made us both sad. We share a piece of apple cake. Then my mum starts working again, and I go back to my fort. I grab my sketchbook and draw Aunty's face with her hair down and no hairnet. I surround her in yellow light that protects her from the virus, like a shield. After, I draw Mum, Daddy, Cleo and myself and then my cousins, uncle, grandma and her Bridge club, Micky and her family, my classmates and teachers, my building – I draw the whole planet and surround it in the same yellow light.

I hang the drawing up on the curtain of my fort using clothespins.

12 march 2020

Mum puts her fork down and looks me straight in the eye. “Nico, what do you think of the slides I made on the Elizabethan era?”

I change the subject. I learnt this trick from Daddy, to avoid telling her something you know she doesn’t want to hear. “The pasta’s delicious, Mamma.”

“What does pasta have to do with it now! I asked you what you thought of my presentation.”

It was silly to try. It never works for Daddy either. “It’s not bad, and it has everything.” I lied. It’s a total snooze fest.

She sits back in her chair and crosses her arms. “You don’t like it.”

“No, that’s not it.... But Mum, you know I’ve never liked history. It’s certainly not my favourite subject.” I put my fork down too.

She jumps to her feet. “But that’s the problem! How can you not like history?! If someone doesn’t like history, they don’t like humanity, life, themselves.” She puts one hand

on her forehead and the other on her hip. Oh no, once she starts, there's no stopping her!

"You're tired and you have to rest." I clear the dishes and put them in the sink. "I'll do the washing up, why don't you go read in my fort."

Mum lets her arms fall. "Read. I wish. I have a pile of books on my night table, but I have too much work to do...."

"Exactly, why don't you rest for an hour. Then you'll be able to do better work, more efficiently."

She considers it for a minute, takes my suggestion, and thanks me. She gets a book from her room and goes to read in my fort. One hour later, she appears in front of the sofa. Her face is more relaxed, and I'm happy for her. I smile at her but keep drawing. I'm working on the face of the protagonist of my new story. She's called Shakira, and she's a young warrior with magical powers, but she doesn't know it yet. Of course, I would rather not to be interrupted right now.

She tells me she feels better, thanks me, and then asks me the same questions as before. "Nico, so what do you think of the presentation I made on the Elizabethan era?"

I lift my pen from the paper. "I told you, it's not bad."

She points her finger at me. "No, it's not true. It's not good, it's a total bore and it doesn't communicate anything. Just dates and basic concepts, but that's not how I want to teach, this is not what I want to teach my students."

Resigned, I put the cap back on my pen. This is going to be a long one. "What are you trying to communicate?"

"Shakespeare." Her face lights up. "He is the Elizabethan era."

"So do that, talk about Shakespeare."

She shakes her head and slouches over in defeat. But then suddenly her eyes light up. "You know, you're right?" She motions me to follow her. "Come with me."

"Mamma are you crazy? We can't leave the house...."

"We're not going out; we're going to the garage."

She reminds me not to touch anything in the lift and to never rub my eyes again. And to not bite my nails or pick at my cuticles. Never again. Or I will die.

When we get to the garage, she asks me to help her pull out an old chest. As soon as we lift it, I realize it weighs way more than I thought it would.

"What's in here?"

"Old photo albums and...theatrical costumes."

"Theatrical costumes. So cool. But whose?"

"Mine." She smiles. "I used to belong to a theatre company."

I didn't know that.

"What are you going to do with them?" I ask her in the lift.

"If I can still fit in the costume I wore when I played Lady Macbeth, I'm going to make a video of me perfor-

ming one of the monologues and send it with the presentation full of dates and facts.”

My eyes grow wide. I’m speechless.

“So cool.” She winks at me.

Totally.

15 march 2020

Not only could Mum still fit in her costume, but she is a such a good actress! Who knew? She uses her voice, gestures, and moves in a way that I've never seen before. She's like a professional!

I film the video with her mobile and then we even send it to my dad, who responds with a ton of smiley faces. And he isn't one to use emojis!

"When I get back to class, I'm going to act out my history lessons!" She tells me while looking through her chest for something. "Here it is! This is perfect for the Nun of Monza from *Promessi Sposi* by Alessandro Manzoni." She shakes out a black tunic and black sheet. "I wore this for a post-modern piece."

This morning after breakfast, we hang the black sheet over the living room bookcase and Mum sits in a chair in front of the sheet. A black background, black dress, all you see is her pale face. It is a pretty spectacular effect.

"I'm ready when you are," I say.

She nods so I start recording. But then the telephone rings.

Mum goes to get it. Whatever they're saying, it's not good news. She hangs up. "Zia. She's in hospital. She's got the virus."

The black sheet falls from the bookcase darkening the sofa and our souls.

18 march 2020

Today, Mum had to go do the shopping. We haven't been able to get a delivery slot because the supermarkets are inundated with requests. She just went down to the shops below and came back with two bags full of groceries. She left them in the hall and ran to the bathroom to wash her hands.

"The two ladies there are so nice. When this is over, we have to continue shopping at their store. We mustn't forget."

I bring the bags into the kitchen. Mum's eyes are teary when she comes in.

We put the groceries away in silence.

We make ravioli with butter and sage in silence.

We eat in silence.

When Aunty got sick, everything just shut down. Everything is silence. A painful, heavy, dark silence.

My uncle calls us every night. Mum stays on the phone with him for ages and when she hangs up, she only says there's no new news. *Andrà tutto bene*. Everything will be fine. Every day, I do new drawings for my cousins: bulldozers, airplanes, helicopters, and motorcycles and I send them to my uncle. And Kawaii drawings for my grandma and her

friends. Artistically, I'm scraping the bottom of the barrel.

But will everything be fine? Sometimes, I don't think this will ever end.

Yesterday, I saw images on TV I will never forget. I saw seventy coffins being taken away from the Italian town of Bergamo on army trucks. The military had to take them away because there was no room left for them. My heart broke for people I don't even know but whom I felt as close to as my own family. Mum held me and we both wept.

I can see that image even now.

"You're not hungry, Nico?"

"Not really."

We clear the table and while she loads the dishwasher, Mum tells me not to worry, that Aunty is going to make it. "Doctors from China have come to help us, and, Saturday, others from Cuba will be here. You'll see. Aunty is strong and she's going to be fine. It's going to be okay. She struggles to get a saucer that got stuck.

I don't tell her that I don't believe that anymore. I don't tell her because I don't want to worry her. She's so pale, I'm afraid she could get sick too.

In my room, I rip up the drawings I hung in my fort. The yellow shield of light is useless. I feel so angry, fragile, powerless.

There's nothing I can do to change anything.

Niente. Nothing.

25 march 2020

Since the black sheet fell on the sofa, each day is the same as the next. Hollow. Slow-moving. Raw. This morning, Mum comes into my fort and gives me my sketchbook and pens back.

“I don’t want them.”

“I’ll leave them here just in case. You may change your mind.” She was about to leave but then adds: “Don’t stop drawing Nico, not now. We need you. We need your drawings. Don’t you think your cousins would like to get something new to colour from you? Even Grandma and her friends can’t wait for your messages.”

“My drawings are worthless.”

“That’s not true, Nico, your drawings help others feel less alone. You can’t defeat Covid-19, but you can do your part. You can use your talent for others. To make them feel less alone. You know, loneliness is a disease too. And it could be just as lethal as a virus.”

I wiped away my tears. “Zia didn’t deserve to get sick.”

“No one deserves it. But life isn’t a math equation . Like you get back exactly what you give. If only it was like that.

Bad things happen, but what happens to us is not what defines us. What defines us is how we react to what's happening."

Mum lets out a deep breath and hands me her mobile. I won't take it so she places it on the sketchbook. "If you don't believe me, read the messages that you got today." She studies my face, but I won't even look up so she leaves.

I stare at the phone; I want to chuck it out the window. But instead, I click on the first message: My grandma's friend thanks me for the drawings Grandma had forwarded to her. They make her feel less alone. She asks when my next drawings of the smiley things would come. Then there's a voice message from my cousins asking me for a snow plough and a digger. Their voices unravel the knot in my throat and I start crying hot tears that slowly stream down my cheeks and neck. They must be desperate without their mum. I grab my sketchbook and start drawing: a field of Kawaii daisies for Grandma and her friends, and the trucks my cousins commissioned.

And a big yellow heart for Zia.a.

30 march 2020

When the phone call comes, Mum is taking out the trash with Cleo. As soon as it rings, I'm sure it's more bad news. Maybe this time, Daddy is in the hospital. I answer with a heavy heart.

But it's her. "I've been discharged," she says weary yet relieved.

Overjoyed, I felt myself finally relax, welling up as she tells me the first thing she saw was my drawing. That she thought she was seeing the petal of a primrose flower. One from the fields near my Grandma's house.

"I was in a bad way, you know? I couldn't breathe. They put that helmet on me."

"And how are you now, Zia?"

"I can breathe, and with every breath, that light you drew enters my heart and my lungs." She paused. "I want to remember the gratitude that I am feeling forever, even years from now. And the drawings you did during this time will help us remember. The world has changed, Nico."

Auntie tells me she needs to rest now. As soon as I hang up, I phone Mum and tell her everything. And then I pho-

ne Daddy too. He answers nervously. I never disturb him at work. I tell him about Auntie and, relieved, he thanks me for calling to let him know. He says he's happy to hear my voice and that he's so sorry he hasn't been home with us. He's about to say something else, but they call him from A&E. "One second, I'm coming," he says. "Nico, I'm so proud of you. Grandma and Auntie sent me pictures of the drawings you did for them. And I know you really helped your mum too."

They call him again.

"I have to go. *Ti voglio bene*, Nicoletta. I love you."

"I love you too, Papà."

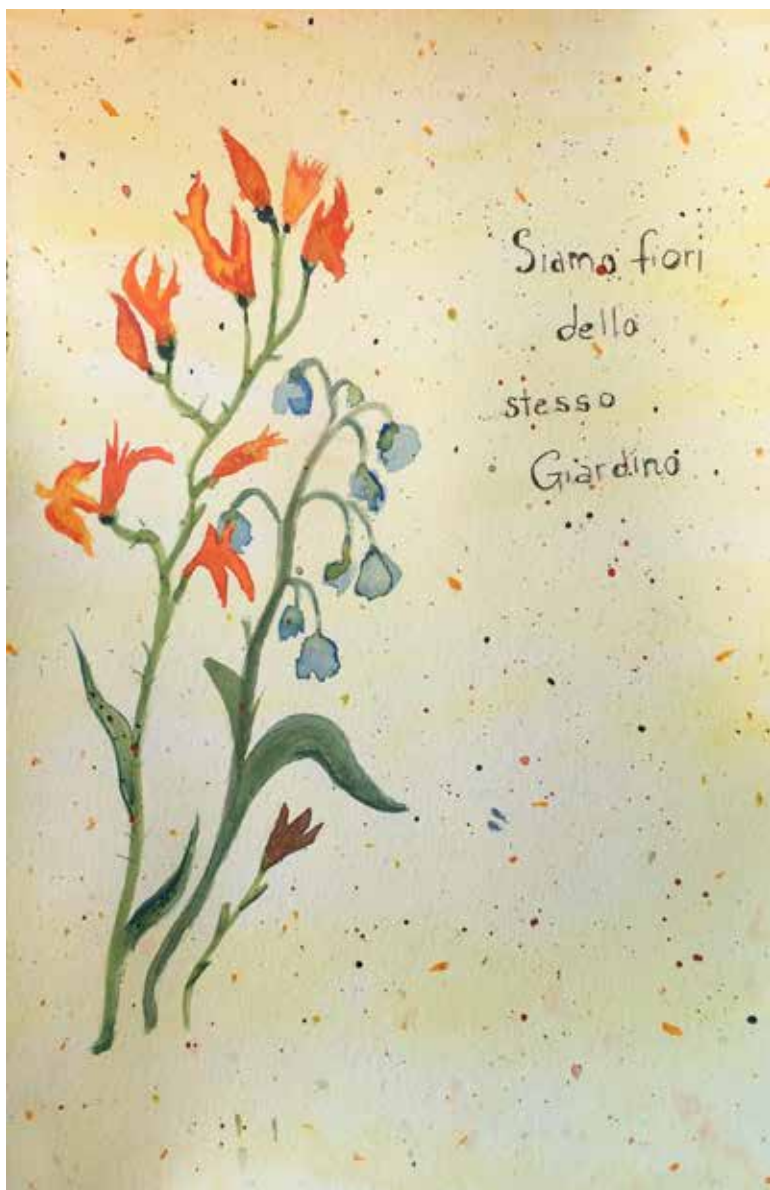
My heart is filled with light. Yellow light. Yellow primrose. It warms me and makes me feel grounded. I look at the door and I'm no longer afraid to go out. But now I'm staying home because I have to.

I don't know if the world has changed.

But even if it hasn't, I have.

And this changes everything.

Even the world.



We are flowers of one garden - Watercolours by Isabella Giudici



Elisa Castiglioni

Elisa Castiglioni is a children's book author. She has published *In punta di piedi sull'orizzonte* (2019), *Desideria* (2017), *Le stelle brillano su Roma* (2014) with Il Castoro.

Her debut novel *La ragazza che legge le nuvole* won the 34th Cento Youth Literature Award.

When not writing, Elisa loves to teach creative writing. She conducts workshops with schools, libraries, and bookstores all around Italy. She lived in the United States for eight wonderful years, where she studied creative writing and started her freelancing career. Now she lives in Varese – Northern Italy - with her 13-year-old daughter, Isabella, and a Cocker Spaniel named Lilly. Isabella painted the watercolour with the yellow primrose background without having read Nico's story. She painted it in the fort she built in her room.