

INCIDENTAL
INVENTIONS

ALSO BY
ELENA FERRANTE

Troubling Love
The Days of Abandonment
Frantumaglia: A Writer's Journey
The Lost Daughter
The Beach at Night
My Brilliant Friend
The Story of a New Name
Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay
The Story of the Lost Child

Elena Ferrante
Incidental Inventions

Translated from the Italian by
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Collisions

18 March 2019

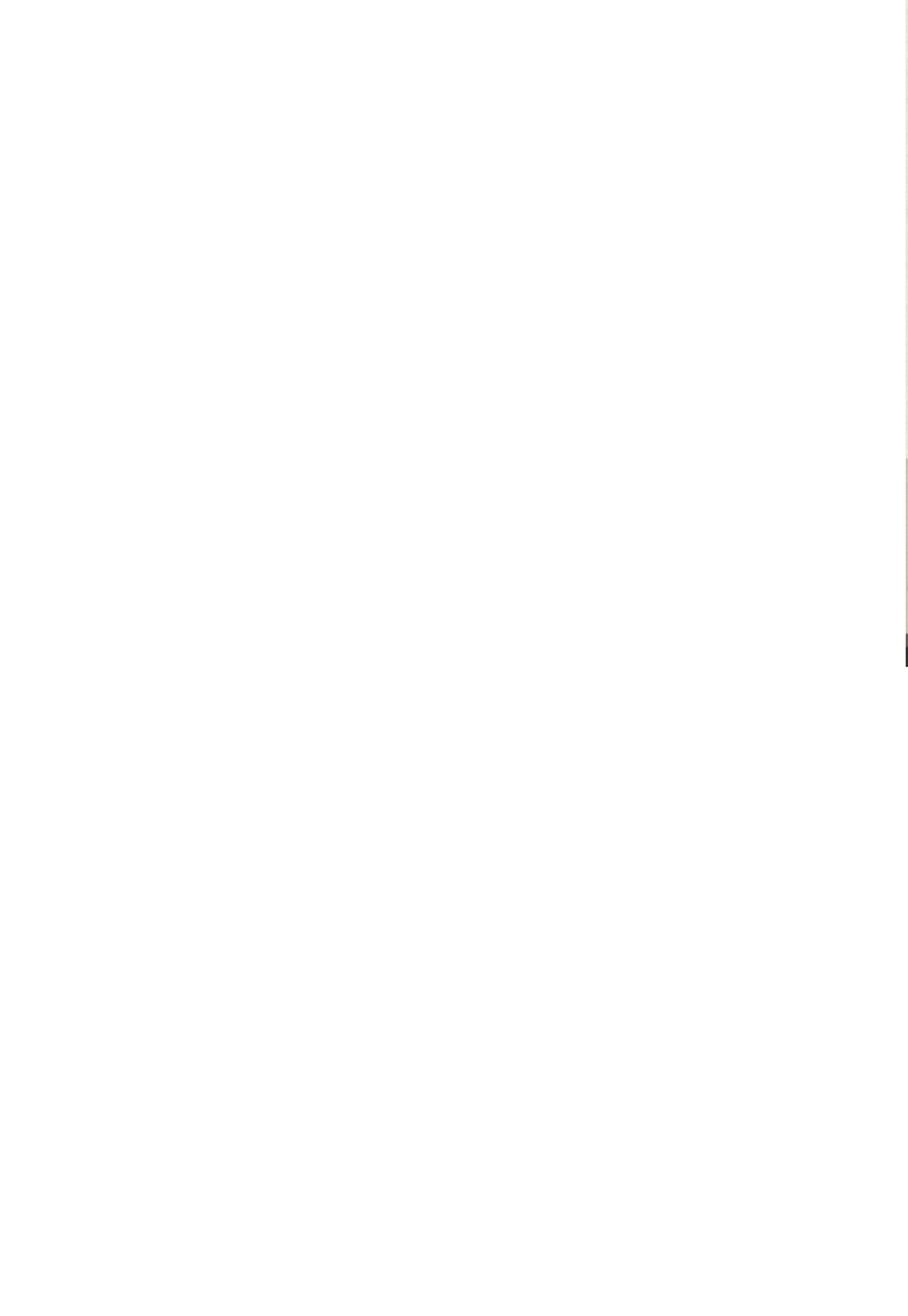
In the autumn of 2017 the *Guardian* proposed that I write a weekly column. I was flattered and at the same time frightened. I had no experience with that type of writing, and I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to do it. After much hesitation, I told the editors that I would accept the offer if they would send me a series of questions, which I would answer, each time, within the limits of the allotted space. My request was immediately granted, along with an agreement that the column wouldn't last more than a year. The year passed slowly, and it was instructive for me. I had never put myself in the situation of being obliged to write, locked within an invulnerable perimeter, on topics that I myself had asked the extremely patient editors to suggest. I'm used to looking on my own for a story, characters, a logic, putting one word after another, often laboriously, eliminating a lot; what I find at the end—assuming that I find something—is surprising, especially to me. It's as if one sentence had gen-

erated the next, taking advantage of my still uncertain intentions, and I never know if the result is good or not: yet it's there, and now I have to work on it—the moment has come when the text will take the form I want.

But the *Guardian* columns were governed by the random collision between the editors' subject and the urgency of writing. While the first draft of a story might be followed immediately by a long—sometimes very long—period of closer examination, rewriting, expansion or meticulous reduction, here the process was minimal. For these pieces I rummaged through memory in search of small illustrative experiences; impulsively drew on convictions formed by books read many years ago, then cast off and recovered, thanks to other readings; pursued sudden intuitions inspired by that same need to write; came to abrupt conclusions because the space had been used up. In other words, it was a new form of writing: every time I hurriedly dipped the bucket into some dark depth of my mind, I hauled up a sentence and waited apprehensively for others to follow.

The result is this book, which happens to begin on 20 January 2018, with the perennial uncertainty of something done for the first time, and happens to end on 12 January 2019, with the clarity of something done for the last time. I was tempted to give a more thoughtful order to the different parts, and I drafted possible arrangements. But setting them out as if they had originated in a carefully considered project seemed an exaggeration, and in the end I left them in the order of publication. I didn't want to hide—especially from myself—their nature as incidental inventions, no different from those with which we daily react to the world we happen to live in.

The Pieces





The First Time

20 January 2018

Some time ago, I planned to describe my first times. I listed a certain number of them: the first time I saw the sea, the first time I flew in an aeroplane, the first time I got drunk, the first time I fell in love, the first time I made love. It was an exercise both arduous and pointless.

For that matter, how could it be otherwise? We always look at first times with excessive indulgence. Even if by their nature they're founded on inexperience, and so as a rule are not very successful, we recall them with sympathy, with regret. They're swallowed up by all the times that have followed, by their transformation into habit, and yet we attribute to them the power of the unrepeatable.

Precisely because of this innate contradiction, my project began to sink right away and shipwrecked conclusively when I tried to describe my first love truthfully. I made an effort to search my memory for details and I found few. He was very tall, very thin, and seemed

handsome to me. He was seventeen, I fifteen. We saw each other every day at six in the evening. We went to a deserted alley behind the bus station. He spoke to me, but not much; kissed me, but not much; caressed me, but not much. What primarily interested him was that I should caress him. One evening—was it evening?—I kissed him as I would have liked him to kiss me. I did it with such an eager, shameless intensity that afterwards I decided not to see him again. But already I don't know if that really happened then, or in the course of other brief loves that followed. Certainly I loved that boy to the point where, seeing him, I lost every perception of the world, and felt close to fainting, not out of weakness but out of an excess of energy.

Consequently, I discovered, what I distinctly remember of my first love is my state of confusion. Or rather, the more I worked on it, the more I focused on deficiencies: vague memory, sentimental uncertainties, anxieties, dissatisfaction. Nothing, in fact, was sufficient; I expected and wanted more, and was surprised that he, on the other hand, after wanting me so much, found me superfluous and ran away because he had other things to do.

All right, I said to myself, you will write about how altogether wanting first love is. But, as soon as I tried, the writing rebelled, it tended to fill gaps, to give the experience the stereotypical melancholy of adolescence. It's why I said, that's enough of first times. What we were at the beginning is only a vague patch of colour contemplated from the edge of what we have become.