They say life in the castle is a smug one. A steady job, a free and dignified existence. They also say once you’re hired in the castle you can make your way up through the years and that it’s not so easy to be fired. Just think, the best-seller among the castle’s inhabitants right now is: “Goodmorning Laziness. How to survive in a company working the least possible amount”.

They also say its merit goes to a miraculous legal device, now elevated to mythical heights: the 18th Article. A strange contraption, which strong of its solid legal tradition, has no equals in the other castles, and after the epic battles of recent years, has now become a true national symbol.

The real problem is that to reach that fortress was once an easy walk. Sure, there was a selection at its doors, but once in, you were guaranteed a job for the rest of your life and you went on pension with 80% of your last salary. You even had baby pensioners too.

Today instead, in order to be granted access to that marvellous protectional system, you must overcome a dark and dangerous labyrinth. They call it the labyrinth of precarity and there’s no avoiding it: it must be crossed by all those who are in search of work for the reason that employers are afraid of the article no.18.

A few lucky ones, who happen to deserve it or to know someone, are able to find the exit quite soon. Most people instead spend years inside it. Others get simply lost in its meanders. They all tell of a distressing place, home to insecurity, frustration and interspersed with booby traps. It’s the traps of precarious living. They always have different names for them: Internship, introductory contracts, apprenticeship contracts, short-term contracts, periodical contracts, project contracts, and so on – but all of these have in common the fact that they’re precarious. They do not give you the right to be protected by Article 18. After a certain amount of time the
terms expire and you’re back to start, with perhaps a few more years behind you, less hopes and hardly anything in the pension fund.

The following is an account given by a survivor of the labyrinth of precarity who has specifically asked to remain anonymous.

June 2001

You graduate. You’re twenty-five. Sure, you’re not a child any more but after all, you’re in the average. Your life seems good to you. If instead of the A you got you’d have hit a smashing A+, well, it’d have been better but what the hell, in the end even mum and dad are happy with the result after all those sacrifices to get your education. So, you feel like a knight in shining armour, perhaps with a couple of small stains here and there (after all we all do), and in your pocket are the keys to your future and to your car. Of course on television there’s always more and more talk of the decline of society, the Chinese peril, national debt, reduction of the Welfare State, etc. But after all you believe us Italians are a sly gang, that underlying the surface is a healthy and fresh sub-economy, plus of course you’re in the most beautiful country in the world where the sun shines all year round. In any case, you’re sure you’ll be able to abandon that call-centre in which you took refuge to add some cash to your subsidy during those months away from Uni. I mean it’s not exactly true frequenting classes helps your studies. Working in the call centre wasn’t that bad. It was only 4 hours a day and those € 450 a month enabled you to fulfil quite a few desires. It cost you a year away from Uni, but it’s all water under the bridge now. You’ve got your degree, you await a thriving future career, and in the meantime you can enjoy your holidays deservedly. September 2001, you’re back from the holidays. It’s time to look for a job. Your father tells you to sign up at the labour office. You tell him it’s a system which is about to be abolished, and he replies it’s best to do it anyway. “You never know”. You tell him you’ll go, it’s a lie, albeit necessary in order to finish this torment. Your parents are getting more and more unbearable. You just can’t wait to go and live alone so you can put an end to this endless complaint.

In the meantime you start sending Cv’s, by post, by internet and through friends. While you wait for answers, you go out at night, you argue more and more with your folks so you can get more money from them and you pass endless hours in front of the television. It’s not even such a bad routine although in a way you start feeling a certain sense of anguish which just grows as the months of unemployment pile up.
December 2001

That’s it. You finally start off working. It’s not thanks to you but to your dad who managed to put a word in with that MP. You’ll prove your worth though showing them what you’re made of. After all you’re a brilliant graduate in Media and Communications. True, six months have gone by since you left Uni, but that’s just a minor detail. It’s only an internship. It’s not a professional post, you’re only getting a reimbursement of € 400 (less than the call centre) and it’s only for six months. You can’t have it all and straight away can you? Plus the MP told your dad there’s a good chance you’ll get hired after it anyway.

June 2002

The internship is over, and it certainly wasn’t an overwhelming experience. You did your best but you were the last in line. Your tutor who was in charge of your apprenticeship didn’t have much time for you and everyone else was exceptionally busy in their jobs. “Learn with your eyes” they’d say. It’s a bit difficult though (you’d say to yourself) to learn with your eyes if you spend most of the time making photocopies, phone calls, and doing net searches. “We’ve all got to rise through the ranks and you’re still very young”, they said. You were ready to spend night after night working, and by waiting your turn there was definitely something to be learned, to increase your professionalism and not end up doing what everyone else can’t be bothered doing. You’re not that young after all, you’re heading for twenty-seven and a year has gone by since you graduated.

In any case, the office staff acknowledged your commitment and good work, so the boss says he’ll put a good word in for you to get a contract by project. Your dad calls the MP again and he promises he’ll do the same. Both though admit it’s all going to happen after the summer holidays.

While you wait, you spend your days at home. Your Mum and Dad love you very much but they’re just more and more unbearable. The main issue is that you can’t even turn your back on them because of the pocket money you get every month. Luckily the holidays arrive and you can worry about it all in September. December 2002, still nothing. You’ve sent emails, made phone calls and bothered quite a few people. Now the boss at the office doesn’t even answer your calls. Same story for the MP who is avoiding your Dad. There’ve been many promises but nothing’s happened. And so, out of desperation, here you are back at the call centre. Also because you can’t possibly live with the money your parents hand out to you. This time, though, they’ve changed the type of contract. It’s not a contract of participation but is instead a coordinated and continuative contact. It seems that you’re just wasting your time but it’s better
than just sitting at home watching TV. At least you’re among a young crowd and the building also has a 5-a-side pitch.

In the meantime you send out your curricula and you subscribe to a firm which deals with temporary work. You hope it might help while the frustration mounts. In March 2002 the government decides to change Article 18. You consider it the ultimate attack towards your rights. You decide it’s time to fight for a better world. You take part in the protests and demonstrations. In the end, you’re overjoyed when the government abandons any changes to Article 18, and with that the abandoning of the social safety net which in theory should help exactly people like you who are lost in the labyrinth. Worker’s rights shouldn’t be touched, especially if they’re someone else’s.

September 2002

The temp work firm calls you up again. You’ve turned down all their offers in the call centres and it looks like your perseverance has been rewarded. It’s a vocational training firm which appears to be expanding. Unfortunately the tasks involved are not what you studied for. Clerical work is not exactly what you envisioned to be doing forever and you’ll have to spend the summer at your desk. In fairness, the pay is pretty good, it’s not a call centre and the main issue is to get your foot in the door.

October 2002

You’re not needed any more. The contract’s up, something which doesn’t even bother you too much given the humiliating nature of the job and the continuous harassment coming from the ones on a continuing contract. Some colleagues were nice but many were unbearable, lazy and dull. They didn’t even have a degree but nonetheless gave out orders arrogantly. They’d “already seen a great bunch of temp workers”

January 2003

Life at home is now intolerable. Your father keeps saying it’s your own fault, that you moan too much, you’re spoiled, that in his days it was even tougher and that your grandfather who died in the war never had the chance to help out economically. Your mother is more understanding. You just can’t handle them anymore and you don’t know how to get out of it. Also because the other day, during that interview you were hoping on so much, you were told for the umpteenth time that you’re too qualified for the job, they’re not looking for people with a degree, they’re after ones of a younger age.
In the meantime, through the satellite decoder, in comes that amazing source of frustration which “E Entertainment” provides. The celebrities’ channel. You discover Tara Reid spends more in one night than you’ve earned since you finished Uni and you also start snubbing Big Brother a little less. They don’t have a degree, they can spend 100 days without reading a book, but at least by exposing themselves to the public they’ve found a job, and for some time can even permit themselves a good life.

March 2003

Those few pennies put aside working as a clerk are now spent. You don’t know what to do, your girlfriend begins to think you’re a failure. You can’t possibly continue to stay home. You decide to go back to the call centre.

This time they don’t welcome you with open arms at all. You meet the personnel manager who tells you they were disappointed with the way you left the last time. You can’t possibly consider the job as a last resort and that in any case they’re in no need of workers at the moment. You beg him, telling him you’re in desperate need of the job. Needless to say, it’s humiliating. Better to humiliate oneself though than staying at home all day. He doesn’t change his position though. He says he’ll see what he can do but not to count on it too much. They call you up again in July 2003. You finally start work again at the call centre. You’ve never been so happy to be there. This time you get a project contract. In substance, nothing changes though. It’s always the same job. Of course it’s summer work but it’s no big deal because you don’t have the money to go anywhere anyway. Staying away from the TV is also a good thing as it seriously reduces your frustration and leaves you in a better mood. Some of your old colleagues are there, all with the same problems and slightly older. The only novelty is outside the call centre, where some trade unionists often stand and hand out flyers, looking like preachers. They say we’re being used, that it’s a scandal we’re getting short-term contracts and that it’s necessary to fight for our rights. You’d like to sign with them but the director inside has been very clear: there’s no room in the firm for those who join a trade union. You want to fight but you also need to survive. And Trade union battles are a luxury you can’t possibly afford also due to your expiring contract. There’s no way you’ll risk not being renewed. Especially now that your girlfriend talks about her biological clock, marriage and children.

November 2003

Freedom at last! After an endless series of legal cases and bureaucracy, the old tenant in the family flat has left the place and your folks say you can move in. Due to the fact they lose the rent though, you’ll have to hand them over your monthly income. It seems only fair, so for this reason you go to the personnel manager again and ask him to pass over to full time. This time
he’s more understanding and consents. In exchange though he asks you to cover the evening shift for a few months. It’s quite a sacrifice, your girlfriend isn’t happy but there’s no alternative so you accept. It’s January 2004 and life in your little home seems bliss but everyday work is hell. Apart from the evening shifts, that 1000 Euro a month is just not enough. You decide to join in with your university mates who are starting their own business by putting up a consultancy firm. Of course becoming an entrepreneur is a risky business, but considering how things have gone until now, you may as well try it out. The main issue is that you need the funds to back the project. You discuss it with your girlfriend, who says she’s with you on this one. You promise her if all goes well you’ll marry her.

You also discuss it with your parents. Both of them, more your father than your mum, are instead contrary to this decision. They say it won’t bring any money in, but it doesn’t matter because you’re determined and ready to use the inheritance your grandmother left you in her will, although it’s not enough. So you decide to get a loan from the bank. After all you’ve had an account with them for years, they know you’re a smart university graduate. You bring your job contract with you, which they require. You show it to them and the answer is that they can’t provide a loan for anyone under a short-term contract which doesn’t guarantee a steady income. It’s a contract which could end from one day to the next. They say if you want a loan you’ll have to guarantee by putting your house in the deal, a house which does not belong to you though. You discuss it again with your parents, who continue being against the whole affair. After a month of heated discussions, you give up your entrepreneurial dreams.

January 2004

Tragedy! The trade unions have issued a lawsuit with the employment inspectorate. The inspectors arrive and gather information and say you have the right to be employed on a continuing contract. Outside the call centre, the trade unionists tell you the age of exploitation is over. Instead, the company shuts down. The firm’s evil owner runs off (word is he hid his wealth abroad). So now you’re jobless again, and all you have is your degree.

March 2004

You start sending Cv’s once again. You go back to the Temp-work firm which now defines itself as administered-work. You check out all the job offers. As you wait for the national employment system to work, you surf the net, stumbling upon websites such as Bodyrental.com, who offer “the most convenient labour in the world”, albeit in Bangladesh. You start chipping into the small sum your grandmother left behind. Luckily your girlfriend has been hired with a beginner’s contract. She’s paid less than her colleagues who do the same job
as her, but it’s all legal, it’s not moonlighting and the energy to fight back just isn’t there anymore. You have to make ends meet somehow.

June 2004

Your father’s firm suggest to him to go into pension. It’s all in order to avoid any issues with being potentially fired and the risks of the firm having to re-hire him under Article 18. So he’s offered a golden handshake. 36 months plus severance pay plus various incentives and lastly a professional apprenticeship contract for you. It’s a huge sum and an attractive proposal. You think Article 18 is a marvellous invention and that also you will be able to benefit from it one day.

In the meantime you accept. You start work in administration and you begin by organizing the archive. It’s not your dream, not what you studied for but at least it’s a real contract, still fixed-term but with a good chance it’ll turn into a steadier one than the project and short-term ones.

January 2005

You’re thirty. You’re not in the castle yet but you’re close. Things are going well and your boss says he’ll ask for you to be hired. Of course until the contract is signed you’ll have to bow down but once inside the castle walls you’ll benefit from the wonders of Article 18. You can ask for a loan, get married, have kids, and make your way up through the years. Pensions are unfortunately being reduced, and after entering the strange world of the Euro, your salary is ever less substantial. But Article 18 holds up.

March 2005

You’re hired on a continuing contract.

June 2005

Your girlfriend and you decide to have a child.

September 2005

You come back from your holidays and find out the company has been bought by Chinese.

December 2005

The procedure for social mobility begins. You decide to wait before having a child.
February 2006

Among the criteria the company uses to re-assess their employees longer serving staff, are of course privileged. You, as a result, are out.

March 2006

Your girlfriend leaves you. She can’t waste her time anymore with a “Precarious guy”. You can’t afford to live single anymore. You’re back with your parents, you start sending Cv’s again but you only get answers from call centres.

Epilogue

They say our survivor, after a few tormented days thinking about his future, took his leave money and fled. Today he lives somewhere in the States or the UK. They don’t have Article 18 there but it’s a continuing contract he has. Your career is based on merit, there’s bonuses for productivity, and he can afford his rent. Yes he misses the sun and his family but he seems happy and doesn’t want to return. Between the mirage of Article 18 and the fear of getting lost once again in the labyrinth of beginner’s contracts, he hasn’t got a doubt at all. His new life prevails. And now that pamphlet by Maier, the one called “Good morning laziness. How to survive your job working the least amount possible”, is very irritating to him.