Mariella Mantovani

The Housewife

pp. 42-44

I don’t know what happens to me when I see men. It all started in ’65, when I had been married for just over a year., Whatever they look like, the first thing that comes to mind is how they might fuck me both ways, but especially in the butt, where there seems to be no end. It could be an illness, I suppose. Or it may be just that when both holes are filled, my belly doesn’t feel so empty. The lack of love isn’t howling in the wind like a hungry wolf. Or, again, it might be the curse Graziellina put on me when I was a girl and had started seeing a miner who laughed and joked whenever we met. Not like now, when, to get any reply that’s not an obscenity, you have to fire a cannon ball at him.

Poor old Divo, he’s always so mad. I know why, too. Over the years I’ve gotten off with every man in town who has ever come near me, from the youngsters to the old geezers. He’s the only one who never gets a peek inside, though we still share a bed. We lie head to toe because he snores like a pig and lashes out at me in his sleep, as if in that other world they’ve told him all the things I’ve been up to in the orchards. Instead of my face on the pillow next to his for the past forty years, he’s had my heels.

Divo’s hands are like a monster’s, his nails like little claws. After all these years, his neck has disappeared. A backwards miscarriage, he was born perfectly formed and then slowly became the shape of a gas boiler, all back and nothing else. In the winter, when the sheets are icy cold, I feel sick when he stretches his foot over to my side of the bed and his big toe brushes against me. And yet in the early days I couldn’t get enough of his contraption. He would go at me without a break, even after a double shift in the cages down in the Ribolla mines. I don’t think I’ve seen him with his pants down for a thousand years, but I’ve been washing his underwear my whole life. I send him out dressed like a gentleman, I do. I really have no idea where he’s been getting his kicks from in the meantime. I don’t think about it. I keep up appearances and act like a good little wife, and that’s enough for both of us.

Graziella may have a gift for the cards, everyone knows she does and I’m not the one who’s going to say she doesn’t, but she’s not good at spotting these things. Or, rather, she doesn’t like to talk about them. The last time I saw her she was complaining about Samuele, who’s back in Le Case after creating elsewhere. “If you say so much as *Buongiorno* to him, it’s like greeting the devil,” she warned me. “Pretend he doesn’t exist and shut your windows”. As if it was easy. I’ve watched Samuele grow up, though he skipped town just as he was getting to the age when he might’ve whooped my ass a little. Some of those boys back in the day used to enjoy turning my cunt to jelly with their thrashing. Take Giannone, for example, who lives down near Meleta and has two kids now, one of them just like him. We used to meet in the pigeon house, which stank to high heaven, and where there was always the chance of running across a snake. I held my legs up high and yelled “Giannone, take a break for God’s sake! You’ll bust your guts if you go on like this, and that will be the end of you!” But there was no way of stopping him. He went on grinding into my pelvis, staring into space. I would sometimes feel it right up in my throat and it made me want to cry. “If you stop now, I’ll kill you”, I would say to him. Giannone was built like a jack-hammer, his engorged tool like a mule’s. When he sent me home my legs were like jelly. My husband would see me walking with my legs apart. “Are you getting your arthritis again?” he would ask me. “It says on TV that the weather’s changing…” The following day would be worse. I would wake up, jacked up to the roots of my hair.

I remember Samuele with his wispy beard and sullen look. I used to watch him on the street from my window as I chatted to Esedra on the next-door balcony. He was fit and pale-skinned, carved like a statue. I would get straight to the point, without beating about the bush. “My dear friend, if I were thirty years younger, I would make your nephew sing like a nightingale”. Esedra laughed but I was thinking, “I’ll wait until he’s fourteen and then I’ll take him down to the cellar to see what kind of squirt comes out of that little pipe.” But I never got the chance, and then he went off to high school in Grosseto. He simply skipped town. Only to end up a year ago on all the news channels.

At my age, I can’t go on accommodating every dong that comes my way, though I would still like to. I wish I still had that sheet of paper where I made a list of all the men who had been inside of me. It was hidden in the kitchen under the plastic flatware box in a kitchen drawer nobody ever opened. One day, I was about to add another trophy to the list but the sheet of paper was gone. My nerves were frayed for weeks worrying about it. The idea that Divo might have gotten a hold of it upset me more than I ever would’ve imagined. Thinking about all that string of young men I’d taken at full throttle when I had never given him the time of day… I would climb into bed in the evenings and watch him closely, but he looked the same as ever, scowling as usual like a nostalgic Fascist. After a while, I allowed myself a little relief: “I must have thrown the sheet away by mistake,” I convinced myself. The next day, there I was again getting my fill of cock, but without the hare-brained idea of preserving the guy’s name on a list that might well end up in the wrong hands.

It’s true what they say: when in old age there are some things you enjoy going back to. Your memory goes, and the idea of a diary that gives you the chance to replay certain scenes comes to mind. You kick yourself for not keeping one. Sometimes, though, I get a sudden flash back of being fucked by a bull, and that keeps me going. One guy comes to mind at his moment. He was from Montebamboli, and everyone called him Piston. The name says it all. I start chuckling to myself just remembering the two of us under some chestnut trees, my panties in my hands. Divo turns to me from the TV set and says, “Why are you laughing? Have you gone gaga?” I look at him while I’m dishing up dinner. For a second I’m weak at the knees, but then I give my usual answer: “I have no idea; it must be the change of season.”

Domenico Fiorani

The Peasant

pp. 76-82

The trouble began as early as I can remember, and doubled when I went to school. I had to get myself up, walk alone into town through the hollow in all seasons, when he had already been tilling the land for at least an hour. I would eat a piece of cheese while I was walking. The other kids would see me arrive with mud on my boots and they would make fun of me, because my breath smelled like feet. On top of that, Mr. Serafini – may the devil devour him in eternity - would call out my name: “Fiorani, come up to the blackboard!” he would shout, pointing to a nice little math problem that was waiting for me. I never opened my mouth because I was ashamed of speaking in front of the other kids. They would make obscene noises as I walked past. I stood at the blackboard in silence and Mr. Serafini would say, “Well, at least with that piece of chalk in your hands you’ll be taking home a semblance of cleanliness.” He meant that with chalk dust on my hands you wouldn’t be able to see the dirt under my fingernails. Two years ago, when he was found dead as a doornail, I went to Maso’s bar to celebrate and drank myself into oblivion.

It was while I was at school that I started to think about things, and the thought still haunts me today. What if that horsefly of a father I find myself saddled with picked me up for cheap me at a Friday market back in ‘66, pulling me out from under the stall of a family that was scratching the walls they were so poor. I know for a fact he never had a wife called Mary, though he sometimes says he did to show off. He needed a slave to make dinner for him, that’s all he needed. Someone he could use in October when he had to lay the nets under the olive trees, prepare the mats in the cellar, get the ladders, and find the rakes for picking the green olives, the ones you can eat, that brings good money in.

I can’t explain that level of ignorance. When I was a child, I would get holes in my socks so I would ask him to darn them. My naked heel rubbing against the nails in my boot heels all the time had made me walk like a crippled chicken. The blister that formed in a a day made me cry, and the contact with the leather made me smell like death. He used to say, “Do it yourself, it’ll be better”, which was the spiel he gave me every time I asked him anything. If I needed a pair of pants one size bigger, “Do it yourself, it’ll be better”. If I asked him to check my homework, “Do it yourself, it’ll be better”. Always the same answer, still to this day. Including when I had a fever I had to bring down with a wet rag, even when I nearly fainted getting out of bed. In the end, I stopped asking.

I suppose I can say this: if that spawn of the devil who says he’s related to me has done one good thing in his life it is not teaching me anything. Now my strong hands can do anything: make up some good soup, and split logs in one fell swoop, though I learned the hard way, amputating my baby toe at the age of twelve.

This year the trees were laden with olives as fall was ushered in on St. Matthew’s Day. When I looked over at my neighbors’ fields, I saw merry bands getting ready for the olive harvest as if they were going to a party: cousins, grandparents, grandchildren… my heart turned to stone. At our place it feels like a death knell is ringing, and I’m sure the olive oil is affected by it, kicking you in the teeth with its acidity. The dirty bastard screams at me to get out of bed, and all the hairs on my body stand on end at the sound of his voice. We head off for the olive groves without saying a word. He stakes out the nets where the land is uneven and I lay the sheets under the trees. He climbs up the big ladder. I start raking off the olives from the lower branches. He wants me right under his nose. If I go off for a second, he calls out, “I can’t see you”. I would set fire to the whole grove, with him in it, if only I could. Until a few years ago, I thought he was checking over the work I was doing. Then I understood that he couldn’t care less how I rake the olives. What he cares about, if anything, is that I don’t go to near the foot of his ladder, in case I decide to kick it out from under him and crack his head open on a rock. Just to give you an idea of the trust there is between father and son.

At Le Case they think we are from the same stock. The truth is we are desperate to get rid of each other every minute of the day. When we sit down for dinner, the first thing we do is check where the knives are. If we hadn’t broken our backs working all day, glancing across the table would’ve been enough for both of us to lose our appetite.

I was eight when the Toninellis had their accident. It was after midnight and I was already in bed. I didn’t even hear the crash. But I did jump up onto my bed when I heard the door of my room suddenly burst open for no reason, like when the wind opens the doors of the rabbit cages if you don’t put the hooks on properly. I rubbed my eyes and saw that animal standing there in his work pants and night sweater. “They’ve landed in our grove,” he said, indicating that I was supposed to follow him outside.

I’d never seen a dead person. Then one perfectly ordinary night I saw two. Babbo shined his flashlight onto the last olive tree in the bottom row, where the trees cling to the rocks. I saw the car that had flown off the curve in the road and landed head first down there. One of the back wheels was still spinning. The tree was split in two. But that was not what got me. It was the woman’s torso on the ground, looking as if she’d been buried in that grove up to her waist. She was standing, her arms splayed open, her head bowed with her hair covering her features. My knees turned to jelly when I saw her shuddering as if she were coughing.

I felt that brute of my father grabbing my collar from behind and holding me up on my feet. “It’s the nerves going into in shock,” he said. “The other half of the body is still in the car.” He shined a cone of light onto the car, with its windscreen all shattered, so I could see the whole gruesome scene: a tangle of twisted metal. Inside, the woman’s bottom half was dangling, dripping blood onto the concertinaed hood. “If you’re going to puke, go and do it somewhere away from here,” he said, walking away. My head buzzing, I found myself sitting down without realizing. There were little white dots shining at the back of my eyes.

It was pitch dark. Aside from the shiny white dots, the only light was the flashlight like a spotlight on the wreck. Some suitcases had burst out of the Lancia Fulvia after the impact and were now scattered around under the trees. Babbo was running around picking them up and taking them back to the carcass of the car, which stank of gas. I watched him bend down, looking for anything valuable. Every now and then he put something in his pocket. Then I heard a voice, a stone’s throw from where I was sitting. I jumped up yelling.

There was a man. His legs were in an unnatural position but he was still moving. He was whimpering like a little kitten. His face was clean. Not a drop of blood. Babbo turned his flashlight towards him and stood there, while the man was desperately trying to open his eyes. They kept fluttering shut again, as if he were fainting a hundred times in a row.

“I’m going to call Dr. Salghini,” I said, getting ready to run, even though my body was not reacting. I felt Babbo’s hand tightening its grip on my shoulder. “Don’t be such an idiot,” he grunted, handing me the flashlight. “Hold this up for me.”

I saw him empty the poor man’s pockets and take his wallet. I thought he was checking for an ID card to see who he should call. Instead, he pulled the bills out and squirreled them away somewhere. He ripped the gold chain off the man’s neck. Then he grabbed the man’s limp hand, trying to pull his ring off, but thought better of it. “No,” he muttered. “Better leave this on his finger.” And he pulled himself back up.

“Silvia…” the man started whining, as if he were calling out from the beyond. “Silvia…” Babbo grabbed him by the arm and started dragging him towards the split olive tree. He dumped him there like a sack of potatoes. I followed him to the woman’s torso, which was now immobile. He grabbed her in the same way and heaved her to the site of the crash, dropping her in front of the Lancia Fulvia’s hood, right under the other half of her body. Babbo turned and looked in my direction. “Go fill a can with kerosene from the tank. And bring a rag while you’re at it.”

I was eight years old, and my head was still buzzing as if a bumble bee had gotten in there. I went to the shed and grabbed everything. When I got back, my father was still rushing around picking up bags and clothes. But now the man was speaking, without the delirium of shock. He sounded tired, and every word was a spasm. “Who are you?” he groaned. “Where am I?”

Babbo took the can and started pouring paraffin around the woman’s torso and along the path where he had dragged her. He did the same for the rut he had made with the man’s body. Then he ripped the rag in two. He dipped them into the fuel and got his lighter out. He turned towards me. “Run into town,” he said. “Knock on Dr. Salghini’s door until he wakes up and tell him that a Lancia Fulvia has driven off the curve.”

I stared at him, my eyes wide as saucers. He realized I wasn’t moving and thrust his arms up in the air, as if he were herding a cow. I started running. Behind me, I could hear the voice of the poor man calling out for Silvia, who was split in two. I was running with the devil at my heels. I ran up the path, out of the hollow, and onto the road. Only then did I stop to catch my breath. At the bottom of the ridge the flames were already raging. That was when I heard the explosion.

The Carabinieri came. The Toninelli couple’s tragic flight even featured in the papers. The funeral was attended by everyone in Le Case and people also showed up from the nearby hill towns, well as from the ones down in the valley. A crushing sea of faces. I still have a clipping. It says that there hadn’t been such a big crowd since the mine shaft collapsed in Ribolla. Except there weren’t any government officials for the Toninellis. The only one not to join the funeral procession was that brute of a father of mine. I think that’s one of the things the town has always held against him. Let’s face it; not showing he was mourning was animal behavior on his part. I went, of course. I wanted to prove I was different from him. I also had the chance to take a good look at how city people dress. I got home that evening to heat dinner up on the fire and I found the ugly thug sitting at the table counting money. He was weighing in his hand the gold he had stolen from the bodies and the newlyweds’ bags before setting fire to them. Winking at the treasure he said, “Here’s what they owe us for killing a perfectly healthy tree.”

Many little favors have rained down on our olive grove from the curve in the road since ’74. If the accidents take place in daylight, though, you have to be careful or the neighbors might see you, not to mention the people walking in the woods. If they happen at night, it’s another story. You hear the crash and then you have to sit and listen carefully for about half an hour, without turning the lights on. After a while, I hear my father’s bed springs and that’s when I know I have to get out of bed.

It may surprise you, but there are lots of car crashes at that bend. The town can put up as many road signs as they like, but there are still some folks who aim straight for the guardrail at speed. Mostly kids who have spent the evening tanking up on wine. Or young couples, who can’t keep their hands off each other. But a road is a road whatever, and it doesn’t give a damn about you. Or again, they may be out of towners who have never navigated these hairpin bends before. One yell, and it’s *arrivederci* forever.

I had to admit that that freeloader of my father - if he died in the next ten minutes, they would have to take me to the hospital because I’d be splitting my seams laughing – was right. All those cars raining down onto our olive grove were destroying our trees. No one ever comes to say sorry. They roll up and collect their dead and that’s it, thanks a lot. While here there’s someone who has never had a day off, who’s been spitting blood since he was six. Every five years my father goes down to Grosseto to sell some of the gold. In ’87 we got a new tractor, and it’s still going like a dream.

Emilio Salghini

The Doctor

pp.101-107

I tell the deaf mute dwarves about Alfredo, my son. One morning forty years ago, he didn’t wake up and he will go on dreaming the same dream he had been having the night of September 9, 1976 for centuries. It was important for me to be sure that it was a good dream. Such a striking, happy dream that it stopped his young heart just before he turned twenty-three. Vilma didn’t want anyone to touch him. She sat by his bed on a chair and watched over him. If I came anywhere close, she would jump up like a spring with a nervous titter. Whispering like a spy, she would say, “Tell those people to keep quiet. Can’t you see Alfredo needs to rest?” She went on like this for three weeks, even after the funeral. When she went to Mario’s to get the groceries and someone came up to her to offer their condolences, she would rebut their advances, almost playfully. “Okay, my husband’s face is like a fat old toad but aren’t condolences a bit much?” she would joke, and then turn her back on them. One morning she took the bus to Grosseto, saying she wanted to take a stroll around the Thursday market. And she vanished. Into thin air. The search along the bed of the River Ombrone gave no clues. So now you know why I have no son, because he was kidnapped by a dream, and how I have a wife who was erased from the face of this earth one day.

And yet, dear Giuliano, I keep going. I took an oath, and almost every evening I recite it from memory. Don Lauro has his litany of prayers, but I only need one, written by Hippocrates. Every morning I open my office and one sick person after another strips on my table. Sometimes I can see they have advanced stage cancer and I don’t say anything. Instead, I give them a pat on the back and send them home with a prescription for cough syrup. Or I prescribe a strong pill for their nerves. The family always invites me to the funeral, and they don’t seem to mind much. “He was doing so well,” they say. “And then a week he went to rest in the graces of God in just under.” I don’t say a word. In fact, for a week I feel great, a little wind in my sails. I think about the poor wretch or the weary, bored widow I released from their suffering. I go up to Maso’s bar and have a drink or two, and gaze out at the world around me. I might see Divo, and I wonder how the swelling in his goiter is going, and whether he has noticed it yet. Or I may meet poor Isastia on the street, with her early onset dementia. I take pleasure in watching her trudging up the hill, thinking that the osteoporosis that she has never done anything about will one day make her bones crumble and she will have a bad fall. If she’s lucky she’ll die on the spot like Serraglini two winters ago. Otherwise she’ll have to spend a few months in bed with a hip or femur bone broken. This anyway means she’ll be close to the graveyard and will be able to dance her way there.

Dear friend. The same fate is in the cards for your sister Piera, and for once I can say it out loud; talking to you is like singing to an ant. The old doll can hardly breathe because of her heart, which is on its last waltz. If we’re lucky she’ll be gone before the end of the month. Who knows? Maybe tomorrow you’ll wake up to find her lying next to you, as cold as a stone, with her mouth gaping open like the son I once had. Then you’ll be heartbroken and you too will die soon. That is, if your poor deformed sister’s death doesn’t make decide to give up the ghost on the spot. I recommend a nice dive into the muddy waters of the Pecora River.

I feel sorry for myself if you go, though. Who will I tell my stories to? Who will hear about the acts of charity nobody knows about? Giving and giving, and never being thanked, wears you down after a while. It would be nice to get a word of comfort every now and again. But this town is full of fools, fault-finding from dawn to dusk. As soon as you get a little pain you dig into your miserable lives like tics. Let go of your lives, I say! Life’s a waste of time, so it’s curtains down and let’s be done with it. If it were for me, I would prescribe a digestive concoction for everyone instead of antibiotics, in an effort to reign in all of this profligacy. Followed by a bullet between the eyes, which would at least make the walls of some of these sitting rooms look a bit more interesting.

As I have already said, however, in Le Case the people are thick-skinned, and some of them try to put obstacles in way of the fine work I do with such affection. It’s like they’re doing it on purpose to get me. Take Mrs. Franci, for example. It looks like she’s about to leave us, but then she hangs on, all skin and bones, her hair patchy. When I go and see her, she’s eager for a chat. I check her blood pressure, and everything confirms she’s in worse shape than an animal on its last legs. Her bedsores are getting infected, and that should send her on her way, freeing her from her stinking deathbed. In short, everything is ready for her to go. I say: “Adelaide, I’m very pleased with your progress. You’re doing very well.” She doesn’t listen and plows on with her prattle. You should see how bright her eyes are! The only thing that comforts me is that I can’t understand a word of all her gibbering, and I’m thinking to myself, “At least the dementia has set in. This must be the peak before the final fall.” I go back two days later and she’s stable, but her blathering has gotten worse. The talking seems to be enough to keep her blood flowing.

Adelaide’s gossip is all about an affair between a young girl from the valley and that Samuele, Esedra’s grandson. I find it hard to listen to, because it feels like she’s interested in staying alive. I can beat her at that game, though, so I insist on checking her condition all over again. According to the stats, she should have been dead at least a month ago. Meanwhile, hearing her talk of young men taking their pleasure around town gives me a lump in my throat, as if I’d swallowed poison. At this point I ask you all: what purpose does the younger generation serve anyway? I swear, it’s something I think about a lot. These young things come along and lower the average age of the town, making my task more difficult despite all my hard work.

Luckily, I got a phone call this morning from Silvestri which gave me some comfort. “She fainted,” Mario said. When I got to the store, he was standing there, his face set as if he were going to a funeral. His store assistant had been laid out on the counter in the storeroom. Mario had rolled up her apron like a pillow to raise her head. “She’s breathing alright,” he mumbled, like a doting parent. “She opens her eyes every now and again. I talk to her but she can’t see me. Then she drifts off. Is it serious?”

Dear Giuliano, Dear Piera, us folks at Le Case don’t get much of a chance to touch young flesh, you know. One of the last women left is big Giovanna Ginanneschi. But when you unbutton her blouse, the rolls of flesh are enough to put you off. I tell her she’s doing all the right things, and recommend eating pig liver with slabs of bread dipped in fat. You have big bones, I tell her. You need to gain at least fifteen pounds to sustain yourself. Sometimes I see her panting up Via di Mezzo. I’m happy to see that she’s struggling to walk and holding a hand up to her heart as if it’s about to burst. It takes a long time to clog the arteries of a woman her size. But I don’t have a train to catch.

Eleonora, on the other hand, is in her first bloom. “I’d know how to make you better”, I thought as I bent over her colorless little face. I got my smelling salts out and put them under her nose. Her eyes opened wide and she looked around. She took a while to work out which side of the world of the living she was in.

It was odd to see that girl in Mario’s storeroom, on the counter where the supplies are usually piled up. It felt like I was reliving the time two years ago when Adelaide fainted and hit her head on the tiles. It was the first symptom of her sickness. It makes you wonder whether slicing Bologna for old customers causes fainting spells. “Let me go and shut the door,” I said at the time to her concerned husband. And I said the same thing this morning: “Let me go and close the door.” Meanwhile I told the girl to stay still, so I could at least measure her blood pressure. When I tried to loosen her collar just a little so she could breathe, she pulled back, her lower lip trembling. She had the same reaction when I attempted to roll up her sleeve. “I’m fine,” she kept on saying, and she was probably right. Maybe a little anemic. I could see it in her eyelids, which were pale and lifeless. Iron deficiency. That must be why she fainted in the store. Apart from that, Eleonora, who had taken Adelaide’s place in the store, was a monument to good health. Then I noticed the bruises.

They stood out like peacock tails against her pale skin: dark purple, black, and yellow smudges. I had glimpsed a big one on her throat as I’d loosened her collar, before she buttoned herself up again. There were more on her arm, deep impressions of finger marks. “Someone is abusing this girl,” I thought to myself, but said nothing. Instead, I produced one of my patent smiles that was meant to say, “Dear girl, you are the picture of good health!” I tapped her knee to check her reaction and asked Mario to bring his assistant a glass of sugar and water. He didn’t ask me for a doctor’s certificate.

This is all just to say that Adelaide’s stories are idle gossip, animated, no doubt, by her sickness and by her envy of this new little pony trotting around the store where she once ruled. What is for sure is that something is not right with Eleonora; someone is roughing her up at home. One day, if I’m lucky, there’ll be an “accident” and the younger generation in this town will be halved on the spot.

I could never say these things to anyone, not even in my confession to Don Lauro. He doesn’t give a damn about the confidentiality of my profession and would call the Carabinieri in a split second. Speaking of that little priest, in the last two weeks I’ve noticed that when I go and see Mario’s wife, the sleeping drops I prescribe her are never there. It just so happens that, the day before, our beloved minister had passed by, so assiduous is he in his duties as deathbed advisor. I may be wrong, but he may be stocking up on deep sleep… so that is why I’ve decided that the next time I bring round Adelaide’s prescription the concoction is going to be a little different, both to encourage the sick lady to take a leap into her grave, and to poison that empty chatterbox. He’s always tooting his own trumpet, counting off people’s sins on the tips of his fingers, and then he commits a worse one himself, stealing drugs from a woman on her deathbed. I know he does it because he doesn’t want to give me any satisfaction. Don Lauro is obsessed with his faith. He would beg to be flayed in the town square rather than come to my office and ask for a prescription for the poison of his choice like everyone else does.

Dear Giuliano, this might be the last time I can talk about my plan to someone who is alive. Or, at least, to someone who looks human. It’s important that someone knows I’m going to keep on working at my task. Here, at Le Case, there’s evil that needs to be rooted out, and in order to do so we need to free all its captive souls, like birds from a cage. This shell of a town must be scooped out and emptied, its windows left dark, its streets filled with spiders.

Le Case is a monster that grows fatter with every breath we take, and my task is to extinguish all of these breaths, one by one, until the very last one has been put out. My own. When the monster is hungry, it makes the earth from which it was quarried shake, giving us cold sweats and strengthening our hearts. The long agony has already started. Month after month, in the church at the top of the town, the bells toll for the dead. The funeral processions are getting thinner and thinner, considering those who are already six-feet-under and the others stuck in bed. In the old town every now and again, one less window lights up behind the shutters. The monster’s breath is more and more labored… the day will come when I can finally deal the town its final death blow by shooting myself in the mouth.

Giovanna Ginnaneschi

The Spinster

pp.114 -118

Here, my lovely little pooch, one for you and one for me. Gobble it all up; you at least can stuff yourself without gaining an ounce of fat. I would strangle you I’m so jealous. One for you and one for me. There you go… for your hollow belly every cookie is manna from heaven. Whenever you see me reach into the box for another, you pull at your chain to strangling point, foaming at the mouth, your claws scratching at the floor. Your little yelps are like a child’s after falling down a dark well. I love making you crave my crispy butter, caramel, and hazelnut cookies. Mamma always says, “Don’t feed the little beast, it’s too many calories and she’ll be pooping everywhere.” She doesn’t understand that it’s a ploy for me. If I didn’t come down here I’d finish the whole box in no time, the rolls of flesh on my legs would double, and my hips would become wider and wider, filling out my clothes ‘til they tear. That’s why I give one cookie to you for everyone I eat myself. That way I can keep the yearning in my throat at bay. And keep the rolling lard under control.

Mamma used to say something else, though recently she seems to have changed her mind. She used to say it was a matter of bone structure. “You’re well-built,” she’d say. “You need to stop thinking of it as a disease. Dr. Salghini says so. Do you think you know better than a man of science?” Then I look at myself in the mirror with no clothes on and see how deformed my body is. Sometimes I stop and study myself for a few minutes, to the point where I can almost see beauty in there. In my reflection, I see Giovanna with a lot of extra weight on her body. Giovanna is still there, though her ankles are swollen under the strain of 220 pounds.

One for you, one for me, my little pooch. The truth is they should have caught it in time, when I was about twenty and I was just beginning to lose my shape. All the signs were there. I was one of the last young people to stay behind in Le Case, but nobody looked at me even then. Mamma would come into my room, where I still sleep now, and stroke my back. “My dear little creature,” she would say. “Don’t take it so hard. Would you really like to marry one of these boors from the *contrada*? Do you really want to waste yourself on them?” Nothing has changed since then. Except that now I’m past fifty I’m getting my first hot flashes.

[…]

Well, little pooch, there are some days when I ask myself whether I should just give in. It’s not easy to find a man who knows how to ride a woman like me. But then I feel sick at the idea of falling asleep in the same bed as that peasant. He made me sick when I was eight, and I still feel exactly the same now. It was Mamma who started it all. Practically every evening she hammers on about the same thing. “By the way,” she said the other evening, after a miserable little meal she had cooked to keep me thin, though her efforts are in vain. “They say Fiorani’s new olive oil is ready. Tomorrow why don’t we go down the ridge and get ourselves a nice big can to see us through the winter?” I got up and went to my bedroom without saying a word. I opened the drawer and pulled out the diaries I like rereading every now and again to make me cry a bit.

One for me and one for you… disappear! That’s what I feel like doing sometimes. Like that girl from the store who’s been missing for a week. They’ve turned her parents’ house, and her boyfriend’s place, upside down but there’s no sign of her. No letter, no note. Swallowed up by nothingness for no reason. Lucky her. One day Mario comes back to the grocery store from his lunch break and Eleonora is gone. Whenever I see her picture in the newspaper, I say to myself, “Dear girl, either you’re really brave, or you’re unlucky.” Then I sit back and enjoy all the gossip about the case. I pretend they’re talking about me. It may be a game for the deranged, but it feels great. When someone just vanishes like that, people take a good look at themselves and still don’t understand. When someone disappears, and their body is never found, people start insinuating a secret plan has been carried out without anyone’s knowledge, neither the husbands, the wives, nor the children. A year or two later, and people start talking about Martians.

I wrote it in my diary in ’76, when I was nearly twenty. I want to disappear, I wrote, filling in the margins with his initials. I might not have ever savored a kiss, or enjoyed the carnal favors of a man, but I know what true love means and it has a name. Someone who broke my heart not once but twice.

It’s a story you could recite from memory, dear little pooch. Whenever I come down to spend time with you, we always go back to the same place, to Alfredo. But some gaping holes can never be filled, and I’ve never had the chance to find a replacement for that feeling that used to beat in my heart as I ate dinner, my stomach in a knot. At the time, my body was not like the one I drag around now. I thought of nothing but him. Nothing else mattered. I was in my prime, with the arrogance that comes with the age. Then it all ended. There’s nothing worse than letting someone experience their own beauty, and then taking it all away so cruelly and so quickly.

Still today, I think of Alberto walking down these streets in the summer, in the old days when the fair rides used to come to town. He always had a cigarette tucked behind his ear, his long hair falling over his eyes on both sides. Most of all, though, it was his laugh that stopped the blood in my veins. There were all the answers in the world in that laugh full of white teeth. One evening, I made up my mind and sent Valentina Cocchetti over so I could see his reaction. She was more brazen than me, and now she lives in France with two kids studying in Paris, like the ones you see in the movies. I spied on them from afar, wringing Sabrina Gori’s hands to relieve my tension. She married a dentist and sends me a Christmas card every year from Florence, and I’ve never sent one back. “I’m going to die,” I said, my heart beating like a drum as I glanced over at Valentina. She was surrounded by a group of boys, in the midst of which Alfredo’s good looks were shining like a torch. “Why isn’t she coming back?” I began to wonder after a while.

I want to disappear, I wrote back in the summer of ’76. August 6, to be precise. The tears are flowing now. I couldn’t help seeing my friend’s face thrown back in full-throttled laughter, and Alfredo taking the cigarette out from behind his ear and offering it to her. That might be the moment that old Giovanna, who was still beautiful and not yet deformed, actually died.

I was paid with the same coin I had used when I was ten and turned down the advances of a certain snot-nosed Mimmo in front of the school gates. The first few days I bleated out my desperation. I woke up crying at all hours, and buried my face in my pillow. Mamma brought my lunch into my room as if I were sick. I handed it back an hour later without having so much as touched a crumb. By the end of the month, I was as thin as a rake. I spent my days staring at the ceiling, in the shadow of the tragedy that was consuming me little by little. I heard my mother saying, “My dear girl, you’re still in your prime…” or “The sea is wide and full of fish, you’ll see …”. Babbo would just open my door a little and peek inside. Then he would tiptoe away because he’d never been good with words. Until something changed. One day, the pain may have been worse but at least I could breathe. Except that something had gone sour inside.

It was already the beginning of September. One day they saw me creep out of my den. Pale, with tousled hair and wearing only a t-shirt down to my knees. I took a few unsteady steps, as if I were a skeleton, and sat down at the table with my parents. Mamma smiled. "Darling,” she said, making me choke on my soup. Babbo poured me half a glass of wine. ”About time,” he muttered. The television was on low, like in hospitals. I sat there staring at the food on the table. Then, without saying a word, I started eating.

I made up for all the meals I had missed over those weeks of agony. The more I stuffed my face the more I wanted to eat. Mamma rose to the occasion, cracking eggs, frying cutlets. Babbo cut slabs of bread like there was no tomorrow. Or he would take out jars of artichokes, rounds of cheese, and sides of prosciutto hung to cure. After a while, their relief at seeing me a little rounder turned into concern. They filled my plate and I wolfed it down without a moment’s hesitation. I wanted more. Did I really want to kill myself with food? That I wanted to end up like a beached whale on my chair? I was always hungry. I would polish off a whole bar of chocolate, and follow it with half a pear tart. I would eat fig jam by the spoonful until the jar was empty. Still not sated, I would gorge myself on fruit, eating all the peaches and plums in the fruit bowl. That was the time I suddenly went rigid, my eyes wide. Mamma ran to get a towel, expecting the worst. Babbo jumped up saying, “I’ll hold her head.” And I let it all out.

A burp. A giant belch, a hunter’s salvo, so prolonged it shook the glass in the windows. It was big and smelly. As I released the gas, I gripped onto the table as if there had been an earthquake, a bad one. One of those quakes that makes the ceiling come down. I was as shocked as they were, their jaws dropped. We were in the eye of a powerful storm. I felt like something was being evacuating from my belly. It was as if I was ejecting a ghost that had been inhabiting my body. For a moment I was scared. There was so much gas coming out that I felt I didn’t have any air left to breathe in. I thought I was going to die from a burp and instinctively planted my feet on the ground and stood up. Then it was over. The silence that followed shrouded us as if the ceiling had really come down on our heads. I took a deep breath. I looked at Mamma , who was glaring at me as if I had just murdered someone, “Is there anything else to eat?” I asked.

Achille Serraglini

The Dead Man

pp. 138 – 144

There is no doubt, life is full of funny twists. My twin brother disgusted me, we were like chalk and cheese. I used to think he was a collection of all the things that were wrong with me, all bagged up into one body. Now I’ve turned into him. I walk like him, I talk like him. I wear his clothes that smell like a girl’s. But I still have to be careful, even as we’re coming up to Day 1,000. Last month I was coughing so loud the windows shook and in the end I had to call Dr. Salghini to come and listen to my chest. I didn’t want to die twice, the first time in public and the second time out of sight. Salghini arrived looking like an omen of death, clutching his doctor’s bag. As soon as he walked in, he stopped in his tracks and started sniffing around, his big fat nose in the air, filling up his lungs with deep breaths. “There’s something not quite right here.” I was standing there in those dainty little sandals my brother used to wear in the house. “It looks fine to me, Doc. Let’s get on with it. I need a check-up. With all the phlegm I’ve expectorated we could open a jam factory…”

“Expectorated.” In order to stay in character with the man who still poisons my days even though he’s dead, I’ve had to study his vocabulary. I wouldn’t have dreamed of using words like “querulous” or “puerile” before. When I go to my old house to pay Sonia a visit, I drink my tea with my pinky up in the air and say it’s “exquisite.”

I must say, though, Angiolino made me sick but I can imitate him perfectly. Everyone falls for it, even my wife who slept in the same bed with me for a shitload of years. I know his face so well, identical to mine but more sickly-looking, with a needy expression, especially when he was running out of money after having to take care of Divo’s medical expenses. “Achille,” he would say to me, “why don’t you sell back the Bianciardis’ cellar? I need some room to maneuver.” My answer was always ready, “I’ve never asked anything of you, so you should do the same.” His eyes would glow like hot coals. “I’ve been eating nothing but bread and onions for a week. When you needed help, I chipped in without batting an eyelid. You’re just cheap, that’s all.” And he loped off, wiping away his crocodile tears. I shouted after him, over his head as always, “I’m not like you.”

When he came to tell me he’d found something valuable, though, his expression was different. There he was, with an old book in his hands that he’d found in a dusty attic somewhere. It was called *The Mysteries of Paris*. I shrugged. “What am I supposed to do with that?” Clenching his jaws, he said, “I’m not interested in the book. It’s what’s inside that interests me.” He opened the heavy tome and took some yellowing sheets out from between the leaves. He started reading them out loud.

They were random sweet nothings scribbled down on April 7, 1984 about me and Mariella Mantovani back in the day when we were messing around in the Ponenti family’s vineyards. Sins of the flesh committed when I was thirty and horny after ten years with a ring on my finger. That woman had the devil in her, I tell you. She threw herself into things as passionately as if she were actually in love, but she never came, even after I’d jiggled around for over an hour and was starting to get bored. “I love you,” she would moan, her eyes shining. Then she would urge me on, “More, Achille, more. Don’t take any notice if I scream out in pain. Harder, hammer me harder.” The affair lasted a few weeks. On my way back home after my shift, I would go up to the old town the back way, avoiding Via di Mezzo. Mariella would come from the alley, the one near the Pretella gate. We would run out of the old town and tumble onto the grass like teenagers. She kept saying, “I love you,” and this scared me because what we were doing was enough, without any gift wrapping. We weren’t exactly planning to start a family. Then I would go home to Silvia and tell her I’d missed the two o’clock bus. Or that I’d stopped in the square to meet my mates, down at the benches near San Bastiano. One day she said, “You’ve missed the bus after work a lot in the last month when you always used to run straight back like a homing pigeon. And anyways, I can’t imagine you sitting on a bench gossiping with your mates. I wish you talked a bit more when you’re home!” So, that’s when I stopped.

And now, here was my twin brother, with those memories hidden in a book that must have been collecting dust in Le Case for at least two decades, left there by Mariella at some time or other. Angiolino stopped reading and looked me straight in the eye. “Are you going to sell the cellar now? Or would you like me to send these love letters to you-know-who?” That bastard mongrel. After all the kindness Sonia had always shown him. Here he was using her to blackmail me. I was about to say something when he stopped me, waving the sheets in my face. “I have a copy of these and I’m the only one who knows where they are hidden. Think carefully before opening your mouth.” I lowered my eyes and didn’t speak for a whole minute. Then I looked up. “Let’s go and see how that damned cellar is doing in after all these years we’ve let it go to ruin. Then we’ll decide on a price.”

Sonia, with a cleaning rag in her hand, saw me come back in from my walk, without taking my jacket off. She was dumb-struck when she saw Angiolino. Seeing us together after so long must have given her a shock. She watched me take the key to the cellar we’d never used off the hook. “Shall I put the coffee on?” she said. I didn’t bother answering.

Trying to turn the key in the rusty lock that been untouched for so long nearly broke my hand off, but in the end the door creaked open. It was the first time I had seen the Bianciardis’ cellar in the dim light that filtered in from the street.

A curse nearly escaped my lips: the cellar was bigger than I remembered. It was full of abandoned furniture. There was even an old racing bike, exactly like the one our poor Babbo used to have. There was a stone arch dividing the space in two. Angiolino opened one of the drawers of a dresser. I heard the rattling of tools. And then I heard him say, “This place is a gold-mine.” “I know what a mine looks like. This place is a palace in comparison,” I scoffed. My twin wasn’t listening. He was feverishly opening and shutting cupboards, lifting up sheets which shed fat spiders and giant lice. Then he pulled an old vinyl record out from somewhere and wiped it clean on his coat sleeve. “I can’t believe it…” he started whimpering. “I can’t believe it … this alone is worth ten of these cellars.” He was just turning around to show me his find when I knocked the living daylights out of him.

I pulled the door to, leaving a chink of light so that I wouldn’t bang my own head on some old piece of farm equipment. I put the table leg back where I had found it, in a damp, rotten basket full of filthy junk and squatted over my brother, feeling for his face in the dark. I covered his nose and mouth with my hands and started counting in my head: “One, two, three…”

By the time I got to twenty-four, Angiolino had stopped struggling. He’d been kicking like crazy and reaching out with both hands for something to grab on to. But he had been weakened by the strike on the head. “Thirty-eight, thirty-nine…” I held my head right back so I wouldn’t get any scratches on my face. I listened to his heels banging against the flagstones and echoing around the cellar. “Forty-eight, forty-nine…”

Angiolino died when I got to sixty-four, exactly his age. And they say there’s no such thing as destiny. Just to be sure, I held on for another two minutes at least. Holding my twin brother’s head in my lap for the first time in my life maybe made me feel some tenderness for him. But it didn’t last long. I had to clean myself up. I locked the door of the Bianciardis’ cellar and went home. When Sonia saw me hang my jacket on the peg, she murmured, “Don’t tell me you’ve finally decided to sell it?.” I looked at her and nodded.

That night I took her into my arms for the last time. I buried my head in her hair so that I could breathe in the smell of her. I hugged her tight and kissed her on the forehead and on the mouth. We never talk while we’re at it, but this time she whispered, “Why are you trembling?” I answered her with more kisses, on her neck and all over her body.

After making love, Sonia fell into a deep sleep. I waited until the bell up in the clock tower struck four and got up. I dressed in the same clothes I’d been wearing the day before. I stood in front of our bed for a couple of minutes, trying to hold back my tears, leaned down, and gave her a kiss on each eyelid. She hardly moved. I left the house, going past the kitchen where Pepita was dozing on a chair, and stroked my cat one last time.

Back in the cellar, I started undressing Angiolino. He was already stiff and, as I moved him, little bubbles of gas came out of his mouth. At one point, I thought I was going to have to use the table leg on him again. I dressed him again in my own clothes, down to the underpants. And I put on his, drenched in that repulsive effeminate perfume. When I had to put my wedding ring on his finger, I felt sick because it felt like I was marrying him.

Before leaving, I checked out the alley both ways. The half hour bell rang. I said to myself, “Le Case is dead at five in the evening, so at five in the morning there won’t be a soul.” I went back inside, heaved Angiolino over my shoulder, and headed out into the thick December fog.

I placed his body in a sitting position, his legs splayed sideways, on the Barberinis’ doorstep, at the point where the ice on the slope makes it too slippery to walk any further. Then I went straight back up again, the keys of the house I’ve lived in ever since owing to a trick of nature – to borrow a phrase from my inverted twin - jingling in my pocket. At least I still go out and get the papers in the morning.

What made the whole thing believable was the stubble that had continued to grow on my dead brother’s chin overnight, giving him the shadow of a beard I usually sported. I was more worried about our hands, because that was how people could have told us apart. Mine were the hands of a worker, while his were as soft as a maiden’s. One of those girls who leaf through books all day and put cream on their hands at night. Yet, one look had been enough to convince the whole town. It was Sonia who sealed it with her wailing: “Ever since he retired he started going out early in the morning. I told him he wasn’t so young anymore. Those slabs of ice that form in December have split more than one head over the years. Achille, my love, Achille…” she sobbed, “what will I do without you?”

They didn’t even do a blood test. The man found dead on the doorsteps was me. He had my ID in his wallet, my wedding ring on his finger. The deep ridge on my ring finger would have given the game away, but it was winter so I covered myself up, and wore gloves. Even now, I keep my left hand hidden when I go out in public. The dent left after years of marriage is hard to hide.

When they came to give me the news, I answered the door in this frilly dressing gown, the one I still wear when I’m at home. I made a scene, pretending I was going to faint. During the wake I greeted everyone in silence and kept my eyes on the ground. Ditto at the funeral. I walked on Silvia’s arm, my gloved hands deep in my coat pockets. My head span when they closed the burial vault with the last tile. I was so involved in the unfolding of events that for a second I convinced myself I was being entombed myself. I felt like I had disappeared into the crypt, and in some ways it was the truth. People thought my dizzy spell was a symptom of grief, and they walked me home.

Living Angiolino’s life was a never-ending process of discovery. To start with, in order to avoid being caught out, I wolfed down all his books. I tidied up his notes and diaries. I wasted reams of paper practicing my twin’s writing and signature. Then something changed and I finally understood it was a double-edged sword: my brother had been an antique dealer and art lover, and the more I digested his world the better I liked it. Angiolino was good at his job. While I’d wasted my life toiling down the mine shafts so that I could buy a fridge when I got back up, he’d gone around looking for abandoned possessions. Treasures that have come down to me as if they were a gift. I don’t feel a bit guilty, though. The most precious things in the world are worth nothing compared to witnessing Sonia’s expression after finding out she’d been betrayed. I’d rather she believe I’m dead than unfaithful. I’d rather she went crazy. I’d rather the idea of my love for her remained as solid as the stone the foundations of San Bastiano church were laid on, for ever and ever.

Giovanna Ginanneschi - 2

The Spinster

pp. 163 – 172

It happened one morning early. I was having breakfast. I heard Babbo coming back in from his walk to the Due Porte bar, where he goes to read the paper. He sometimes brought me a fresh donut. As soon as he walked in, I heard him at the end of the corridor call my mother, “Serena, come here a minute.” Mamma scurried to the door and I heard the two of them talking in a low voice. After a while, they came and stood outside the kitchen, peering in. I noticed that Babbo hadn’t taken his jacket or beret off. Mamma came in looking grim. At one point she had to grab a chair and sit down. She tried to put a smile on her face, but it looked like the snarl of a death mask. “Darling…” she stammered, not knowing how to go on. She swallowed, took a deep breath, and started again. “Darling, something rather bad has happened…”

I stared at her, sucking on the cookie I had dipped into my barley coffee. I went on chewing after she had finished. She tried again, her whole body shaking, her voice reduced to a whisper, “Honey, did you hear what I said?” I reached out for another cookie. Dipped it. Sent it down. My eyes on the television. It suddenly felt like Mamma was speaking in tongues, a stream of meaningless words coming out of her mouth.

Alfredo had died in the night. His lips had been barely parted when they found him, just enough to let the ghost of his soul fly out. Alfredo broke my heart twice. And I turned into a 200 pound lard ball of love stuck at the starting line of life of life.

I didn’t go to the funeral. At least, I don’t think I did. I can’t remember. Nor can I remember the months that followed. Alfredo went to bed one evening and never woke up, which meant I was never able to get my revenge on him for choosing the slightly older, bright-eyed, giggly Cocchetti girl over me. Everyone else went on with their lives. Even her, my best friend. She solved all her problems two years later by getting pregnant. I, on the other hand, was completely lost.

Thinking about it now, I couldn’t even really say I was in pain. My days were taken over by a big sleep. I was walking in a no-man’s-land between two worlds, which would only come together if I stopped and stared into space. Alfredo’s death had reached a place deep inside me, and an invisible hand had extinguished my last glimmer of hope. I ate, that’s for sure. Without any limits. And I went for walks around the town. I would take a different route through different alleys every day of the week. When I got back home, Mamma had a pink pill waiting for me next to my morning snack. I took a white one in the evening with my last glass of milk before going to bed.

One for you, one for me… When I first met you, my dear little pooch, I knew right away you had been abandoned just like me. You were a stray mutt, belonging to nobody, lost-looking, withheld love swelling your teats, deforming your body. You were the one who picked me. We said hi to one another down in the Brigantinos’ alley, but we both held back. Then I said, “Come home with me. I’ll make you a hot meal. It may help a bit.”

Anyone could see that you were only putting one foot in front of the other because that is what we are told to do: put one foot in front of the other. You didn’t have an aim in mind, not even the idea of an aim. All you were able to sense was a vague line on the horizon where the sky met the earth in a dark glow, an infinite waste of space. In your eyes I saw my own dismay. And yet, you made an effort: you curled your hair, painted your nails bright red, put on a nice dress as if you were going out somewhere special, when it was just an ordinary weekday afternoon.

Do you remember? We used to talk until dinner time, my dear little pooch. We had the house to ourselves, Babbo was at work. Mamma was out doing errands, collecting extra orders from the Nencioni dressmaker as she does every two days. So maybe it was Tuesday. “I might want to kill myself,” you said. “After Alfredo it’s all over.” There were no tears. You stared down at the table, with a determined expression, like when Babbo got his packed lunch ready for a double shift at the Piombino blast furnace. I’d put the kettle on the stove and the water was boiling, so I jumped up to make the tea. Instead of bringing you a second cup I emptied the boiling kettle over your head.

You gave one shake of your body, that’s all. I could see your long hair from behind stuck to your shoulders. You didn’t budge. When I moved to the side, I saw that your mouth was wide open, but you were not making a sound. It was a silent scream. You looked at me, just briefly. The skin on your face was purple, your makeup dripping into your mouth. Then you fainted from the pain.

Now you can’t even remember your name, little pooch. You’ve lived in the dark for an eternity, chained up here in this room. Your hair is absurdly long, almost twice your height. You haven’t stood for forty years, your knees are stuck in a position that makes you look like a locust with transparent skin. You ears shriveled after that shower of boiling water, and now, all these years later, they look like the ends of balloons when they’ve been tied. Your eyes, too, have gotten worse with age. Nobody can understand what you’re saying. You have no words. When you hear me coming at night, you whimper like a lap dog . It’s how you celebrate when I bring along an unexpected bite of something special.

That day, long ago, I was standing over you, the dripping kettle still in my hand. I heard Mamma saying, “What’s going on? Did you spill something? The mop is over there where it usually is.”

I had been so engrossed I hadn’t even heard her come home. I didn’t answer. Until she came into the kitchen. “What are you playing at? Statues?” she joked. Then she saw my bag on the chair near her. She came closer and when she saw you on the floor her face lost all its color. “Honey, what have you done?” she said, her hand over her mouth.

There was no way I was going to let you commit suicide. If I had to go on living, you had to survive with me. Putting on your lipstick and going to throw yourself over the precipice behind the old church was too easy. Maybe you didn’t understand at the time, but it was in your womb that it all started. That’s when everything started going wrong. The day a certain Dr. Salghini had the hots and squirted his come into me, a future baby. In one second I had conceived a new life, and destroyed another that still needed to be lived. My own. It was nearly Christmas, and Alfredo had been dead less than three months. I had already gained more than twenty pounds.

You were the only one to feel everything I felt. I could read it in your eyes, my dear little pooch, and even now words cannot describe all those shades of blinding black. You couldn’t leave me on my own to deal with the pain, having been the one to generate it. I was suspended between two worlds. I suddenly understood that if I had shared with you the madness of it all, I might have been able to get back on track, at least in the eyes of most people. But you had to go on living.

When you tried to get up I was scared. One eye was half stuck together from the burn, and your face was blistering. “They’ll send me to jail,” I said. Mamma shook her head. “Don’t be stupid,” she said. With a fierce expression I’d hardly ever seen on her face, she walked around the table, took the kettle out of my hands, and dashed your brains out. You fell asleep like a little angel.

I’ve heard the story of Nonno Dante since I was in diapers, but I like telling it to you every now and then when I creep down the stairs. He spent the war hidden in the woods, but one day he was shot by the Germans. The bullet went into his leg, just above the knee, smashing the bone into a thousand splinters. He screamed out in pain when they tried to move him, but one night they managed to bring him here to this hidey-hole in the middle of Le Case. Mamma says the town is full of secret rooms like this one, though most of them were walled up after the Americans came. There are some old people in the town who still say, when the mood takes them, “Watch what you’re doing! I could knock the wall down in a second.” What they are trying to say is that, behind the bricks and mortar, they’ve stockpiled the rifles and revolvers they used after the war to fight the Fascists.

Mamma says Le Case is full of hidden treasure that has been forgotten. Where wounded partisans were once held, now there are pots of gold that families have set aside over a lifetime. When there are no children, the family line soon dies out and there’s no one to leave your inheritance to. Households die out, while behind every wall there may be hidden valuables melding with the stone over the centuries.

Behind this wall you lie, my dear little pooch. There are twelve steep steps to get down here, below a trap door that opens under the kitchen floor. The tiles are the same all over, exactly the same, so when the trap door is closed nobody would ever know it existed. This is where Nonno Dante fought his last battle, before shooting himself in the temple at the age of 24. While he was convalescing he kept asking whether his brigade had blown up the cabin up at Monte Alto, the one built by the Germans. “Have they taken down the antenna?” he would ask, while his wound was rotting, weeping serum. One morning a squad of eight gendarmes came and broke our door down. Someone had informed on him. Mamma was only six, but if anyone asks, she says she remembers it as if it were yesterday. The Fascists got straight to the point and asked where the hiding place was. Nonna Ambra denied its existence to the very end, weeping and wailing as she was roughed up by the policemen. When she realized they were going to search the house from top to bottom, she leaned on the table and tapped her heel twice on the floor, the arranged signal. One of the men slapped her across the face so hard she fell onto the floor. The gendarmes dragged her and her little daughter away with them.

Dear little pooch. What the Fascists – more dogs than you – did not know was that Nonno kept an arsenal down there in case it was ever needed. There were three British hand grenades and fifteen revolver shots. When the first policeman opened the trap door and peered down, a bullet hit him right between the eyes. Nonno shouted, “You’ll never catch me alive!” and lobbed the first grenade up through the trap door. It rolled under the table and blew the kitchen to smithereens, and with it the infamous traitors who were still in the house.

Nonno Dante’s act of resistance was written up in the papers later. Mamma still has the cutting, and she goes back and reads it once in a while, when she needs to give herself courage. She reads about her father’s exploit, fighting off the Germans for a whole day from the bottom of this cellar with a butchered leg. They couldn’t enter the house. The resistance fighter was ready to pull the safety off the grenade as soon as he heard a floorboard creak. Or he would shoot into the air, just to show that he was ready, with an arsenal at his disposal. “I’ll take you all out with me!” he shouted before firing his last shot. At himself. Though the gendarmes knew he was dead, they stayed for hours outside, surrounding the contrada, and calling for reinforcements. Time went by, but the gendarmes ignored all orders to go in and put an end to the skirmish. They ended up getting arrested themselves. They would rather desert than storm this house. There were the brain and hair dripping down the walls of the last people who had tried to storm the house. They waited outside, squadrons filling the alleys around the house, leaving their other positions unguarded. The news spread, and reached the ears of the partisans in the woods outside the town. At six that evening, an explosion echoed around the hills. There was black smoke coming from the antenna on Monte Alto.

All this to say that this pit here has witnessed many a story over the years. Including yours. You still live here, with no teeth, your skull showing through your transparent skin. One day, forty years ago, I boiled your head, little pooch. Then Mamma bade you goodnight; a nice knock on the head with a kettle. She moved the table over with her hip and opened the trap door onto this cellar, carved out of the rock back in the eighteen hundreds when Nonno was still a kid.

To start with, you struggled a lot. We had to wait until Babbo had gone off for his shift. Then we would clamber down and give you a few drops of water or some left overs. “Well, you were the one that wanted to disappear,” I said to you as I pulled your muzzle off, staying clear of your teeth. You howled like a harpy, but there was no point in telling you your yelps were buried in the belly of the bedrock. You refused to eat, so I force fed you and then you puked the whole lot up over yourself. Mamma came down with a mop and pail, especially after we decided to strip you naked, because down in this pit it’s hot in summer and cold in winter. You pissed outside the pail on purpose, and grew skinnier by the day. “She’s decided to let herself go to seed,” Mamma said one afternoon, as I rubbed your fur dry with a wet cloth, and you just sat there as usual without saying a word. “Pretend you’re dead for real,” I whispered in your ear. “What do you care? Imagine you’ve jumped off the Tolomei cliff, and this is Hell. But there’s someone here anyway looking after you.” You stared at me, without any reaction. I left the cloth in the pantry and burst the last blisters on your face that were still weeping.

The good thing was that you were already a little crazy, and being buried alive in a dark pit all day sent you off the edge altogether. You did something strange: every day when I came down the stairs you were more like a little girl. You started talking again, but by the end of the month you hardly remembered you had had a baby. You went on about a certain Emilio with a well-tended little moustache you had fallen for but had never dared speak to. I tried hard, but I could never really picture Dr. Salghini as a young man. He disappeared too, and you were alone at the age of twenty. You talked about a fling with a dipstick builder from Valpiana with nice hands, though they were calloused from hard work.

Mamma wanted to kill you and take you out in pieces a little at a time. “What if Babbo finds her?” she would say. I had to explain it to her all over again: without you I would go gray in no time at all. “If she survives, I will,” I insisted. Anyway, you had turned into a newborn baby. You started wagging your tail as soon as you heard me open the trap door. You had regressed so much you couldn’t speak any longer. Not like the first time. You had forgotten your words. “She’s just pretending,” Mamma would say. But I could see your eyes in the naked light of the bulb. They were the eyes of a devoted little pooch that was thankful for small mercies. Just like now.

It had been quite funny when, in the evening, Babbo would sit at table and say things like, “Sometimes there’s no end to bad luck. Imagine Dr. Salghini. First his son, now his wife vanishing into thin air…” They had even trawled the whole river bed of the Ombrone looking for her. In the papers there was a picture of her from twenty years ago. She was the talk of the town.

Forty years have gone by, and it feels like all this happened yesterday. The girl that disappeared was me at twenty, the one who locked you up down here. Even back then I played the game I play now: I imagined I was you and felt a wave of relief. We shared the same pain, like twins with the same blood in our veins. You vanished out of sight, banished by your suffering. So, I vanished too. I used to enjoy listening to the idle chatter: “She must have fallen down a ravine or something,” they said.

Babbo died on January 6, 1983, the Epiphany. Remember? That morning Mamma and I went down to San Bastiano for the eleven o’clock Mass. When we got back there was a strange silence, because the silence of death in the house is different to normal silence. “Gaspare, are you there?” Mamma called out after hanging her coat up. “Gaspare?” She stood there, peering down the corridor. I shrugged. “He must have gone for a walk down to Due Porte,” I said. I didn’t really believe it. I noticed the TV was on in the kitchen, not from the sound that was almost inaudible. But from the shadows shifting imperceptibly in the room

Mamma took a few steps, her face gray. “Gaspare?” she kept calling, her voice not much louder than a murmur. We reached the kitchen door. I was about to look in, when her scream stopped me in my tracks. “Gaspare!”

You were there on the ground, my little pooch. In the light of day you looked like a phantom, an unbelievably pale skeleton. You were hunkering down. The TV was showing cartoons, and your eyes were glued to them. Mamma’s scream had not budged you. Your hair was down to the ground, and you were crouched there like a toad, with the gaze of a sleepwalker. Your iron chain, one link loosened, hung down your side. There was a pool of piss under you.

The worst thing was the upturned chair. Babbo was on the other side of the room, in a sitting position, his back leaning against the cupboard under the sink. His face scared me to death because his staring eyes did not look normal. Nor did his mouth. It looked like his jaw had been dislocated from screaming so hard. His hands were curled up like claws. A puddle was forming under his pants.

Dr. Salghini said his heart gave out. “Of course,” he added, “his weight didn’t help matters. Even though his latest tests came back perfect… he was taking the pressure medication I’d prescribed, wasn’t he?”

Only Mamma and I knew the truth, and just thinking about it made my blood curl. I imagined Babbo sitting at the kitchen table, with a cup of coffee, the paper, and the TV on low to keep him company. The daily routine, as usual. When suddenly the trap door flies open and a balding, bony beast with a muzzle deformed by burns leaps out at him, bellowing and howling. The shock was so great he jumped out of the chair and his heart stopped. The last thing he was expecting that morning was a monster rising from the belly of the earth to drag him down into the underworld.

Alvise Barberini

The Retired Factory Worker

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I keep an eye on that Samuele. Every day he walks down my road carrying heavy bags loaded with shopping. It must be the good air up in the hills giving him an appetite. Or maybe it’s the tidy income he’s earned from all those interviews with the gossip magazines that he can throw about however he wants. And who cares about that poor girl Clara, who they found on the rocks in Corsica? He spends his days shut up in the house. To start with, I would avoid him and choose a place at another table. Now, I prolong my early morning walk and go up Via dell’Incrociata from the porticoes of the old school. His shutters are always closed, even at midday. Samuele must live practically in the dark. The season of thick fog has already started at Le Case, and it sometimes sits there until lunch time. It suits him like a tailor-made outfit because he doesn’t want to see anyone. The only person he talks to is Mario, at the fruit and vegetable counter. Poor devil, they haven’t given him a break since his assistant vanished into thin air. He’s gotten thinner and thinner, worn to the bone with Adelaide’s work to do as well as his own. Apart from this minimal contact, Esedra’s grandson doesn’t really seem to be living in the town where he first learned to walk. He’s holed up in that house, quiet as a mouse. I wouldn’t mind bumping into him in the street by chance and invite him to play a game of cards with any old excuse, just to pass the time. It would be the test of my life.

There’s something about the lad. A commanding air. I see it, and at the same time I have to suppress a shudder of rage, because I can’t help seeing Tempesti’s face alongside it. The face he turned on me that day long ago when I approached the table and dared touch one of his chess pieces. “So that’s what the old drunk wants,” I mutter to myself as Samuele walks past. I saw him through the chinks in the fence, his eyes glued to the ground. I think back to that day when the old chess master stared at my mouth before widening his gaze to include the rest of my face. A sign. That’s what I was looking for. Recognition that I possessed that mark of distinction we all have in one way or another, however old we are or whatever we are wearing. I see it as a glow that only some others can recognize. There is a kind of spark, and you know you are kindred spirits. That day with Tempesti I sat there, unable to make that electric connection, like an animal that’s been shooed out of the house.

I would like to go and meet the two of them at Due Porte, like we used to in the old days. I’d grab a chair and place it between them, and launch the game with a Sicilian opening to show them what’s what from the start. And see the difference between a man whose skill is a gift of the gods and one who fill hundreds of notebooks with everything there is to know about the game, from A to Z. And then laugh with a hundred mouths at the sight of talent thrashing discipline. Because we all know that discipline can change shape as life goes on, and it can also suddenly leave you in the lurch. As it did for Nicodemo Tempesti, who went on the wagon when he retired, and for Esedra’s Samuele, who lost his head for something as idiotic as jealousy and women. While I’m still here, the same Alvise as always. Silent as a guillotine.

The truth is that ever since the lad walked back through the gates of the old town my blood has started to boil again. Nothing is the same as before. Every time I walk down Via del Mezzo I feel my breath catching in my throat, as if a pack of wolves were on the hunt in Le Case, lurking in every corner. I’m on the edge of a precipice. Iolanda hates it when I hand my plate back half eaten, but I have the appetite of a sparrow. All I can see is a chess board ready for battle. In the meantime a wife’s bustling fills my days. It’s the backdrop to an obsession that is wearing me down, but she’s the one to blame. I wish I had the voice-box of a tenor in the opera so I could belt it out once and for all. “My dear woman, I was about to beat Tempesti the day of the tournament. He was lording it over me, but I had upped my game with the challenge and I was finally facing off the chess master. But at one point I took my eyes off the board to seek you out, and you weren’t even watching. The spell was broken. I lost everything: the game and the prize money. Instead of two days by the sea as I’d planned, that afternoon I fell into torpor. My nerves were shattered and they still are today. You may feel you’ve wasted your life on me, but it was your levity that lost me my place in the pantheon. The scepter was mine, and then it was ripped out of my hands. The devil clawing me would be like a tickle compared to that.”

If there was one thing I wanted, it was to be the hero Iolanda had been seeking in that corner of Maremma. I have never felt as handsome and truly hers as I did then, when I was winning. I was a giant. A ray of light. I finally felt I deserved her, and my love was unwavering. I could contemplate her as an equal. I was strong and solid. But she was the only person who didn’t see me in that state of grace, when my sweat was liquid gold and my lowest thoughts had the brilliance of a diamond. “Iolanda, look at me!” I screamed inside of me, in my moment of glory. “Iolanda, I’m setting fire to fire.” She wasn’t there. I was alone, even though there was a crowd around the table. All I heard was Tempesti’s voice: “Your turn.” The earth opened up and swallowed me whole. Making me fall down to the floor below, a mere human.

Many years have gone by since that fall tournament in ‘69. Gilera has lived in Belgium half his life and he’ll probably stay there until the day he dies. Montierino died a while back, but we were all expecting it as he had palpitations all his life. But killing himself to avoid military service left a sour flavor in our mouths, as if the fatal bullet had been shot by someone else. Sometimes I take a flower to his grave and I stand there staring at the old photo. I look at it so intensely that I can hear his laughter - which was never whole-hearted, always slightly distressed - in my head, as if he were right next to me. A wave of tenderness washes over me so strongly that I start to cry. Not because I miss him. I feel nostalgia for the way I was, when I was free of my obsession with rising to the throne. Maybe I never really stood a chance, but I needed to show Iolanda I was worthy of the title because the only time I got to put my backside on the throne, she had gone to the bar to get a Campari soda. By the time she got back I was a different Alvise. My hopes were dashed and the light of my soul flickered, like a wick drowned in melting wax.

I tried anyway to be her King. In this game of life there is always danger lurking. If you don’t have a move prepared, you pay for it dearly. I’ve been holed up in this defensive position for forty years, and she is lookout. Since she is the Queen, she’s the stronger of the two. Just as strong as my heart beat when I see her shuffling towards me with Calamaio’s earthenware dish in her hand. “You’re an idiot,” she sighs, a smile lighting up her face, and my world with it. “You’d hidden it in the larder, behind the box of cookies.” A ray of sunlight falls over her face and the scar on her forehead flashes for a second, like a wisp of angel hair.

From the secret dairy of

Piera Del Casino

Nana

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In the summer, we would drag our chairs up to the window and pull ourselves up onto them, our elbows resting on the windowsill. The kids who came up to our contrada in the old town from the last widening in the Via del Mezzo would suddenly appear on the stone steps. They were wearing old sheets around their necks as capes, and waving their wooden swords in the air. Coming closer, they walked in single file, hugging the walls, raising their cardboard shields. Then they would prepare their blowguns. Giuliano would tap my elbow, telling me to move back a little. But I wanted to see, see, see … curiosity got the better of me, and sometimes I would get a bullet in my forehead.

They used dry olives. Or chewed-up paper projectiles that would stick to the windows with their saliva. We squatted, watching the missiles hail down on us. Giuliano would collect them and bring them to me so we could share them out. Then we would lean out and retaliate with a shower of our won.

The battle would go on for up to half an hour. The kids down on the steps lay siege to us, while we responded with fire from our tower. We saw them yell and raise their shields as protection, waiting until our spray of bullets ran out. It was like a silent film. Including the piano accompaniment. Including the breathing. I saw mouths gaping with shock, necks puffing out with air as they prepared to scream. The band of brothers may even have had a battle cry, but we had a protective skin, made of silence. A thick skin. Neither a breath nor an echo could pierce it. Nothing could.

Still today, when we talk about it, we call that period “the years of silence”. We’re nostalgic about it. It’s like a dream from another life. We lived inside a jar. Not locked in, just protected.

The fact is, God wasn’t concentrating when he modeled the clay to make our bodies. He paid the kind of attention you would pay when you’re putting your underpants away and your house is on fire. The result was twin dwarves. Deaf mute from birth.

We used to love coloring in. We loved inventing new signs for things. To say “crayon” we would hold up our right index finger. To say “get that” we only had to look in the right direction and clench our fist twice. We had an alphabet of our own that made us feel special. But most important of all, we held a secret.

Living in silence didn’t mean we couldn’t listen. Le Case talked to us. It did so through its earthquakes, for example. Sometimes they were so mild that they didn’t even make the lamp swing. But we could feel it. While everyone went around their business in town as if nothing had happened.

To say “it’s shaking,” we placed the palm of our hands on our foreheads and shook our heads. I invented that one. When it happened, we stood still, even when we were in the middle of a hailstorm of bullets. I would turn to Giuliano, my eyes unfocused, *listening*… I shrugged my shoulders twice: “Can you hear that?”. He said “yes” by rolling his head backwards. The quake was like an itch. A tickling of the bones. It caught us by surprise even when we were asleep. I would suddenly sit up in bed and turn to my twin’s side. He would already be staring at me. We would peel ourselves out of our bedclothes and run down to the cellar.

We had learned what to do from Daniele, our oldest brother. One day, he came back with a little swallow with a broken wing in his hands that he had picked up in front of the house. While he was showing it to us, he lost his grip. The bird flapped madly against the floor and then fled into a corner of the kitchen. It didn’t want us to come close. If it saw anyone take a step towards it, it would open its beak wide and start to flap again, beating its head against the wall until it nearly broke its neck. In the end, Daniele bent down and picked it up again, showing us how to calm it down.

His hands were clasped around it, like in an embrace. The head of the little bird poked out between his thumbs. Our brother bent his head down and warmed it up with little puffs of breath. Maybe he was talking to it, too.

To start with, the little swallow tried to get away, jabbing at my brother’s hand with its beak. Daniele kept on puffing at it, his lips so close they could have been pecked. At one point, the little creature calmed down, as if it were sleeping with its eyes open. Our brother continued with his warm breaths, at the same time uncurling his fist slowly until it was completely open. Daniele handed me the bird and indicated that I should carry on with the breathing.

When there was an earthquake, we did the same thing. As far as we knew, we were the only ones who felt the tremors. If we were home, we stopped whatever we were doing and ran down the steep steps into the cellar carved into the rocks. We would head straight to the far corner, where the bare rock jutted into the room like a lava field that had solidified thousands of years before, and we would embrace it, breathing onto the rock surface. We would carry on until the tremors stopped: Le Case had calmed down, and we could go back to sleep.

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I once drew a cat and showed it to Giuliano, raising my hand, three fingers down, thumb and pinky up: our sign for “cat”. That was our way of saying it. Or he would draw a cloud on a sheet of squared paper. To say “cloud” we drew a circle over our head with our hands. The circle would go around and around if we wanted to say “bad weather.”

To say “Daniele” we tapped our chins, because our eldest brother had a pointed chin he was embarrassed about, which would stick out even further when he laughed. He heaver laughed, in fact. “Roberto” was a hooked finger at the height of our noses because he had a pronounced hook in his nose. To say “Mamma” we put a thumb on our cheek, because that was where she always planted her kisses whenever she got us in her clutches. The sign for “Babbo” didn’t exist. We didn’t really want to talk about him.

He was always so serious. Everybody’s mood fell into a ravine when the door opened and he appeared on the threshold. His face was sour, with a hard, staring scowl. Our father always looked like he was grieving, but we had no idea for what. He hardly ever spoke, and when we saw his lips move, Mamma would usually nod or bow her head. He never deigned to look at us, not even by mistake. Giuliano and I were invisible in his eyes. Like ghosts. Pockets of air to ignore or walk past. He never came into our room, not even when we had the flu and were shivering in bed under the covers, soaked in sweat. If he caught Mamma in the act of looking at our drawings, he would walk past without bothering even to glance at them. She would clap her hands and smile, as if to say, “Draw some more!”

We had lots of copy books. Sometimes we would grab one at random and start testing one another on our scribbles. It was the only language we knew. We turned all the things that existed in the world into signs, but only the ones we wanted to include in our universe of silence. We didn’t have a way of saying “tears” or “pain”. As if they didn’t exist.

Then, one day, there was a storm.

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The kids from the streets below were kind to us. After the battles, we would sometimes go down and join the pack. They didn’t care if they left us behind. Their legs were lithe and they ran down the steps two by two. But it was nice being treated like who we were, without any special regard. Their indifference made us feel normal.

They were obsessed with a game that we never understood, which was why we had such fun playing it. Once we got to Piazza dei Sospiri, Giuliano and I clambered up the last steps holding onto the rope handrail, which that had been put there for old people who would never have been able to go down to their storerooms in the winter because of the slabs of ice.

The other kids would surround us. The girls would untie my hair and let it hang loose down my back, and then they would weave some flower petals into it. They would make necklaces with a stone or flower pendant out of string and hang them round my neck. Giuliano had leather laces tied around his wrists. There were even times when someone would untie their cape and give it to us. It was as if we were being knighted. We two freaks would suddenly become sovereigns, dressed up for a coronation ceremony. Gods to venerate. We were taken out in a procession.

More steps. Up towards the narrow alley that leads to the clock tower. But on these occasions, unlike during the battles, the other kids wouldn’t run off home. They walked behind us, and we headed the parade. I often thought about Mamma, wishing she could see us just once. Or else, I would look at Giuliano, who would stare straight ahead and march proudly, looking invincible. The top terrace was the highest spot in the town. Apart from the flagstones and the clock tower there was nothing. Just wind.

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It was the summer of ’52. The weather was turning that day. The skyline was low, a metallic grey color. The air was still, and hard to breathe in. There was a distant rumbling of thunder, but we could see the lightning. They were like white gashes. Flashes that discharged their voltage down into the valley. We could *hear* them because it was as if the world was ripping apart, and it echoed in our bellies. The sound was different from the earthquakes, though. It was a loud roar, that didn’t come from under our feet.

We went up the steps in the midst of that electric storm; the purple clouds seemingly a hand’s breadth away. We reached the terrace and let ourselves be led to the front gate. The kids positioned themselves behind us. Then one of them came forward and knocked. The others started retreating to a rearguard position a couple of steps down. Some of the kids found it hard to stay where they were. They would have turned tail and run for it if they could have. They watched their companion placing his ear against the iron rail, listening. Then there was a scream, and everyone started running.

We watched them run helter-skelter down the steps. One or other of them would drop their shield or blowgun, but they never came back to get them. The pack only stopped when they reached the center of the square. They herded together, shoulder to shoulder, waiting with baited breath. They were watching us, the dwarves from the top contrada, dressed up as royalty. From the top of the tower, in our turn, we watched them. They looked like a swarm of flies. Our terrified subjects. We stayed there for a good while, doing nothing. The kids were stewing, as if Le Case might open its maws and swallow them up whole. We were the only thing that was keeping the town in check. But as time passed, they started to get bored. The band began to break up; their eyes started to wander. Some of them shook their heads. Those who had lost their weapons during their escape headed back to the steps to get them back. Then the boys went off in dribs and drabs, leaving us up there dressed like mad emperors.

That day in ’52 they ran away. That day boredom got the better of their euphoria. We watched the first little urchin leave the group, followed by another, and then another… I leaned over Giuliano, gesturing with my hand as if I were tightening a huge, invisible bolt. In our language it meant, “What does it mean?” He opened his palm, which meant “I don’t know.” A second later I felt a tingling in my tummy. It was as if someone had lifted me up by the hair from behind. Then, everything went white.

When I came to, I was sitting on the ground soaked to the skin by a storm that had torn the sky apart. The first thing I saw was a group of kids. They were yelling something, a fair distance away. I turned around and saw my brother. His hands were on his ears and he was staring into space. Maybe that was our way of saying “I’m scared”, but we had never really said it before so it wouldn’t exist. What I did understand was that there must have been the same confusion in his head as the chaos that was splitting my head in two. The snotty kids went on yelling. Although I was feeling weak, I focused for a moment on their mouths. And that was when I realized I could hear them. I could hear the downpour that was pinning me down on the flagstones of the terrace. I had lost my membrane of silence. Then I fainted again.

Mamma came to get us, together with our brothers. Daniele picked me up in his arms and Roberto carried Giuliano. The whole way down the hill, I never took my eyes off my twin. He, too, did not have the energy to lift a finger, but from his expression I could see that we had changed. Up there, in front of the tower gate, something had happened.

Babbo was home. He did not turn around when we came in. He stayed in the kitchen when Dr Salghini came to give us a checkup. The doctor moved his finger back and forth in front of my eyes and mimed that I should take a deep breath. He then moved on to Giuliano, spending more time on him because he seemed worse off than me. He was so weak he couldn’t even lift his arm. When he was done, he smiled at our mother with the air of someone who wanted to say, “there’s nothing to worry about.” Our sign for that was rubbing our lips with the back of two fingers as if we were shining them.

We took a long time to get better. Mamma came to feed us, first me then my brother. She was always smiling, smelling of lavender that filled the room with fresh air every time she came in. I gazed at her as if for the first time, because she was speaking and I could hear her voice. It made me short of breath. I stared at her face the whole time, and she would stop and stare back, the spoon midair. She would say a few words, which I didn’t understand, with a worried look on her face. Then her expression would melt into a smile again. Finally, there was a new sound that stumped me completely. It was my own voice: a primordial long vowel without any meaning. A wailing sound loaded with questions.

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Learning to speak at the age of nine was hard. We practiced at night, helping ourselves with signs. I raised my closed fist, thumb and pinkie up, meaning “cat”. Then, I would whisper the word “cat” having maybe heard Roberto say it at dinner time. We would sit on my bed, in the dim light. Giuliano drew a circle over his head and tried to say the word “cloud”. “Cloud”, I would repeat, a little scared.

We had to rebuild our whole world. Would we be able to? Would we lose our way? My twin knew full well the consternation that kept my eyes wide open. When I was overcome, he would grab my head and press his forehead against mine, which meant, in our language, “only us”. I would look at him and try to find one word to express the concept: “secret”.

We spent our days listening in secret to what everyone in the house was saying. Meanwhile, we pretended that nothing had changed. To start with, we thought our mother was called “Ma”, because that is what Daniele and Roberto called her. Giuliano was “frog” and I was “little frog” to them. Instead, Mamma called both of us with the same name, which was “my treasure”. We didn’t learn one word from Babbo.

And yet, despite our early confusion, I soon learned that I really enjoyed our secret education. Learning the names of things was fun. Transforming things into sounds felt like magic.

The two of us went on playing our old signing game. That was how we expressed ourselves in front of the others. Mamma had even learned some of our signs, like, for example, the one for “combing hair.”

We would wait for the kids to come up from the streets below, on Sundays if it was nice weather, with a different kind of anticipation. We were now able to listen to their battle cries. And we found out they called us with different names from the ones our family used. We would go up the steps to the clock tower and we would hear yet more words.

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Legend had it that the clock tower had once been inhabited by a wicked sorcerer who could blow up a gale with his mouth and suck curious children up in the gusts. One day, he vanished. Weeks went by before the people in Le Case noticed that the windows in the clock tower were not lit up in the evening. When they went to check, they found the walls dripping with blood, drenched clumps of hair sticking to them. The sorcerer’s clothes were carefully folded on the back of a chair, but there was no trace of his body.

It was a terrible disappointment when we realized that, for the kids from the lower streets, we were not royalty. They were just getting their kicks by taking us up to the panoramic terrace, not to venerate us, but to use us as bait. Lambs to the slaughter. We used to dream that the door of the clock tower would open, and the sorcerer would pull us inside with his claws, slamming the door behind him.

We continued to play the role that had been assigned to us. We would watch the victim of the day, selected with a counting game, go and knock at the door. He would lean on the iron gate and stand there listening for a few minutes, his heart pounding. Then he would shout, “He’s coming!” and they would all run for it.

We let them observe us from the safety of the square. Despite the accident a year before, the kids went on playing their perverse game. We watched them down below, tiny and useless. They stood there until boredom set in, and then they would leave. Only at that point would we ourselves go up to the door and place our ears on the metal grate. Knock, knock. We heard a low banging noise from deep inside. The Sorcerer’s steps as he came down the stairs of the tower. Or maybe just the giant mechanisms of an ancient clock.

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A bolt of lightning. We found out years later that it was the lightning that had smashed the bell jar we’d been living in since birth. Sometimes we would sneak up into the tower on our own and inspect the burn mark that had been left on the flagstones of the terrace. That is where we were born again.

I often used to claim that our world of silence had been better. The one we lived in now was deafeningly loud. On the other hand, I knew that words had their own secret resonance, especially the few words Babbo ever uttered, usually no more than a grunt. To sign “happiness” it was enough to rub our chests over our hearts, but to say it was another matter. Something hatched out of it. Spoken words developed layers.

Even the quality of silence had changed. It was no longer a vacuum. It spoke. In Daniele’s sighs, for example, when he spied on Susanna from the window while she was strolling by. Or in Roberto’s grim expression the day Babbo came home with the news that they had given him a job at the Ribolla mine. He would start as a laborer down in the tunnels were there were often fires.

Giuliano and I would whisper to one another for hours at night. At first, it was to compose a new alphabet. Later, it was to practice. We were soon able to have rusty conversations, halting every now and then when we couldn’t find the right word for something. We would then go back to signing, but never for long.

We would even speak in our dreams. Mamma used to talk to herself while she was doing housework, convinced nobody could hear her. Sometimes she would even sing along to the radio. I would stop whatever I was doing, besotted by those sounds that I would never have been able to imagine in my world of silence. Giuliano would often stick an elbow in my side as he walked past, bringing me back to my senses so we could go back to playing the role of little deaf dwarfs. It was hard. I would have liked to break out in song. One evening at dinner, Roberto knocked a glass off the table, which shattered into a thousand pieces on the floor. I was so shocked I turned around without thinking. Giuliano was right there beside me, pinching my thigh under the table. I turned back around again and met my father’s gaze. He was staring at me. It may have been the first time in my life that he kept his eyes on me for more than a distracted moment. He glared at me so intensely that I held my breath, as if he were strangling me with his sight. Then he started chewing again, slowly. So slowly I got goose bumps.

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Giuliano was better than me at keeping up appearances. A bomb could have exploded right next to him and he wouldn’t have batted an eyelid. Little by little I learned to do the same, even though it meant living in a permanent state of alertness. Since the episode of the broken glass, Babbo had changed. While before he had never bothered to look at us, now he would observe us closely. We had become his home entertainment. He would set traps for us. Spoons were suddenly dropped on the floor, and he would register any minimal movement in our eyes, or check whether our breathing changed. We could not allow ourselves to show any fear when thunder and lightning filled the sky in a storm. When a door slammed in a draught. When a dog barked. Nothing would betray our secret.

We sometimes talked about it at night. Was it time to reveal what had happened to us? But Giuliano was convinced we should hold onto our advantage. We had neither height nor strength on our side. Our fate was to live a life that was different from all the other inhabitants of Le Case. The lightning bolt that had struck us on the terrace of the clock tower had been a gift from God. People would pay gold to have our special power: knowing the truth about people. The kids from the lower streets went on escorting us on our processions, calling me “Queen of the Toads” and Giuliano “King of the Mongoloids.” We just smiled, and pretended we were having fun as usual.

One evening we made a pact. In everyone’s eyes we would be the same old freaks. It would be our new shield. Our sword. I looked Giuliano in the eye and agreed. He came up to me and planted a kiss on my lips. In our language it was like a seal. In words it might express something like, “I swear”.

[…]

Going down to the Staccioli newsagent’s in the morning to buy the crosswords is always a great pleasure. Sometimes, I take a note in, with an order for the latest book. In all these years, nobody has ever wondered how a deaf-mute like me, who’s never been to school, can read and write. They see I have two eyes in my head and opposable thumbs, and that’s enough for them. While I’m paying for my order, I hear people say things like, “books were invented for retards, housewives, and freaks like Piera. They have no real life that’s worth living, so they read a few dumb stories to give themselves a little flutter, even though it’s all in the imagination.” Then they go down to the Due Porte bar and drown their sorry selves in a glass of wine at ten in the morning.

Antonio calls me often. He says the latest novel still at the top of the bestseller list, one year after publication. “In a month we’ll be coming out with the new one and you are still riding the wave,” he says. Then he asks again, for the umpteenth time. I have to repeat, as usual: “I don’t want photographs or interviews. I’m not interested in going to the talk shows. I must remain anonymous.” And then he finally gives up. “Okay, but after twenty years you could at least have a coffee with your agent,” he grumbles. “I would pay a fortune to see you once face-to-face.” He wishes me a good day and puts the phone down.

It’s a pity, because it would give me satisfaction to see the faces of those wretches. “Deaf-mute dwarf: Queen of the world bestseller list.” I can picture myself sitting in the television studio describing my efforts, all the hard work and passion I put into my first blank pages. I could also add something about my rigorous studies, which I started using my brothers’ elementary school text books, and continued by reading novels. Giving things a sound and a sign. Until I was able to launch myself like a rocket out of Le Case and into the world. Win prizes. Travel. See oceans and foreign lands, beyond what I could catch a glimpse of from the rocky crest above our town. The same rock we had hugged in the cellar in secret, because we had the magic power of calming tremors that nobody else even felt. Then the lightning bolt struck us, a miracle of black magic. I once asked Giuliano outright after that: “can you feel the tremors now?” He looked down and shook his head.

Le Case is like a theater performance for our benefit only.

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We write long letters to Daniele. He writes back with the same enthusiasm, only now he has to dictate them because his sight is not as good as it used to be. Our older brother is the only one in on the secret of our books, and he’s the only one to enjoy the fruits of our labor. We have wonderful nephews who have been able to afford the best schools in the world. The only condition is that our pact of silence is never broken. That’s ironic coming from us.

Once a year, Staccioli sees me coming into the store in a state of acute excitement, usually around Christmas. “Here comes the crazy dwarf,” he says, as usual. He leans down and pulls a plastic bag out from under the counter. Last time, Dino Valenti happened to be there, with a carton of Marlboro tucked under his arm. “Don’t tell me they’ve finally sent her a gun to finish herself off with?” he quipped, with the scowl of an impenitent Fascist. Staccioli stuck his oar in, “She’s fixated with this big writer from who knows where. She never misses any of his books. Listen to her heavy breathing; she’s like a bitch in heat. Any minute now she’ll start barking.”

It’s nice when I get home, though, with my package. Giuliano is waiting for me with baited breath. As soon as I walk in, he rushes up to me and whispers excitedly, “do you have it? Let me see!” I show him and he grabs it out of my hand. Then he runs into the sitting room to start reading.

In my books there is everything to know about Le Case. Names. Surnames. Tragedies. They describe the neglect, obscenity, and loathing that envelop this spur of rock in the Maremma hills. The betrayals, hypocrisy, and ignorance. To start with, Antonio was convinced the setting was all in my imagination. Then, one day, he called me in a frenzy. The second book had just come out. The rights had been bought up across half the world. “You lied to me,” he said. “I’m here, now, in Le Case… And what do you know? I couldn’t swear on it, but the woman I ran across five minutes ago on the street looks terrifyingly similar to the widow Isastia. There’s also a Via di Mezzo. Oh, and there’s a bar with a sign on it that says “Due Porte”. I went in for a coffee and, guess what? The guy behind the bar looked just like Maso. In the corner, there was a man playing chess on his own…” I didn’t say a word. Antonio went on: “I don’t know what you are trying to do. The only thing I care about is that you go on writing your stories. I just happened to be passing by and I thought maybe…” As usual I had to say no. He implored: “just a handshake! Please?” I chuckled and put the phone down. Just to be on the safe side, however, I didn’t go out for three days in a row.

There are millions of readers in the world every year who stick their noses into these wretched lives. In the summer, buses crowd the car park at the Bel Sole, disgorging French and German tourists. Families take selfies in front of the Due Porte bar. They go into the grocery store with the excuse of buying something so that they can meet Mario and hear him spitting out his infamous “Tankyu!” The cheekier day trippers stop passers-by and ask if they can take a photo with them as a souvenir. I look at the lost faces of my neighbors and see them wondering whether they are being taken for a ride, but still filled with a meaningless pride. Then, of course, there are the cemetery tours. The old ladies fall silent when they see the paths of the graveyard invaded by clusters of foreigners. The snapping goes on, but this time they are taking pictures of the tombstones under the astonished eyes of widows and widowers, who chase the miscreants away with brooms and pails of water.

This is why I don’t want to die. I would miss all of these stories. I have created an army of readers who know everything there is to know about the intrigues of a certain Mariella Mantovani. They follow the decline of an old hero like Tempesti with passion. They would kill to know how Salghini’s struggle with the sleeping giant will end, or how Don Lauro is coping with the giant mechanisms of the clock. Anyone able-bodied enough comes up to Le Case and takes a stroll around this strange zoo, being careful not to leave any animal feed behind. They take the “author’s advice” at the end of every book seriously: do not interact. Do not alter the ecosystem where these lost souls graze. Every April, I call Antonio and ask him to make detailed enquiries into how many copies had been sold or ordered in this hilltop town. The answer is always the same: one copy. Mine. I smile because at Le Case they would rather be executed than leaf through the pages of a book. And I can continue to make them a laughing stock in the world for as long as I like.

Adele Centini -5

Isastia’s Widow

pp. 264 – 270

Two years ago, at Calamaio’s, I stated my case clearly: “Dear Luigino, look deep into my soul.” He thought about it for a while and then nodded, with his typical expression that was both mortifying and teasing. Finally, he picked up a pastel crayon and started to draw.

“Everything that is outside shows everything that is inside,” my mother used to say, as she stuck her finger in the ash of the stove to make herself a dark eye shadow. She used to enjoy watching the laborers on Sunday morning, their day of rest, drooling on the church steps as I slinked past them. “Look straight ahead,” she would warn me. “If you look these dung beetles in the eye, misery will cling to you instantly. And forget their languorous air; it would disgust the devil in person. It’s best if they look at you as they would a loaf of bread in the bakery window. A nice crusty one that would split the stomach of someone so penniless they can’t afford a slice.”

Well, I let Calamaio carve my pasty, flaccid flesh with his bare hands. “If there is any beauty in here,” I said that morning, the first time we went into room 112 of the Bel Sole, “find it and pin it down – hammer it down if you have to – in your drawing”. I hadn’t taken my clothes off in front of a man for many years. The last inch of flesh I had revealed to someone was the time I was with Marcello, when I still felt the screams of my body and my life, before going into exile within the four walls of my house. Now my loneliness was crying out from every pore of my skin. Draped on the chaise-longue, I looked at the tips of my toes. It felt like they belonged to another person. I said to myself, “this body has been through everything and nothing, but deep down it has fought a real war. That is what dear Luigino must find and draw.”

He still makes a valid attempt but, in the end, he leaves the room with a heavy heart. He never lets me peek at his sketches. He gathers up his pastels and runs away like a soldier surprised to find himself in an enemy trench. The last image I have of him is of his eyes damp with dismay. I let myself swim in this sea of silence, so different from the silence there was between us when I used to pose for him. That silence was a lake with no shore, that I would dip into at the end of every session. You need cold water to combat or kill the icy touch of naked skin. “If it hurts, it’s good for you,” was another of my mother’s sayings. I stare up at the ceiling for a moment, and then I go down for my last trip.

When I ran into him a month ago, I thought that all the stories in the town about ghosts had suddenly come true. It was a misty evening, the kind that creates a veil between you and your surroundings. I saw him walk past me, his head bowed and a bag of shopping on his arm. It was Esedra’s grandson, Samuele. Yes, him.

I stood there at the entrance to the street, leaning on the wall, just like the old days when I would walk through Le Case, my knees weak with hunger. “I must be dreaming,” I said to myself, my heart galloping. “Maybe my obsession has turned into a disease of the mind and I’m seeing shadows.” But that evening rumors were already spreading: the shutters of a certain house on Via dell’Incrociata had been opened for the first time in years.

Even though the young Samuele had been cleared of all charges so long ago, people thought the judgement was misguided. Many were ready to move on from words to deeds. That was why he was holed up in this Maremma hilltop town. He was opening up the rooms where his grandmother had given him such tender loving care. And there he was, right in front of me, like a little bird.

It was as if Esedra had banged her head against her tombstone and broken out of her grave to come back and occupy her own house. I walked up the contrada, using the back path, and came out on the corner of the water fountain where I settled down to spy on the movements of that character, my back squeezed against the wall of Mariella’s house. I had seen so much about him in the news, and read so many articles in the papers, that I was almost beginning to think of him as a superstar. I would go up and lay siege to his area of town at all times of day and night, but he never did very much. If I was lucky, I would see him go out, only to come back five minutes later with some shopping.

After a while I almost started to pity him. I rejected the impulse on principle, but I couldn’t help myself. It felt as though I were reliving my own troubles, back in the day, when I was thrown out of Palazzo Isastia and, more in general, when I lost the goodwill of the townsfolk. Esedra’s Samuele was a carbon copy. He spent his days in the silence and disregard of an exile that would have tested the patience of a saint. “Look how things end up,” I would say to myself. “They are torturing him in the same way they did me.” I could feel his every torment on my own skin. I stared at those dark windows with a kind of compassion I knew well because I had experienced it for decades looking at myself in the mirror. At the end of my stakeout, I had a bittersweet feeling that somehow reconciled me to my anger and helped me sleep at night.

As the days went by, I noticed that there were other things going on. It’s hard to imagine, but in Via dell’Incrociata there are comings and goings you would never believe. It’s busier than San Bastiano square on Friday market day. Take the son of that peasant from the Marches, for example. Some mornings he would scuttle out of the dark alleys like a spider. He would walk up to Samuele’s motorbike and start stroking it, standing there looking around him, caressing the hull as if it were the belly of a bride. Or again, I would catch sight of Divo if I leaned out a little into the street. He would stand there at his window, his jaw set like a small-town Duce, without twitching a muscle, staring at Esedra’s house as if he were peering into the depths of hell.

Whenever Angiolino walked by, I would pull myself back and hide behind the house, resuming my spying in snatches whenever I had the chance. I noticed a strange change come over him in the last few yards before he reached the door: he would suddenly alter his gait, as if he were stepping out of someone else’s shoes. As soon as he turned the corner, if he had been humming, he would stop and look down, his expression sullen and ominous. Once, he dropped his key while he was trying to put it in the lock. He cursed out loud, and, for a second, I thought he must have been drinking because he doesn’t usually say anything dirtier than “Maremma Marinade!”

The most interesting thing I noticed by far was the girl from the valley, the one they have finally stopped looking for. I would see her pop out of one of the porticoes like a kitten emerging after a nap. In the early days of my stakeout, she would just stand there and look hesitantly up at the windows. Then the house visits started in earnest. She would check Mariella’s windows to make sure she wasn’t looking, and then run across the road like a flash of lightning, race up the stairs, open Esedra’s door, and disappear behind it. From that very spot, someone else’s face appeared. To start with, I didn’t recognize the outline because she was stretching out her neck to see what was going on. One day, while I was strolling around the contrada, I saw Sonia Serraglini’s back in one of the alleys. I don’t know whether she was following Eleonora, or whether she was spying on Angiolino, who is identical in every way to the husband she once had. Thinking about it, to this day I feel a terrible sorrow. “Just look at that desperate woman,” I would say to myself, and still do. “She spies on poor Achille’s twin - maybe she even thinks it’s him - so she can convince herself he’s alive just for a moment.”

I stopped my peeping when the gaunt face of Eleonora down from the valley appeared in the newspaper. I had begun to convince myself that Samuele’s fling with her was a snub in my direction. Instead of being crushed by solitude and silence, Esedra’s grandson had his fifteen minutes of pleasure with a bimbo who caught the bus early in the morning somewhere in the Ribolla area. I had never had such luxury. Men had never in my life looked at me that way. They pinned the blame for my rejection of the colonel on me before I was eighteen, and the mark is still there today. They didn’t see me, they saw him. Any temptations the more daring of them may have had, fell away like dead leaves. In the meantime, I was forced to witness the deterioration in those same workers, who preferred to marry a hag to keep them company rather than choose me. To think that when I was forty I still looked like a queen. They left me there to rot.

I listened to the rumors distractedly. Everyone said the bimbo’s disappearance stank of violence, but I was the only one to know the truth. And yet, I didn’t say anything. My intuition told me this was fertile terrain. It was a way to bury Esedra with another scandal, maybe even worse than what I had seen on TV. Anyways, it was information I could use to beat her back into the grave again. “Where do you think that bimbo has gone and gotten herself stuck?” I would chuckle to myself, watching the woodcutter’s truck crawl by Rodolfo’s bar. Seeing them makes your blood freeze. They have no fear and they’re as hungry as wolves. Their glare makes you want to make the sign of the cross. But, at the same time, I was dying laughing. “Dear Samuele, your little elopement will cost you dearly,” I chortled as I dunked my bread into a glass of wine. “I’ve seen the attitude of that good-looking Albanian, nursing his betrayal. Just breathing next to him is enough to create an electric storm.

I love it when things go this way. I hunker down with my dreams of revenge for whole afternoons. I’d really like a magic wand to freeze this moment forever. The best thing about this whole thing is resisting the temptation to solve the mystery, but if I talked, I would have to wipe the smirk deep inside me clean. The fact is, I have somebody else’s life in the palm of my hand. All I would need to do is clench my fists and there would be hell to pay. I’m content with what I have, though. I pat myself on the back for keeping everyone’s breath bated about what is going to happen. Sometimes I look at the reflection in my wine glass and think, “It’s great impersonating God.”

I will make my last trip go on longer. Sometimes I insist to the point that my body rebels and my legs start kicking without my commanding them. I seek that moment of terror, when the urgent need to breathe starts to give my soul cramps and I feel all my little veins tingling, plucking at my skin. I resist without giving in to my craving for air, while my throat is crying out and my hands are trying to find a grip on the edge of the bath. Resist a little longer. My heart is echoing so loud it sounds like it’s baying and the surface of the water changes color as my eyes feel as though they are about to be switched off. Deep inside my belly there is another Adele Centini who is screaming like a siren, yelling at me to open my mouth and take a deep breath. But I don’t give in to her. She goes crazy, banging her forehead against the walls of her prison down there. If I lost my grip and opened my mouth, I would take in a mouthful of water, tasting like bubble bath. I would be overcome by fear and all my kicking would flood the bathroom, giving Susanna at the Bel Sole another low-season chore.

When I come back up again, it is as if I have been shot up from the depths by the creator. The Adele I have inside fills her lungs with air in one gulp, like someone who is thirsty drinking from the water fountain. Tremors shake my body down to the marrow. I chuckle and realize I am truly diabolic. Holding back my words so that I can get my breath back, I say to myself, “so this is it… you actually want to live… Even though you complain all the time…”

After my cold-water adventure, my body sounds strange, like the clash of metal against metal. I feel as though I am looking at myself from the outside as I place my feet on the bath mat. I reach for my bath robe, twist my hair up into a towel, and look at myself in the mirror. I like what I see. It’s as if I were saying to myself, “despite everything you are still here.” Many other days, I feel so sorry for myself I would like to throw myself out of the window. The same words go through my head, but the echo is different.

I go back to the little porcelain peasant girl. One by one I gather up my ornaments. Room 112 is the same old lake of silence where my movements hardly create a stir.

After my bath, I like ordering a cup of tea, drinking it by the window as Le Case is swallowed by the night. Even the horn of the telephone looks as though it is made of porcelain. To call Susanna I need to dial zero, but my hand shakes. Again, with the impression of being outside myself, I dial the number of this room: 112. It only rings once before it is answered: “Carabinieri”. Gusts of warm wind fill me from within. Finally, I’m giving in to the temptation. “The girl you have been looking for such a long time,” I say. “I know where she is.”

Amico Fritz

Nicodemo Tempesti

pp.320 -322

pp. 326 – 328

I started going down to the Due Porte bar more and more often. When I walked in, people would give me a half-hearted look, but there was always some sneaky comment to go with it. “Here he goes again. If he’d been one of the men killed in the mine explosion it would have been no bad thing. We already have enough village idiots in Le Case.” I didn’t mind them a bit because, by making me out to be an idiot, they gave me cover without even realizing. Anyway, they let me go near the tables where furious battles were always being enacted. I found my corner and stayed there. Cigarette smoke burned my eyes and after a while, since I didn’t utter a word, they would forget I was there. In the meantime, I observed the chess matches. Since I first started coming in here, I’ve been more and more convinced that the catastrophe of the orphanage, the war, deportation, all the skulking around afterwards and, more in general, my whole life, has had only one aim and that was to learn chess.

I was so obsessed I even made my own board. I used pieces of coal for my black players and pebbles for my white side. I had also found one shaped like a horse’s head that I started carrying in my pocket as a good luck charm. All the while, I studied the moves at the tables in the Due Porte bar. I soon started to chafe at the bit: the games were all the same, there was no panache there. Those old men had a precious stone in their hands, with thousands of different faces, and they were only admiring two or three of them. They never looked past their noses. One man would move a knight distractedly and I knew that in four moves there would be checkmate. On the other side of the table, however, there was a similar lack of talent, with the result that the game often went go on for hours with nothing ever happening, unprotected pieces surviving and pawns playacting, being sent blindly to their death.

These men used the chessboard to take their pieces for a stroll rather than to fight real battles. I would die of boredom watching them. It was as if I had a rule book in my jacket pocket, which I had never read and which had been written in one sitting and never been surpassed anywhere in the world, but all around me there was nothing but flocks of goats who were only interested – at best – in eating the pages. Chess gave me power, and yet I was forced to let the power decay inside me. I memorized most of the games and played them my way when I got back home, finally giving vent to my instincts. The matches lasted at most two minutes. Then, one day, there was a brawl.

By then I had understood that the great thing about chess is that it’s all or nothing. Checkmate was like a volley of bullets. You didn’t get over it for days. In the bar, defeat was never taken lightly, partly because the men had started to bet on one or other of the players with shots of grappa. If someone came in the wrong afternoon, they would end up slamming the door, their wallet a lot lighter, yelling that they would only come back to this pig sty of a bar when and if it started raining upwards. This happened with the character I often saw at the bar everyone called Moresco. He had started his day on the wrong foot and carried on losing heavily throughout the afternoon. With a final curse, he lifted the chess table up and tipped all the pieces onto the floor. His adversary had been a handsome man named Pallino, who had a special gift for stirring things up even when he was just saying *buonasera*. He burst into laughter, deep in his gullet, relishing yet another victory, while most of the guys in the bar were pulling the chairs out from under the tables looking for the pieces. Moresco was livid, because losing his cool like that in front of the others was like stripping down to his underpants in public. Pallino’s belly-laugh had sucked the last drop of respect out of Moresco, until he went into a blind rage and lunged towards his adversary, giving him a slap on the face. Somehow, the slap came out badly; it was like the smack of jealous girl. The room went quiet. Pallino cracked up worse than before, and many of the guys in the bar followed suit. The light went out of Moresco’s eyes and he took his rage out on one of them, who had been chuckling in his ear. He shoved him with his shoulder, and almost succeeded in sending him flying. A free-for-all broke out, but nobody was taking it too seriously. The brawl lasted no more than a minute. Moresco picked up his jacket and stalked out, sending the bar and everyone in it to hell. After a moment of silence, phlegmy guffaws filled the room. “Great way to get away without paying your debts,” one of them said. “He’s not fooling me. I take photocopies with my brain, and he owes me three drinks.” Throughout the whole fracas, Pallino’s face never lost its smirk because he had enjoyed crushing the man in his innermost parts. “Next?” he joked. The men said to Pallino that, given the melee, it might be a good idea to put the chess pieces away for the night, together with everyone’s nervousness. Just then, the whole bar went as quiet as a grave. I had appeared out of nowhere, and I had sat down in Moresco’s place, placing the chess pieces into their starting positions. Pallino looked at me, the same smirk on his lips. The only thing he said was, “Today I’ve been kissed by a saint. More shots are on the way.” Then he lost nine times in a row.

[…]

I first noticed Samuele when he first noticed me. He appeared out of the blue one ordinary morning, walking into the Due Porte bar with that grim look on his face. His school backpack was hanging off one shoulder. He slung it under a table and slumped into a chair. He was all of thirteen years old.

We grew fond of the boy, especially because he had no desire whatsoever to make friends with anyone of his own age. He was a stray mutt, full of rage, which was a symptom of all the things he wouldn’t have known how to express. He would get upset by the way the bullies treated him, beating the life out of him in the school corridors and on the bus. “I’ll smash their heads in,” he would say all the time, but he never managed because, every time he tried, he was fenced in by the others and his hatred melted into fear. It was safer to wriggle his way out of the scrum, the ugly words shouted by the kids from his contrada raining down on him like stones.

I remember his defeat a few years back. It was at the Due Porte, where I found him sitting in front of me. I used to allow anyone who had never had the chance to play to challenge me, since I knew how to move the pieces as an opponent. I had thought about him every now and then, especially after the knocks I had taken from the new generation. Samuele was the first one to surprise me with a checkmate. From then on, I started to lose my talent. It wasn’t the boy’s fault, but he somehow personified the beginning of my downfall. That might be why I didn’t have much sympathy for him when he left.

In the deadly hours of the early afternoon, we used to be like a little family: me, Maso, and him. As time went by, he started to open up, telling us about his old grandmother and the father he had never met. He never spoke about his mother and we soon understood where the wave of anger that washed over him at all hours had originated: in his early abandonment. Samuele felt as if he had been picked up and thrown away like a cigarette butt. I recognized my younger self in him, during all those years in the orphanage when I would stare at the shadows of the big windows at night in the deafening silence of the dormitory, and try to drive away the idea that I was destined to live a life floating on nothing because I had no roots. Or again, I would feel as if I was disappearing, a lump forming in my throat whenever I thought about my mother, a woman who had been capable of leaving crying bundled-up baby on the sidewalk, right on the edge of the sewage ditch. To my mind, however poor you are, nothing can justify something like that. Samuele had the same cross as me to bear, which made him walk with clenched fists without even noticing. At least I had had chess to help me come back to life, and I still went around with that pebble shaped like the head of a horse in my pocket. I had found a safe haven in the game because it opened up infinite new routes for me. One day, with a little trepidation, I placed the chessboard in front of him. I felt my heart burst when I recognized in his gaze the same light I had seen decades before in my own eyes. I soon realized that Samuele harbored the same destiny as me, but that he would be able to build vast new worlds with it. He moved castles and bishops and galloped with the knights. As if he were redesigning the board.

In the end, I found myself wearing the mask that Tancredi had put on for me. I taught Samuele the best way to kill his adversaries on the checkered board. Once he’d learned to appreciate the sweet feeling that came from that kind of blood sport, he became ruthless. In provincial tournaments, he would annihilate his peers, brought in by parents convinced they had given birth to a phenomenon. He never boasted about his victories, though. He just wanted more. He would study his latest opponent from afar and then lean over towards me. “Nine moves,” he would say, without even touching any of the pieces, just by observing the way the player walked or looked around him. Nine moves later and the kid would be sobbing into his mother’s skirt. Samuele was cold-blooded. His method revealed a great deal about his character: he would create chaos and disorient anyone who challenged him, including me. Then, he would divide the board up into strips and go after his trophies one by one. Checkmates were the unexpected result of an operation, usually wrapped up by the fifth or sixth move. He would then swoop in and win the final battle, point-blank like a rifle shot.

They were good years, despite the bitterness underlying them. Little by little, Samuele created a new character for himself outside the chessboard, bringing to the outside world the same sharp- sightedness he applied to the game. He also brought me back to life and allowed me to discover both the dark and the bright side of chess by training the natural talent of a genius. Despite the recoil life had reserved for me, my days were full of light because under the muddy waters of my everyday routine, there was a new language which was ours and ours alone. We spent whole afternoons at the table without saying a word. We would then go back home together, dragging our feet like mercenaries after a bloodied battle.

When he started to move away from me, I drowned myself in drink. Samuele fell in love with city life, and he had to keep up his studies after all the love his grandmother had showered on him. He would sometimes come by and make a date for a match, but he never came and the match would always be between me and myself in the corner of the Due Porte bar. Until one day he simply vanished, taking everything away with him.

Samuele Radi

The Monster

pp. 438 – 442

When I was a boy, Nonna Esedra didn’t like seeing me hunched over a chess game. It upset her to see me staring at the board for a whole hour, my hands in my lap, without ever touching a piece. She didn’t give a damn about the game even when I came home from my tournaments, laden with cups and medals. “God knows what you see in those little squares,” she would mutter without expecting any response. As a consequence, she couldn’t stand Tempesti, who, in her eyes, filled my head with garbage. “You’re not going to solve the problem of not having a father by listening to the gibberish of a desperate man like him,” she once blurted out. Saying this had hurt her; I could see by the way she was holding back her tears. Then, one day, she changed her tactic. She would bring me a silver tray with a white napkin folded into four laid out on it. On the white napkin was a small blue pill shaped like a sunflower seed. Handing me a glass half-filled with water, she would say, “Dr. Salghini has diagnosed the problem that is depriving you of your sleep. With this you will go down deep until tomorrow morning.”

She was convinced that my insomnia was the cause of my attacks. They came out of nowhere: I did things and said things and then I would come back to my senses without remembering anything. It happened more often when I was being tormented. Life at school was a case in point because kids of a certain age are animals and I often came home with a note from the teacher or with a suspension letter. It was a double torture: I was accused of doing things I had no memory of, or saying things I had no idea about… or, perhaps, I would punch someone’s nose after yet another nasty comment. Or again, I would shout out obscenities at a schoolmate or teacher who happened to be on my street at the wrong time. Nonna Esedra went to speak to the headmaster with the expression of an army general. “It’s not Samuele’s fault,” she would say, with me standing next to her. “Those bad boys and naughty girls are the ones provoking him.”

The pills had the desired effect but I lost all my talent. They took a veil away from my eyes. I grew more solid; I could feel it right the way up to the roots of my hair. And I slept like a log. But if someone stuck a chessboard in front of me first thing in the morning, I was run-of-the-mill. There was no longer any magic in me. My face was colorless until the evening, when the glow appeared like a warm shiver. The world shifted minutely and I was my old self again. I would lock myself in my room and start moving the pieces around but, often no less than half an hour later, Nonna Esedra would scream up the stairs like a bird of prey: “Dinnertime” Come down!” And with desert, came the silver tray.

Taking my medicine didn’t change the behavior of those wild packs of kids who tortured me, especially the older ones who lay in wait for me at the back of the bus. But at least I wasn’t surrounded and beaten up for something I didn’t remember. There were even some periods of calm when everybody seemed to forget about me. They kept me at a distance, in any case. I had become the weird guy who might pounce at any moment. Even the teachers called me up to the blackboard with a different tone of voice after handing back my homework.

When I played chess, I built new worlds. Both sides were equal to begin with. Then something took place, already at the fourth or fifth move, if not before. Just like life. I loved the matches that surprised me, the ones where I had to use all my skills for both the whites and the blacks. I would lose myself in a labyrinth of opportunities and sacrifices, ruthless strategies and breathless recoveries. I had no use for technique; it was like walking, you don’t think about it. What I loved about the game was the strenuous battle I engaged in against a Samuele Radi who was inside me and opposite me at the same time. It was great because I would always win, but I also lost every time, beyond repair. All I wanted was to outperform myself, at least there on the old wooden board, where getting stuck was worse than being knocked out by a novice with a checkmate. Just like life.

Nonna Esedra’s pills took my shine away. I could easily have tricked her and gone into the bathroom to spit the medication out. But I couldn’t keep making trouble for her with my uncontrolled rage. Keeping myself calm kept the woman who had brought me up on her own, without me wanting for anything, in a good mood. It was important to keep Nonna Esedra happy because she was beginning to feel her age. Good humor was better medicine than the injections she took for her osteoporosis, which was giving her trouble, especially in her hip. Anyway, Dr. Salghini always said my problem would soon go away. He said it was normal at my age, that it was just a way to assimilate the trauma of being abandoned.

But it didn’t go away, and I was almost twenty. I could feel it in my college room where I took refuge after lectures. I could hear the TV blaring in the sitting room because Mrs. Volpileoni was hard of hearing and didn’t know it. I would knock at the door and find her sitting in front of a wooden tray. She would point at the piping hot cup of tea and the box of cookies. “You need fuel for your brain,” she would say. Every other day, Nonna Esedra would call at 6 o’clock on the dot. “Did you take your pill?” she would ask, without even saying hello. “Yes,” I would always answer, without ever having to lie. Rather, if I ever noticed I had missed a dose, I would immediately take a little sunflower seed out of the blister and wash it down; perhaps, with some of that tea I had left on my desk to grow mold. I never drank my landlady’s tea. As soon as it got dark, I would open the window on the first floor and pour it out onto the quiet road below.

When I was very involved in my studies, or fell asleep without realizing it, I might forget my daily ration. Once, in a lecture, the whole class was staring at me while the professor called me out. “Do you think you’re funny or something?” I collected all my things and ran out of the lecture hall without having any idea what I’d done. I never found out.

One evening, Mrs. Volpileoni came and knocked on my door after her usual ringing. When I opened it, she was standing there with a pained expression on her face. She looked at me for a second and then, searching for the right words, he said, “Samuele, why don’t you sit down for a minute…?”

Nonna Esedra was found on the lower steps of San Bastiano, which are as high as benches. She looked as though she was just sitting there, like many of the old ladies do at Friday market to have a rest before setting out on the last leg of their climb up to the old town.

“She looked lost in her thoughts,” Divo told me, his jaw clenched. “Her eyes were open and everything …’Nice day, my dear Esedra’, I said to her. There was no answer. So, I tried again: ‘Esedra, I’m talking to you. What’s so interesting down on the ground?’ Then it was all a discovery I wish I hadn’t had to make … She looked lost in her thoughts, that’s all … poor Esedra. And then, look what happened.”

I felt as if I’d been sent to the slaughter house. That was the day I decided to stop taking my medication. I put an end to everything that day. I threw myself into my work and left my rented room at Mrs.Volpileoni noisy house, where the TV split your eardrums as soon as you walked into the hall. I went to restaurants where I ate and drank too much, and I could have been arrested for disturbing the public peace now that I was old enough for handcuffs. And yet, nothing happened. I went back to my den in via Roma, feeling crushed, but at least, without my medication, my light had started shining again. I took the chess pieces out again and started rebuilding my universe, in the eternal battle between me and myself. Since I was a little crazy, I had convinced myself that, if I managed to beat myself, I would learn the secret that commands things. One of those secrets that can bring back the dead.