Notte di vento che passa

(lit. “Night of passing wind”)

By Milena Agus

Translation by Olivia Jung

To tell you what happened this year, I will have to use the past tense.
The events didn’t happen that long ago but they feel so far in time, and so much of my life has changed since then, that you will agree with me: this last year feels like ages ago.

Autumn and then winter

Chapter 1

My mother always used to say: “We are poor! We are poor!” She was convinced of it because people in town called us *gentixedda* (translator’s note, t/n: little people, wretches). My father was often unemployed and she was an illegitimate daughter. When she was still a young girl, my grandmother used to send her to clean other people’s homes after she dropped out of school.

For Mom, we were the emblem of human misery. But even poverty depends on the point of view, and maybe we weren’t that poor after all.

I was the oldest child and I could afford not to have to go to work, I went to a high school specialized in classical studies. We ate three times a day, we lived in town, in our grandmother’s

house, and aside from having a roof over our heads we also had a TV set, a washing machine, a refrigerator, and even a car (although we never knew if it would work or not).

So I think that Mom was only poor when it came to hopes and dreams.

She didn't hope for a world that was more welcoming and fairer, so she didn't care about politics. She didn't particularly love Sardinia, let alone our town, which she considered a wretched place, and she struggled to move away. She never appreciated the qualities of anything, only its defects.

I basically did the same but the other way around: I "fictionalized," like my literature professor used to suggest. I used my imagination to embellish the original models of things, people, and situations to make them more fascinating.

Dad was a dreamer as well. He liked to paint and, even though his paintings were gloomy and dark, he was an optimist.

When he was out of work, he was a housekeeper: he cooked, he cleaned the house, he ran errands, but he didn't buy the groceries because Mom wanted to be present for that, otherwise he would spend too much money.

According to Mom, we were unlucky. My little brother was born by accident several years after me. He would stay peacefully in his high-chair or on a blanket on the floor with some toys, and he would smile with his big black shiny eyes and his chubby little mouth.

There wasn't a toddler as beautiful and as sweet as ours. But, at the age of three, he didn't make a sound, he couldn't stand up on his own, and he didn't even crawl.

The doctors said that he was healthy, that his vocal cords weren't damaged, his legs and his back were straight and strong, and with time he would talk and walk. We were starting to think that time would never come.

When he was born, he wailed night and day, but at a certain point he started to smile and wave his chubby little hands, showing that he liked everything around him. All of a sudden and for absolutely no reason, that screaming baby had turned into a very sweet and silent child.

You could take my brother everywhere. Even though he was only three years old, he understood situations and, although he was mute, he expressed himself with very appropriate and eloquent gestures. He paid a lot of attention, the little mute with rosy cheeks; he followed everything and never missed a thing.

My mother couldn't understand this son of hers. She used to think that he was brain-damaged and it made her want to die. She said that I would have to raise him if she died, now that I was grown-up and sensible.

According to Mom, the reason we were unlucky depended on the fact that we lived in that *corno di forca* (t/n: remote and hard-to-reach place), and moreover in her mother's home; when she wasn't there, Mom would start her tirade, saying that even a basement, a hut, an attic, any hole would have been better than living there. And after insisting day in and day out, she convinced us to move to Cagliari at the beginning of my last year of high school.

Mom and I wouldn't have to wake up at dawn anymore to catch the first bus headed to town. She would have more energy to clean people's houses, I would be more awake for class, and Dad would have more opportunities to find a job.

Above all, Grandma wouldn't be there bossing everyone around.

Despite all the advantages she listed, Mom wasn't able to convince me, and the day we moved to Cagliari I left with a heavy heart. We were following the truck that contained all of our belongings and I felt like we were the most forlorn family in the world.

I consoled myself by "fictionalizing" reality. I recited Lucia's "Farewell to the Mountains" from *The Betrothed*: after all of her trials and tribulations, at least she managed to return to her hometown.

Mom was born from an affair my grandmother had with a married man. A relationship that she always passed off as a great love story with a man who was buried in Cagliari's cemetery and who died before he was able to legitimize his daughter.

When we talked about him with the family, Grandma wanted Mom to call him "my poor father" and me to call him "my poor grandfather," to distinguish him from the grandfather who was still alive, the paternal one: he had been absent from our lives because he never wanted anything to do with an illegitimate daughter-in-law.

Until, almost fifty years later, for mysterious reasons, Grandma revealed that our "poor father, poor grandfather" was alive; he was recently widowed and had a legitimate family in Cagliari.

Although my grandmother always feigned indifference for people's opinions, that was when we found out that she had lied for her entire life, passing Mom off as the daughter of a dead man.

We didn't understand the reason for that revelation. Or why, almost half a century later, Grandma insisted on introducing us to the family of a father whom my forty-five-year-old mother had never seen in her life.

But then we figured it out. After we moved to Cagliari, Grandma had suddenly seen the cold hard reality: her daughter's family was poor and that (very) close relative of ours was loaded with money.

But she didn't want to meet her old paramour, his legitimate daughter, and his son-in-law.

"They are your relatives," she stated, "not mine."

Meeting our supposed relatives should have been very meaningful, but it wasn't at all.

The villa where they lived was a real villa, near the beach of Poetto in Cagliari. A gate protected it from the street, and the building was surrounded by a beautiful garden with a fountain in the middle.

Before arriving at the actual entrance of the villa, you had to go down a gravel path that led to a staircase with a marble balustrade and a loggia with large windows, where there were wrought-iron tables and chairs, and some chaises longues.

That is where our first meeting took place, on the edge of one of those lounge chairs. Dad, Mom holding my baby brother in her arms, and I, standing there as if we were posing for a photo.

From the veranda, looking through the tall French windows decorated with little colorful pieces of glass, we could see the floor of the entrance hall, made of tiles arranged in a kaleidoscopic configuration. The back of the hall was crowned with arches supported by white wood with a sunburst pattern, and more French windows overlooking the back garden.

My alleged grandfather, his real daughter, her husband (his real son-in-law), and his real granddaughter (who was more or less my age) welcomed us with aloof politeness.

It was a short visit. My grandfather was in a foul mood, maybe because he was recently widowed; or maybe because he would have gladly avoided meeting us if Grandma hadn't forced him. I didn't particularly like him.

He was a sophisticated man, the kind who walked around the house with a cocktail in his hand, constantly adding an ice cube to his glass. The type of man who waited for his guests in expensive slippers, to make you think that he didn't get all dressed up for you, but his elegance was simply innate.

I also didn't particularly like the way my aunt talked: it was stiff, as if she had just come from a diction class.

I didn't utter a single word and just minded my own thoughts. For instance, how my alleged aunt and cousin were neither pretty nor ugly and, in the end, in this misfortune, I was lucky to look like Grandma.

Mom, instead, was smitten by her father, her sister, and her niece. Later on, she wouldn't stop talking about how kind they had been, praising the elegance of the villa, the furniture, the beautiful view overlooking the sea, and the warm light that gently enveloped everything.

When the phone rang, she would rush to answer it. She was hoping for a second invitation, or perhaps another meeting with her father, and maybe some financial assistance as well. After all, she was his daughter, Grandma assured us of it; and he had made his vast wealth in the dairy sector, even though I had never seen his name on any of our products.

Dad didn't say a word about that meeting for days. Until he suddenly snapped and said that, as far as he was concerned, that was the first and last time he would ever set foot inside that place. They were our relatives, not his.

"Forgive me," he added ironically, "I said *inside*, I was wrong, because they actually kept us *outside* on the veranda, sitting on an artichoke. So much the better. I wouldn't want to live in that villa even if they paid me. As soon as I walked in, I would have to wear a formal suit, even just to stay at home; I would have to lift the tails of my dress coat to sit at the table, like the musicians at great gala concerts. I would finally feel free only when I'd leave to go out. Don't you believe me?"

"I believe you, Dad," I said. "I also wouldn't want to live in a place like that. The only nice thing about it is the view on the beach of Poetto, but you don't have to live there to enjoy it, you just have to take the P bus."

We hoped that Mom would find us amusing but she just stared at us like two aliens who were incapable of understanding how the world works.

Thinking about it with a little bit of common sense, those close relatives of ours weren't wrong about being so aloof with us. Where did we come from? The distant past of a woman who was now old, whose existence was only known to their grandfather; she suddenly appeared out of nowhere and, on top of that, with an illegitimate daughter.

They had received us politely. I think they believed that we wouldn't show up again after that. But Grandma insisted that Mom, my brother, and I go back to visit them regularly.

They tried everything to avoid us, often in a clumsy way. We would usually give advance notice of our visits; but if it was out of the blue, I always had the impression that they pretended they weren't at home.

When we were at the gate ringing the intercom, nobody would answer. The second floor was the only part of the house visible from the street. If it was evening, we would see the lights go out immediately and, if it was day, we would see a shadow disappear from one of the windows.

So we would call the house phone. The first time it would ring, and then it would be disconnected. I always suspected that they had seen us and pretended not to be at home.

The worst was during special occasions or on holidays. We weren't invited, of course, and my mother would say: "They are so mean! They don't consider us part of the family, it's a slap in the face." Then, referring to her father, she would add: "And yet, I'm his daughter! And you are his grandchildren!"

My mother would cry about it, she would have bouts of depression so heavy that she couldn't hide them from Dad, who would insist on asking about the reason for those crises. So she would start by claiming, in tears, that it was the holidays in general that made her feel that way; but then she would end up confessing the real reason for her desperation.

"It's terrible that my sister doesn't want to spend the holidays with me and our family."

"Stepsister," Dad would say, correcting her. "Use the right words, stepsister."

She didn't have much luck when it came to relatives. Dad's family never accepted her either. Those grandparents never considered her a daughter-in-law, the aunts and uncles never saw her as a sister-in-law. They were poor, but they thought of themselves as respectable people, not *gentixedda*, wretches.

So, since we didn't live in the same town, they invited us less and less over time, until they stopped altogether.

I was just a little girl the last time they saw us and they barely even knew my brother existed.

Thinking about it would make my mother sick, she would say that she wanted to kill herself. The only thing that stopped her was my little brother, mute and paralyzed.

If the Lord had even a little bit of mercy, He would let her die of a disease, sparing her from committing a sin as terrible as suicide and intentionally abandoning her disabled son.

After all, many women her age would get cancer and discover it too late to do anything about it.

Life was such a pain! What a relief it would be to give up and die, and not have anything else to do with this unfair world that gives everything to many people and nothing at all to others.

But since the Lord insisted on not making her disappear and our misfortune proved that He didn't like us, she got mad at Him and decided to abandon the church and become an atheist.

I was her only hope of redemption because I excelled at school. So, to alleviate her suffering, I would make up stories about imaginary visits to that grandfather, aunt, and cousin, telling her how affectionate they were with me and my little brother.

But in reality, the few times I actually went to see them, when they weren't able to hide in time or disconnect the phone, they were anything but welcoming. When the little mute reached out with his hands to hug them with a smile on his chubby little face, those relatives of ours (including our alleged grandfather) would retreat in fear; it was as if they were scared of contracting something that would make them lose the use of their words and legs.

I didn't want them to think that, after almost half a century, Grandma had sought out her former lover for money. It was just for sentimental reasons, to put some order in the confusion and carelessness that seem to govern human relationships.

So I would "fictionalize," telling stories of a family that was in want for nothing. Instead, we needed help, and how, from an extremely wealthy grandfather. We needed him to recognize my mother as his legitimate daughter, with all that it entailed: for instance, a shopping cart full of food and delicacies. Instead, under Mom's strict supervision, our cart was always half empty when it reached the cash register.

Dad would return to the grocery store by himself with the excuse of going for a walk to get some fresh air. He would buy something prohibited and furtively eat it on the street.

He wasn't buying any kind of extravagant delicacies. He would just get a piece of Parmesan cheese, or a small puff pastry pizza like the ones you only find in Cagliari, or some slices of prosciutto, or a little bag of pistachios. Things like that, which weren't allowed in our house because they were considered too expensive.

If Mom discovered him, because he had a crumb stuck in his beard, or a pistachio shell in his pocket, it turned into a state affair.

Back in our old town, Grandma always paid our bills. But now, when they arrived, Mom would wander around the house at night sleeplessly.

She would sit at the edge of my bed, and I would hear her whisper: "My good girl, poor thing, she doesn't deserve this."

Dad, instead, wasn't so dramatic. He would make a joke when his stomach rumbled from hunger, or about the fact that he was so skinny that he looked like a branch wearing clothes.

He faced our poverty with defiant cheerfulness. But his paintings were made of broken glass, metal wires, chipped stones, sand, seeds, thorns, painted bark, cuttlefish bones, sea urchin tests, feathers, quicklime, cabbage leaves, and terracotta. They were clearly the work of a man who was broken inside.

Chapter 2

Since I "fictionalized" my life, there were certain things from my imagination that seemed more real than reality.

I could only talk about the cold hard reality with a classmate from school. Our professor called him Abya Yala because he used to spend his holidays working in camps in Africa, or Latin America, at *Abya Yala*, which was the indigenous populations' name for "land in full bloom."

Abya Yala didn't send us postcards of beautiful places. He used to send us pictures of himself in the middle of garbage, surrounded by a humanity with toothless smiles, smallpox-riddled skin, and trachoma-infected eyes.

Of course, according to him, my family wasn't poor compared to the people who lived down there. And, in the end, he was right. Meat still appeared on our table, even if it was just a bone to make broth, and we still had fish like mackerel, mullets, or sardines whenever they were available. What really helped us out were the vegetables and eggs that I used to bring back every Sunday from the garden and henhouse at Grandma's when I would go visit her in our old town.

When he returned from his holidays, Abya Yala used to tell the class what he did back there for those desperate children. How they looked for food in landfills, slept under market stalls, and inhaled glue fumes (or worse) so they wouldn't feel hungry.

He would come back to school long after classes had started again. He would walk in and take a wide-legged stance in the middle of our classroom, toss his canvas backpack on his desk, and look around to scope me out.

As soon as he found me, he would smile with almost childlike joy. But the best was when he would come up to me, tussle my hair, pat my cheek, and give me a hug.

And while we celebrated him, we would bring him up to date about what he had missed in the Northern Hemisphere. I thought he was a hero, a kind knight who was trying to make amends to those destitute people for what the Global North had been doing to them for centuries.

Although Abya Yala came from a wealthy family, he was never well-dressed.

He wore canvas shoes with jute rope soles even in the wintertime. His socks would get drenched when it rained, and the smell of mold would linger on him.

He always wore a hat on his head, rain or shine, indoors or outdoors. It was identical to Fidel Castro's hat, the famous *cacuss*, a military-green cap with a visor, which apparently was given to him by the *Lìder Màximo* himself. Abya Yala's family had lived in Cuba for many years; his parents were research chemists, they had worked, studied, and made friends with Castro.

Maybe it was the way he dressed that made Abya Yala seem ugly, but only if you looked at him superficially. I later discovered that his eyes were actually beautiful: they were brown with honey-colored flecks.

Abya Yala didn't like rich people. He didn't pick fights with them, but his disdain came across when he said things like: "Despite being rich, they're good people," or "Despite being rich, they're not assholes."

Abya Yala lived in a large, panoramic, two-floor penthouse surrounded by a terrace that had been turned into a hanging garden.

The place was furnished in a rather strange way. The wood had been replaced with a see-through material, the chandeliers with long thin tubes that adjusted based on your position in the room, the lampshades with soft lights that came directly from the beds' headboards or from the walls. The kitchen was so white and smooth that you wondered where to click in order to open the refrigerator or the oven, or how to make the stove magically appear.

Abya Yala had a small apartment entirely to himself in that house. It was a small tower with recovered furniture where he studied, hung out with his friends, and carried on with his humble life separate from his parents, who lived downstairs and never went up to see him.

Benigna, the housekeeper, would go upstairs. She was always worried that her *fill'e anima* (t/n: her soul child) might need something.

Abya Yala used to invite me often to his house for lunch, that way we could go upstairs afterwards and study together without wasting time.

Like Dad, I was always hungry. Not like the hunger of people who were actually poor. I was hungry for the kind of food that was never on our table.

Mrs. Benigna (what a fitting name for such a benign person) had taken a liking to me. She figured out that it wasn't Cuban food like *ropa vieja*, or *piccadillos*, or fried bananas that I craved: it was the food that was forbidden in my family.

So she paid special attention to me and would place a large platter in front of me filled with every kind of delicacy and high-quality extra virgin olive oil.

In my imagination, everyone in Abya Yala's home embodied the idea of happiness. When Mrs. Benigna was done with work, her husband would come to pick her up; they would kiss and then head home arm in arm.

Abya Yala's parents were also a close-knit couple. They always used the plural "we" when they talked about themselves.

When they invited me over for lunch, every time they poured themselves a glass of wine they would languidly look into each other's eyes and toast with a "Cheers, groom!" and "Cheers, bride!"

Maybe that house oozed with happiness because they had lived in Cuba.

Based on Abya Yala's stories, I got the impression that everyone in Cuba was very happy, especially because there weren't any poor people. Or rather, as he used to say, people were poor like my family, so they weren't really that poor, because everyone ate three times a day, had a roof over their heads, went to school, and got free healthcare. Cuba was basically at the top of Abya Yala's values scale and it didn't resemble any other country in Latin America.

Cubans didn't suffer from depression. Unlike us in the Global North, where some people worked themselves to death, like my mother, and others couldn't find any work, like my father; and others still had money but were depressed, so they tried to lift their spirits by buying stuff that they usually didn't need. Until even that wasn't enough, so they went to bed and stayed there all day, every day of their useless lives.

This didn't happen in Cuba, because there was nothing to buy there, and Cubans would lift their spirits by dancing, singing, and visiting friends to chat, laugh, or eat something together.

It wasn't like here, where you have to cook strange and expensive food when you invite someone over. In Cuba, you invited people over to spend some time together and share even just a bowl of soup.

But, above all, Cubans supported each other. Abya Yala used to tell me that you didn't need every home appliance in the building where they lived. You didn't have a vacuum cleaner? You could ask your neighbor if you could borrow theirs. You ran out of food? They shared what they had.

"There's no need to buy a blender. Or even a toaster. I have them," they would say as soon as you moved into a building. Nobody had everything they needed, they only had some and they would share it.

Neighbors didn't just share objects, they also exchanged many favors. Those with young children always knew people who could look after them.

Abya Yala was two years old when they moved to Cuba, and he was sixteen when they moved back to Italy.

He was homesick at first. He used to go out on the terrace and shout like a child: "I want Cuba! I want Grandpa Fidel! Take me back to Grandpa Fidel!"

Their new neighbors were all wealthy bourgeois. They had started looking at them suspiciously, even though the age of terrorism in Italy was long gone, but they thought that you never knew, just in case.

Abya Yala certainly wasn't a terrorist, but he had the temperament of a revolutionary. He participated in every single protest here in Sardinia: against military easement, the exploitation of shepherds, deforestation, the uncontrolled development of the coastline, the layoffs in this or that company, the ban preventing migrant boats from landing in ports.

That was the reason why he was always in trouble with the police. They often came to our school to pick him up and take him to the precinct but they would have to release him immediately because he hadn't done anything wrong. The most illegal thing he did was stealing a can of paint from a warehouse and writing protest slogans on some walls.

Or, as our literature professor suspected, they released him because not even the police could resist Abya Yala's dialectic and his *No es justo* (t/n: It's not fair).

Or, as I thought, when the police interrogated him, they came to the same conclusion as Pontius Pilate did after questioning Jesus: "This person is a dreamer, not a criminal."

Abya Yala considered me his best friend and loved me, perhaps for the very reason that I was poor and a victim of injustice.

He joined our class during the third year of high school. He interspersed some Spanish in every conversation. But maybe he did it to show his contempt for the Global North, unfair, false, and consumerist.

Even now, after living here for three years, his mottos were still "*No es verdad*," "*No es justo*," and "*Mientras tu consumas perpetras un delito*" (t/n: "It's not true," "It's not fair," and "When you consume, you perpetrate a crime").

I thought that some of the things he said seemed magical, I would fall in love with them, make them mine, and use them any time I could. "You're turning it into a state affair" and "You caused a diplomatic incident" were expressions that I used in my everyday life: usually the state affairs were when Mom lectured me, and the diplomatic incidents were minor mishaps.

Abya Yala was always in a hurry, as if we had a date with History. I am usually slow, so, when we were together, he would urge me by saying: “Come on, hurry up. Do you want to spend your whole life here?” I also fell in love with that expression, I even used it with my little brother, hoping for a miracle along the lines of “Lazarus, rise up and walk.” He would sit on the ground with his toys, make a chubby smile and cover his mouth with his hand, as if he were mocking me.

Abya Yala was the only person to whom I had sworn to always speak the truth. Whenever I told him a story, I would make sure I wasn’t “fictionalizing” anything, so that I wouldn’t break our pact.

“Cosima,” he said with a solemn air, “you’d better always tell me how things really are. Don’t make me worry. It’s hard to keep track of you, I can’t lose sight of you for even one moment.”

With everyone else, instead, I made stuff up all the time. It was an old habit: taking some poetic license to embellish reality. I had always been a true phenomenon when it came to bullshitting.

I drew inspiration from books. I constructed my lies so well that everyone thought they were true and even I ended up believing my version of facts.

Until our literature professor taught us about “fictionalizing” reality. Before that moment, I just felt like a liar. But afterwards, I felt like an artist (no offense to real ones).

Of all the students in my high school, I was the one who most frequently visited the school library. Now that I didn’t have to catch the bus to go back to our town, I would sometimes stay there and read all afternoon; and if there was a book that I couldn’t put down, I would borrow it so I could finish it at home during the night and then bring it back the next day.

The ones I liked the most I couldn’t read just once, but ten or twenty times. I knew them by heart and, in the end, it was as if I lived inside those stories as well.

Sometimes, Abya Yala would surprise me with a visit when I was at the library. He would wander around, look at the titles, and say: “There’s nothing here, you always read the same things.”

“I love re-reading the books I like, learning some of their pages by heart.”

“The walls in my house are covered with books, I can lend you all the ones you want.”

He would list all the books that I could have borrowed from him, but I was a phenomenal reader and already knew them all.

Spring in March

Chapter 6

Springtime arrived. Countryfolk like us who had moved to the city couldn't help but think that it was time to shear the sheep. The time when shepherds helped each other out. But not Costantino Sole, he did everything by himself.

The only thing that was left of the winter that just ended was the occasional rainy day in town and some dark spots amid the fresh bright green.

The streets were covered in dew, shrouded in the golden yellow of the broom, the pale pink of the asphodels, the almond trees, the peach trees, and the cherry trees in bloom. Walking around, I would look up at the frail blue sky and think that the poet Giacomo Leopardi was right when he pondered "*A qual suo dolce amore ride la primavera*" (t/n: "What love it is that brings sweet smiles unto the face of spring").

One day, I accidentally ran into Costantino on his horse.

"Come on up! I'll take you somewhere. Don't worry, I'm not trying to…"

"Oh, of course not… But I've never been on a horse."

"You'd rather give up on something so poetic?" His eyes twinkled at the joke.

"No, no. Help me up."

He lifted me up like a little girl, held me tight, and placed me on the saddle of his steed, which was called Bantine.

The flocks of sheep grazed calmly under the warm sun amid the outbursts of green.

"Here, 'spring smiles sweetly to its love!'" I shouted in his ear, paraphrasing Leopardi.

He bent over the reins, laughing. "Want to gallop?"

"Come on, Costantino…"

"Okay then, let's trot."

Bantine was trotting happily, with her dark and shiny coat, her golden mane and tail.

The plain was a sweet shade of green interrupted by dark rocks, dotted with oak trees bent by the wind. It went up, turning into a hill, and then descended into a valley, a golden yellow heath that was almost black in certain spots from the patches of forest.

We rode through the fields and along a light blue stream, crossing over small bridges, passing by holly oaks, durmasts, oaks, through a fairy tale underbrush of brambles, strawberry trees, and honeysuckles. We reached an area where the spring water rippled down in a series of small waterfalls into ancient pools.

I didn't say it, but when I was hugging him, with my head leaning against his shoulders, I couldn't help but think about how that place reminded me of the forbidden love between Paolo and Francesca, Lancelot and Guinevere, Tristan and Iseult.

Sometimes Costantino and I would meet, pretending it was by chance. Nobody knew about it, except of course for Abya Yala, since we had sworn to always tell each other the truth.

He would advise me not to trust him. That man was too old for me. Moreover, even though he didn't live with his wife anymore, he was still married.

He wasn't trying to lecture me or make my common sense prevail. He hated it, common sense. Nonetheless, he felt that I shouldn't trust him.

"Are you in love?" he asked me.

"Yes, I love him very much."

"How can you tell if you have never been in love? You have nothing to compare it to.

"When you're in love, you realize that it can't be anything else."

"But what do you see in that man?"

"It's as if he came out of *Wuthering Heights*, or *Jane Eyre*, or maybe a western movie. He rides his horse and, when you tell him something, he replies with a couple of words, then turns around and leaves, just like a *High Plains Drifter*. Or maybe, now that I know him better, I think he's more like Konstantin Levin from *Anna Karenina*."

"Cosima, that man worries me."

"Don't call him 'that man,' his name is Costantino."

"Fine. Does this Costantino know that he came out of a western, or the pages of *Jane Eyre*, or *Wuthering Heights*, or *Anna Karenina*? I sincerely hope that I didn't come out of some book…"

"No character comes to mind when I think of you."

"*Mucho mejor así*" (t/n: "So much the better").

I went to town increasingly often, bringing my little mute brother with me. After spending some time with Grandma, I would say that it was getting late and that I couldn't miss the bus.

Instead, I would walk in the direction of Aunt Ausilia's house in hope that I would run into Costantino.

The little mute really liked that pseudo-grandmother. He preferred her to our real one, who didn't pay any attention to him because he couldn't talk or walk; she considered him the latest misfortune that afflicted our family, the glaring proof that God had abandoned us.

Aunt Ausilia, instead, would cover him with *denghi*, what in Sardinia we call mawkish cuddles. But, above all, when I left him with her to take a stroll in town, she always kept him by her side: she would take him with her when she worked in the garden, and also around the house, without caring about the streaks that the stroller left on the polished floors.

She constantly talked to him. Although the little mute couldn't reply, she was convinced (like me) that he was incredibly smart and understood everything. When Aunt Ausilia told him about something that made her sad or happy, he would respond appropriately by crying or rejoicing.

"*Cumprendi d'ognia cosa su pippiu*" (t/n: "You understand everything, my child").

When I would go to mass at the convent of the Capuchin friars on top of the hill, it seemed like nothing up there belonged to the earthly world. The sounds were muffled, nuanced, and the church bells, instead of breaking the silence, amplified it. Sometimes, after it drizzled in March, there would be rainbows similar to halos around the little church.

The reddish roofs, the winding dry-stone walls, the shrubs of prickly pears that served as estate fences, the patches of scrubs and forests in the valley, all lost their material quality and brought you closer to God.

My grandmother didn't want anything to do with it. I had to present arguments on the grandeur of Christianity to convince her.

She would reply annoyed, protesting: "*Lassami sa conca assebiu*," which for us in Sardinia means "Let my head find rest."

One Sunday, when I was in Aunt Ausilia's garden, I saw Costantino sitting on the wall that separated his part of the house from his mother's.

He was wearing a black velvet jacket, a peaked cap, and gaiters. Leaning from the branch of a tall carob tree, it seemed like he was unsuccessfully trying to pierce a silence made of solitude, uncertainty, and melancholy with the music of his harmonica.

"I saw you this morning. Were you going to church?"

"I always go on Sundays."

"Are you scared of going to hell if you miss a mass?"

"No, I'm just curious to hear Jesus' advice for the week and it's a chance to sing a little bit. I really enjoy singing. Would you like to hear something?"

"No thanks… But what happened? Do you stay at my mother's house on Sundays?"

"First, I visit my grandmother, and then I come here. Aunt Ausilia is extremely kind and my brother adores her. Would you like to meet him?"

"I know him."

"But maybe you've never seen him up close."

I went inside to get my little brother and carried him back to the wall.

"Wave hello with your hand. Hi, Mr. Costantino!"

By then, I was drawn to that wall. I always focused my attention on it, carefully listening to every rustle, flutter of wings, waiting for the sound of his harmonica and for Costantino to appear from the thick foliage.

Those melodies didn't seem as melancholic and uncertain as they did at first. Now they seemed capable of piercing the silence, filling the void, and bringing light to the darkness.