

FIORE DI ROCCIA

[*A Flower of the Rocks*]

by ILARIA TUTI

Extract translated by Katherine Gregor

Uncorrected Text

"Anin, sendè chei biadaz ai murin encje di fan."

"Let's go, otherwise those wretches are going to starve to death on top of everything else."

Maria Plozner Mentil (1884 - 15 February 1916)

PROLOGUE

May 1976

She dug the furrows of her hand into those of the soil, in a gesture of tenderness inherent in a return to origins, of a search for roots in the moist depths, twisting them around her fingers and pulling to her whatever was left in a part of the world that had carved a path from the valley all the way up to the peaks.

Carnia had quivered, Friuli had been ripped open and lay bleeding in the dusty silence. The Orcolat – the children of this land reduced to ruins had already rechristened him: the ogre who, legend had it, lived in these stone recesses, had reawakened and shaken humanity off his back. The earthquake had drawn a line on a seismogram that the television news kept broadcasting over and over. If you picked it up and pulled it between three imaginary fingers, this pattern of sharp cusps would have communicated a heart in a state emotional turmoil. A little more tension and it would have suggested the profile of a mountain.

The woman looked up at the summits and it was like resuming a never eradicated habit, like being once again outlined amid distant, long abandoned furrows.

She had not seen her home for decades. She had travelled across oceans only to return to where it had all begun, now that everything seemed erased. And yet her eyes still managed to follow the ancient walkways of the haymaking season, which wound steeply to the low-yielding pastures. The pal was up there, beyond the woods, with its crown of rocks and trenches. Never again just a wretched pasture, but a blessed shrine.

The rubble slid between her fingers together with the soil. She recognised the call of the valley in the wind.

And the recollection of what had been flowed in her veins once more.

1. THE CALL

June 1915, the war

When I was a child, I saw a pack of wolves in these mountains.

My father pointed at them between the snow-laden tree branches, beyond the rise that concealed us. A single file peregrinating on the opposite bank of the stream. I convinced myself I could sense their smell in the wind. I can still remember it: wet fur and wandering life, a warm pungency, the song of wild blood.

The rifle stayed over my father's shoulder and not loaded with death.

"You can't eat wolves," he said to me in a whisper that bore the marks of his booming voice. He had a wide chest and I loved feeling it jolt under my cheek whenever he burst out laughing.

With these words, he explained everything and equipped me with a law of life and an awareness I have never lost. He always knew man's place in this world.

The animals scratching the ice with weary claws looked nothing like those in fairy tales. They were skinny and hunched over. Golden eyes on muzzles made sharp by hunger, like ours.

The bitter cold was thrashing all God's creatures that winter.

The wolf at the head of his companions was limping and the female following him had exhausted udders that brushed against the ground. The two younger specimens were little older than pups and their bearing betrayed their anxiety: they knew they would not be able to take care of themselves. All the coats spoke of hardship and exhaustion, with large patches that revealed the curves of their ribs beneath the skin.

My fear turned to pity. It was a sickly pack, a dying pack.

Never did I see the wolves on this land again. Even now, as an adult, I wonder what became of them. And yet it is as though they are in front of my eyes right now. Their features are human and are here in this church as the priest douses the stale air with incense. Almost all the pews are empty. The bowed heads belong to women and a few children. The invalids have stayed at home. There are no more able-bodied men in Timau. War has broken out.

A jolt of the portal makes us turn, just like animals on alert. An officer walks in, with a brisk step, his boots striking the holy floor. He goes up to the priest without giving him time to come down from the pulpit. War is a defiler and this son of hers lives up to her legacy. We watch his mouth, his thin lips, utter words that only the two of them can hear.

When Don Flor eventually addresses us, he looks upset.

"The battalions drawn up in the Carnia area are in trouble," he announces. "The logistics and engineering commands are asking for our help. They need strong backs to provide a link with the depots down in the valley."

The generals and strategists at Supreme Command have at last realised something farmers and woodcutters have always known: there are no carriageways leading up to the spurs, or tracks for taking up food supplies and ammunition by mule. The lines of defence are isolated on the peaks, thousands of young men are already reduced to exhaustion, and this is just the beginning. Last night I dreamt of them, steeped in blood. They were flowing away like pale flowers carried downstream by a crimson current.

The priest's voice quivered as it appealed for our help and I know why. He feels shame. He knows what he is asking of us. He knows what it means to climb those unforgiving slopes for hours, and doing it with grenades thundering over your head like the wrath of God.

Next to him, the officer is facing us but never looks us in the eye. He should. He would realise what he has before him. These tired she-wolves and hungry pups.

He would see the dying pack that we are.

2. A CIRCLE OF WOMEN

We gathered in the dark once the animals, the fields and the bedridden elderly had no more needs to be met. I thought about how we are used always to being defined through someone else's needs. Even now we have emerged from oblivion only because they need our legs, our arms and our backs, toughened by work.

In the silent barn, we are eyes searching for other eyes, in a circle of women of all ages. Some have a child clinging to their breast. Others are little older than girls, if you are still allowed to be one these days, or ever have been allowed to, in this harsh land that never grants anything for nothing. I look at my hands: not those of the ladies I read about in my father's books. Cracked fingernails, splinters that have formed callouses and a lattice of wounds clotted atop one another. In some, the soil has penetrated deeply and become flesh. There is more of me in the furrows of the fields than in the bloodline of my ancestors.

My companions are no different, their bodies forged by the toil we live with every day. Born with a debt of work on their shoulders, my mother used to say, a debt shaped like the conical wicker basket we use for rocking our children as well as carrying hay and potatoes.

The glow from the oil lamp turns us into quivering borders between light and shade, between desire and obligation. We are not used to asking ourselves what it is we really want, but tonight, for the first time, we will have to.

"They've only just allowed us to come back to our homes and now we have to go back out to risk our lives?"

Viola is voicing everybody's thoughts. She and I were born on the same Christmas night, in 1895, and feel like sisters, but she has always had more of a silver tongue than I.

"They've worked out that living in the last town before the border and speaking a German dialect doesn't mean you're on the side of the invaders," Caterina mutters. "It's never too late." She is the eldest among us and apparently the calmest. It is as though she cannot be dented, like the hardest stone and a stone that has been motionless since she joined us, hunched in her dark, mourning clothes, her downy, white-streaked hair gathered in a low bun. In actual fact, under her shawl, her fingers, knotty like river wood, have never stopped knitting.

"Of course they're suspicious of us!" Viola replies. "Why else send our men to the Karst Plateau instead of the mountains they're familiar with?"

Caterina silences her without ever looking up from the sock taking shape between her knees. "You don't have a husband, Viola, or a fiancé either. Maybe that's why you're angry. Where are you going to find someone willing to take you now?"

The younger women laugh while the others allow themselves a smile as fleeting as a timid thrush, as though it is disgraceful to forget about death even for a second. Perhaps it is wrong or perhaps it is necessary.

Viola retreats, stung by a dart meant to be kind.

"There are still some men around," she says, so subdued she seems to want to cheer herself up. Her eyes flee the control of her will and search for me. I know who she is thinking of and so do the others: for months she has been consumed by Francesco's attentions towards me. Please God this unrequited interest doesn't push her away from me.

Quiet until now, Lucia comes to our rescue with the maternal instinct she has had ever since she was a little girl and took care of us, her juniors by a few years.

"Maybe you'll meet a handsome *Alpino* up there, on the peaks," she says.

We burst out laughing and I finally feel like I can breathe, but silence quickly returns to our mouths. I can almost taste it: it has a slimy texture and the salty taste of doubt: the more you eat of it the more you crave it, until your lips become dry and your throat parched. It has dried up every life impulse.

On this anxious night we surface from the darkness as though accustomed to it, except that we are not. We have large, bright eyes, sunken bellies and strong backs wrapped in the traditional black shawls. The skirts we wear for everyday chores, hems darkened with soil, still carry the smell of the milking before vespers.

I have known each and every one of them forever but this is the first time I have seen them frightened. Cannons are barking in the mountains around Timau. It's the devil clearing his throat, Maria once said, fingering the rosary beads she never parts with.

I wonder how we can possibly decide our fate like this, surrounded by this mouldy hay that will not be replaced by fragrant hay in the summer, since none of us will go up to scythe it on the ridges.

Lucia holds her sleeping child tight in her arms, so strong and loving they could hug the entire world. Even though she is young, her quiet strength has always been a point of reference among us, and now more than ever. I notice the black rings under her eyes and am about to ask her if she has eaten anything more than a potato. She receives eighty *centesimi* a month for her husband who is fighting on the Karst Plateau, and thirty for each of her four children. Not enough.

"I'll go," Lucia suddenly steps ahead of me. "Agata, what do you want to do?"

For a moment, I cannot find the words. It is so hard to pick them, blended as they are with uncertainty and fear, mixed in a pact of obedience and care nobody has ever demanded