**NIENTE PER LEI**

**By Laura Mancini**

**Partial translation by Lucy Rand**

1943 – The Shelter

*Rome, San Lorenzo*

Did you bring the money?

No, she hadn’t brought it.

He looked at her with two burnt coins in place of his eyes, and said nothing.

Rosa jumped to her feet and stormed out of the shelter. Nobody in the room tried to stop her because it was only fair that she should try to retrieve it: that money had been earned by the sweat of her husband’s brow.

When the door reopened everyone turned to look at her. She no longer had one of her shoes, she said if I went back to get it now I’d be under the skylight.

I saw my father shrug his shoulders at Elio the Second, like a cushion being plumped before a good night’s sleep. But he was just a child, nothing like the woman who had just lost a shoe while running down the stairs with the money stuffed into the fabric of her skirt. As large as she was, with Silvano in her stomach. The second thing I observed were Saverio’s hands, stretched towards the maternal neck while the rest of his little body moved beyond, searching hesitantly for some kind of confirmation on the disturbed face of Rosa, our mother. Finding there only an ugly fringe, over-pruned and glued in clumps to her temples by the humidity, above an extraordinarily wild gaze that scoured the room, my brother burst into tears, terrified of the secrets of grown-ups.

I was the only one who remained calm.

Both cousins were pressed up against the wall with vacant expressions on their faces. They reminded me of Ciccio, our neighbour’s calf. After buying him at the fair in Viterbo, the calf went crazy because they kept him in the courtyard at home. All of us children from the building would play farms and horsies, taking it in turns to put him through torture with no respite. I wondered how my mother would deal with all that was to come with just one shoe but, finding no answer, I turned my attention elsewhere. The shelter didn’t offer any grand surprises, we always fled to the same one when the sirens rang and by this point I knew it inside out. The greenish walls, the metal bench, the little table with the water and the cloudy glasses stacked up in a tall, lopsided tower. That was everything, there was little left for the imagination, no fairy tales, no adventures, just modest disgraces, like ours.

However, what happened that day clashed entirely with the cycle of evacuating and waiting that we had become used to: the bombs, on that day, were destroying streets, bringing down whole buildings, shattering train lines, splitting bridges in half. I didn’t know, there was no way I could’ve known, that in that very moment the life we had had before ended for ever, and nobody, not even my father, had any idea of what life would be like after. But a voice inside my head warned me: it’s different now, you are different, your parents are different, everything will change. Not wanting to succumb to the sadness that was mounting beneath my sternum, I decided to do a thorough undercover inspection of that room full of mystery and sorrow. I would say “hole” to myself every time I found one along the green wall. It was a strange colour; too different from the honey and saffron of the walls at home and too similar to the thick grass of the Campo Verano where grandmother’s body lay. I knew all too well that if I had dared to make an observation like that out loud – I already had some idea of what was right and wrong, even at six years old – I would have been scolded, perhaps even hit. Don’t you dare go thinking about that in a situation like this and what the hell do you know about houses and colours, one of the grown-ups would’ve shouted at me. And so, in those circumstances as well as in others that life had in store for me, I kept quiet.

It was May’s rent, the money my mother had just retrieved. The night before, the landlord had said Mr Giusè, you’re tired, I’m tired, give it to me tomorrow and we won’t mention it again. And it soon became clear that it wouldn’t be mentioned again, the house was collapsing with the rest of the neighbourhood, and who knows where the landlord was at that time, who knows if he was still alive. I remembered perfectly the moment my father returned with the wad of cash still untouched, swollen in his pocket. It was dusk and the dining room was washed in the yellow of the last of the day’s light. Once that had run out, we would light the candles stolen from the church – see’n as you’re unemployed by chance and crooked by nature, you’ll do this job, your mother had snorted at uncle Antonio, and he hadn’t begged or pleaded, he relished the task. While my father, looking pensive, rummaged in his pockets for the packet of bank notes, I decided I would tidy up my hair. The burnt ash of my soft strands of hair didn’t look so dull between the turquoise teeth of my plastic comb that I’d found in the street. If I’d had a doll I would have gladly shared it with her. But I was alone, and happy to take care of the task by myself, avoiding the humiliating five minutes of having my hair torn out and stifling my sobs that Rosa would inflict on me when she found me too unattractive for even those four neighbourhood tramps, as she called them. It hurt so much. When I brushed my hair alone I could adjust how hard I pulled the comb and was free to avoid the most stubborn of knots, which were like straw and made me look scruffy. Keeping my face still and directed towards the mirror so that I wouldn’t draw attention to myself, I attentively observed my father handing her the white packet saying he didn’t want it today. She took it and put it back in the bedside table, inside the wooden box that was chipped and crooked on one side, not without first shooting my father a stormy look. Perhaps she didn’t believe him. My father had an air of confusion about him, like somebody who hadn’t eaten or slept enough. A bored and slovenly silence reigned over the house, which could be broken only by a scream or an eruption of laughter. The brothers were out, who knows where, and nobody breathed, least of all me.

It was difficult to comprehend the sound of the bombs, inexplicable in the same way that the disquieting nocturnal imaginings were, improvised in the state between sleep and wakefulness. Godmother held me with one hand and Saverio with the other, tight enough to stop the blood flow, our knuckles squashed against one another. We children didn’t dare protest, silently envying Elio the Second who lay contentedly on the soft legs of Selene, Godmother’s daughter. She had picked him up when he was crying a little while earlier and now she was singing to him fly fly fly fly fly fly. Fly? Where? We were stuck under the ground in the hope of not dying and the roars that reached us from far away suggested it would be hours before we could leave the shelter.

Unsatisfied with my reconnaissance mission of the shelter, I closed my eyes and focused on my room, more mine than anyone else’s. I could’ve described it millimetre by millimetre, detailing the exact position of all the objects within, every cot, every blue cotton handkerchief, every button doll, every forgotten and dried out apple core, every faded vest hung up to dry. During the interminable nights I spent in that crowded, dirty and untidy space that was my home within the home, I studied all of its details unbeknownst to my brother and uncle, who were clumped together on the sunken mattress in a single deep and inviolable sleep. If I really concentrated I could distinguish whose heavy breathing was whose. Wide-awake as if it were the middle of the day, I enjoyed my strange but private little hobby, the spectacle of things, undisturbed and in total secrecy. If I wanted to keep that secret, which for me was a privilege, all I had to do was keep quiet and maintain a neutral look in my eyes in the morning if somebody pressed me as to whether I had slept. I would nod, respecting the indifference I had always been treated with and keeping the truth, which was much more fascinating, all for myself.

Not owning much lightened the overnight bag that had been sitting ready at the apartment door for a while now. The grown-ups had filled it with clean underwear and a change of clothes that they kept in the closet, a little bread that was replenished every two or three days, half a wheel of Caciotta cheese, some dishes and bars of soap – my father’s obsession, of which he always had a spare to hand, as if the real problem in a life like that one was how you were going to wash your armpits. I had managed to furtively slip in the little blue woollen blanket at the last minute, knowing that if Elio the Second didn’t have it to rub, he wouldn’t be able to sleep. I knew Rosa wouldn’t have thought of that.

The godparents sat rigid and silent at the back on the metal bench, on the side opposite the one occupied by my family. The electric silence that divided the two couples, in comparison to their usual racket, contained more tension than a group brawl. There was something beyond the fear, beyond the anxiety of collapse or the certainty of mourning, and we children could feel it. They were uncertain and stuck, unable to enter or exit the narrow corridors of their minds. Usually, on a normal day, they never stopped chatting, slapping their thighs laughing, letting their heads fall back and forth at the slightest trifle. It was all one big do you remember, tell me, how did it work out in the end, then. I didn’t know, I had no way of knowing, that when the siren sounded Godmother had abruptly asked my father to go out and find Massimo, they might kill him, what if he doesn’t make it home, under the shelling. My mother hadn’t liked the request because it too much resembled an order and had ignored some important matters, like the fact that her husband had three children behind him and another on the way. Why should he have to risk his life for a layabout who only ever thought of himself and who, in a moment like that – the war, atrocious and furious, over our heads -, didn’t feel at all driven to get home by himself? Nobody could hate Massimo though, and Rosa knew that better than anyone. To dislike him even a little took some real effort, she had to push away the memory of that evening – abandoned in the grip of his painter’s arms, the knot of her loins dissolving into a wellspring, I mute and unmoving as ever behind the embroidered curtain. Nor could she allow herself to recall those black afternoons in which she cursed her life, her husband and that very house that was now probably no more than a pile of plaster and yet, on hearing Massimo’s whistle to a drinking mate in the courtyard, a fresh smile would flower on her lips and a great desire to throw all the soapy water from the bucket into the air would grip her anus in unbearable agony. She had to drive those impulses back into their sewer and remind herself that he was just a street boy, the most cheerful of all of San Lorenzo’s destitute, the husband of her best friend, Tiziana, and nothing to her.

We children intuited – children always know everything – that Massimo could brighten our mother’s gloomy mood. When Rosa began to slam doors and pile up plates as if she wanted each one to smash the next, I always hoped that he would turn up soon. Besides, Massimo was an interesting spectacle to stand and watch. In my meagre six years of life I had already seen him in a plaster cast after a nasty fall from his bike; standing in rags on the street while Tiziana shouted you’re a rat go die; in bed with a 40 degree fever because he had jumped into the Tevere Fountain in the middle of the night, in winter, to pay off a bet. By contrast, my uncle Antonio who would pound me with pinches and requests of little favours, as he called them, drove me to despair.

So, when Tiziana had asked for help, do me a favour, Giusè, go and bring back that poor wretch, my mother had bitten her tongue and clasped her hands together in an act of self-control. My father hadn’t needed to look at her to understand the risk that Godmother was running. He knew his wife, she was capable of getting up and smashing a plate over her head, the beast she was, and flustered by the pregnancy too. And so it was to protect Tiziana that he immediately went out to search for his friend, before it was too late for him as well. My mother constrained herself to glowering at the upset face of Godmother, and the small shoulders of her husband as he walked away. They’re only good for getting walked all over, those two. She would stay put, looking after her children, she said.

Frightened by the risk that my father was running, going out when the sirens were sounding with no protection and no precise destination, I squinted my eyes to look at the backs of my eyelids, where I would escape when there was suffering going on around me, and I saw the streets of our neighbourhood, San Lorenzo, which for me was the whole world. Buildings neither high nor low, red, yellow and brown, with sheets hung in smiles, the train behind, the garden around the church, the white colonnade with the green lawn in front, for running around on before and after the imprisonment of the infinite mass, that I endured on the kneeling-stools, between my aunties’ skirts. It was impossible that that village, as my girlhood thoughts had absorbed it, could be transformed from the pretty and colourful postcard that it was into pulverised nothingness. It was too real and essential, too eternal and as hard as the marble of the sculptors chiselling away in the piazza, to be flattened by the folly of war.

It was only a few steps before my father found his friend. He was hobbling hurriedly along Via degli Equi towards home like a huge caterpillar, twisted and frantic. The prodigy returns, my mother commented from behind the window, as she put on Elio the Second’s vest and threw a final packet of cheese tied up with twine into the provisions bag. Then she added, under her breath, tragedy’s a blanket, they pinch it when you’re sleeping and you don’t realise ‘til it’s too late.

This time was different, the bombs didn’t stop falling and the air inside the shelter became heavy. The day of Elio the First’s birth came to mind, on that day too I had waited, ignorant of everything, for an ugly truth to materialise. My mother was in her seventh month and nobody expected her to give birth before her due date. I remembered my aunt running, the blankets, the single hand of my father that trembled as he brought a cigarette to his lips, the deafening screams, the cold wall behind the door, where I was squashed. Eventually Elio the First came into the world stripped of life. Rosa was shouting take him away, take him away. My aunt left the bedroom crying with a small box in her arms. If I had reached my hand out from my hiding place I could’ve touched it. My brother was in that box.

The silence was broken by the thud of the beam as it fell from the ceiling. My father pushed into my mother, making her tumble onto the floor, the beam missed her by a few centimetres. Keeping my eyes on Rosa’s body, I waited in silence for the beating of my little heart to return to its normal rhythm, not moving or speaking. If I had started to cry, Elio the Second and Saverio would’ve begun to scream and then, together with the roof, the patience of the grown-ups would also have crashed. We had to stay calm and trust in God, if we wanted Him to go on protecting us: it was the second time that day that we didn’t lose mamma. My father and Massimo hurried to carefully lift her up while Tiziana arranged her a chair, far from where the ceiling had crashed. My mother straightened out her dusty, creased skirt, cursing all the angels and saints who were sending death into the home of her family, we who’ve never done nothing bad to no one, she said.