

Melissa Magnani

Teodoro



BOMPIANI



MELISSA MAGNANI
TEODORO

translated from the Italian
by Alice Kilgariff

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Today my father buried his beard. He did this after the two old women knocked at our door, after the two old women, one blind and one lame, spoke to him. My father fell silent, he went into another room. Minutes passed that felt like entire seasons. When my father emerged, he was holding a dark skein in his hand. His face shaven. It was after. He opened the front door of our house, and walked to the shadow cast by the belltower where the horses went to rest. He bound dark threads with a green shoot. He bent down. Without saying a word, my father buried his beard. Then he stood up. He moved away. He walked as far as our field, all the way to the end of the road, all the way to the carpenter's house. All the way to his house. All the way to his door. It was shut. He didn't knock. He waited a long time. I carried on watching him the entire time, following him with my gaze. Still now. My father is an unmoving figure standing before the carpenter's house. Around him, the plains, the sky, April. I stay here, next to the

belltower and our house, next to the horses that move slowly through the field. I observe.

My father is the village bellringer. He knows the notes of the bells, he knows their tolls. Three when a man dies. Two when a woman dies. Three tolls of the three small bells when it's a child. His hands are strong. Today they smell of beard and earth. And he walks around the carpenter's house. He looks at the east-facing windows, closed. He looks at the north-facing windows, closed. Those facing west, closed. He only stops when he finds a south-facing window open. And he sees a wooden table, wooden chairs, wooden boxes, wooden wardrobes and a wooden crib.

I remember my crib.

Just a few days before my birth, my father asked the carpenter to make me a crib. It was strong, made from poplar. My father paid the carpenter with very large coins. That day, my father had walked down the street carrying the crib in his arms. It was September. The crib was heavy, my father was sweating. His thoughts were drops that fell from his forehead onto the crib he was carrying. He thought.

“In my arms, my son's crib, my son, the bed made of poplar for my first son”.

At home, he placed the crib under the window in my room. He touched it over and over. My mother had sewn the letters of my name into the pillowcase. I was a child ready to be born, a son with cheeks, a nose and a mouth inside their eyes. They stood close to one another next to my empty crib. They said my name
“Teodoro.”

I can see her.

Just now, in this very moment, she is leaving the house. She is barefoot. She comes towards me. I stay here. I can see my mother and I am happy. She cannot see me. And she does not see my father, at the end of the road, as he walks around the carpenter's house without ever knocking. She does not see that a beard has been buried next to me and I know that it will remain a secret between my father and me. She moves closer, she is carrying fodder in sacks for the horses. She is wearing a thin dress. She sits a few steps from me. I look at her and would like her plait to come undone and for her hair to go back to being a black mane, for her ankles to go back to having the soft, warm flesh of a young girl. I hold onto a corner of her dress, the material grows warmer between my hands. Then we lie down together on the earth, to rest even

though it's morning. Our backs on the grass. Next to us, the foals stay close to their mothers. We listen to their movements. We stay like that for a long time. We do not say a word. I never tire of sitting in silence with her. I like those gestures that do not require a voice. Those of old people or children. I hear the whinnies above our heads. I search for her hands and she doesn't know it.

Mother, I'm here.

“Teodoro.”

And I was small, bread dough between two hands, I had white skin and a mole on my chin. I had tapered fingers. I liked to touch your hair. I tried to hold it, but it would escape my grasp, slipping away. It was black, long, you left it loose, it fell down around your neck. Today, however, you keep it tied back, like grey horsehair. Mother. You are a creature of fodder and hay. You wear the colours of an ancient land, of wheat. I know that as a girl you ran alongside the foals. You left buckets in the street, you filled them with water for the animals to drink. When you met my father, he was sitting on the threshold of the belltower. He had

unkempt curls, which reminded you of the manes of wild horses. You looked at each other for a long time before speaking. Then days, months. Days when the morning bells rang late, the evening bells rang when it was already night. Months in which the morning bells rang out at the end of the morning, and the afternoon bells chimed at the end of the evening, and the whole village followed my father's bells, the whole village thought that the sky had changed its cycles, because there were no instruments for measuring time in the whole of the valley, except my father's belltower. The village would wake up when the sun was already high in the sky, and lunch would be prepared at dinner time, and everyone closed their windows to sleep during what they believed to be a particularly bright night that was actually just a day, a morning, when my father forgot about the bells and was thinking of you. Sometimes he opened the door to the belltower and showed you the cords that climbed all the way to the top. You placed the reins of your horses in his hands. You taught him the names of the different breeds, you showed him the brass medals nailed to their hooves to protect them from harm. He told you about the chimes. He could read an oncoming storm in the sky, the empty holes in the clouds before the hail. There were days when my father would place on your knees books in which the

sun was depicted over and over. In those pages, the winds had the names of far-away places that you didn't know. You would say

“I like being here,”

And you talked about flat land, of racing. It was always you who would take his hand first. When you entwined your fingers around his, you felt a strong gallop inside you. At times your voices would mix together, without knowing whether you were talking about terrain or bells.

I was born on the first day of October. I lived for eleven days.

Then came the autumn. The thread slipped from the needle. The October sky. The wind. Your empty eyes. You, my mother, you made yourself mute, deaf, blind. Under the October sky, you passed a black thread through your fingers. You mended your mourning dress. You put on black socks, black shoes. You, my mother, became darkness. You, a child mother, became the colour of night. You closed the blinds in my room. You closed the window in my room. You pulled the door of my room to. And you grew old. You walked through the house, without talking, and became old. My father watched you, without talking, and you

became old. The October sky ripped itself apart above your heads. The love letters, kept in the small drawer in the nightstand, yellowed with pain.

Do you remember?

Then a year passed. Then another year. Then you opened the door to my room. Then you opened the window. Then you threw open the shutters. You touched my crib and your hand met with so much dust. Then you collected up what had been my covers. You shook them and felt wind on your skin. When you brought in the clean sheets and placed them down, you had a swollen belly.

Mother, I have nine siblings.

I call them by name and say Ero, Gedeone, Ada, Abele and Zaira, Giacinto, Libero, Pellegrino, Mario. I watch them grow, I go into their rooms and try to reach them with my voice. I am a secret they do not know. A secret sealed in your voice and the voice of my father, like a kiss hidden beneath the belltower. My name, never said out loud. Replaced by silence.

Mother, can you hear me?

Gather me in your hands. Inside this April day, in this valley, on this land. Take me in your arms. Bind my wrist to yours with thread, so that I do not get lost in the wind. Let's stay close, let's cover each other with our bodies. *Mamma*, I am your child. I am the white mark inside you. I am here now. I never left. Let's stay like this, laid down in the world, next to the horses as they chew their fodder. While the sky keeps on turning and my father, far away, walks around the carpenter's house, without ever knocking, like a merry-go-round that knows no end.

Can you hear me?

Hold me close. I'm here.

Melissa Magnani Teodoro

A debut novel about the sacredness of family bonds.

Teodoro is a child who anybody from lived for eleven days. He now occupies a place suspended in mid-air. From there he observes life happening after him. He retraces his places, under the bell tower, in the field where horses are resting, inside his house. He looks again for his place in his mother's arms, among his father's words. He pronounces the names of his brothers: Ero, Gedeone, Ada, Abele, Zaira, Giacinto, Libero, Pellegrino, and Mario. Nine, all born after him, all oblivious of his existence. His life is a secret buried in memory. But Teodoro speaks, talks, reveals. He gets closer, touches, comforts his brothers and parents with love, tenderness and complicity. The scattered splinters of each existence recompose in Teodoro's whispering voice, in a country village where life rhythms follow the seasons, the rituals of the land, the migration of birds. A child who is not there, who was there when too little, and who follows the lives of his nine brothers born after him like a devoted small shadow.

MELISSA MAGNANI was born in Correggio in 1992, and when not in Correggio, she spends her time in Bologna, working in art and fashion. This is her debut novel.

A DEBUT NOVEL OF SENSITIVITY AND SUBSTANCE, SUFFUSED WITH THE TIMELESS IMMUTABLE STUFF OF RURAL LIFE.



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