

Sortilegi

BIANCA
PITZORNO

BOMPIANI





BIANCA PITZORNO
SPELLS

translated from the Italian
by Julia MacGibbon

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BOMPIANI

PROLOGUE

Everyone slept. The two sisters, the father, the older brother, the elderly grandparents, the small boys. Only the mother's eyes were still open, although she, too, lay still, stretched out on the mattress of rushes, her skirts rumpled. She struggled to raise her head. The little girl standing in the doorway looked at her with curiosity. She didn't know why that drowsiness, that terrible tiredness, had overcome everyone in the farmhouse. Her grandparents had been asleep for three days. She began to move closer but her mother lifted a hand to stop her. 'Don't touch me,' she said. 'Don't touch anyone.' The child did as she was told. In that sense she was a good child. Even when she didn't understand – which was often – she did as she was asked. A year earlier, when she had developed the dreadful fever that had raged through her little body,

a fever that neither cold sponging nor boiled herbs did anything to allay, her mother had been certain they would lose her, like the four other babes they had already lost. But this one survived. Her vivacity, however, and the eagerness with which she responded to and imitated everything her elder sisters did, the quickness with which she comprehended and reacted, somehow seemed dimmed. She was still very tiny – four years old, or perhaps still three – and it was hard to tell how badly her mind had been enfeebled. Her grandmother said she was just a little slow, something that would pass as she grew. Her mother hoped so. She was the youngest and the prettiest of their daughters. Watching her run around with the chickens, as blond and happy as an angel, filled all their hearts with joy. But beyond childhood, should it remain unsullied by smallpox or accidents, that very beauty would one day represent a danger. They would need to watch over her, her mother had thought: she's not a rich man's daughter whom men will treat with respect.

Now, though, the child's mother knew that none of them would aid her. The child who had remained miraculously untouched by the contagion would confront life alone. 'Listen carefully,' her mother said to her. 'You must go to old Gostanza, the woman who lives on the far side of the wood. Do you remember?

The house close by the big oak tree. We went there last year, together with your sister Vanna, to help her chop wood for the winter, and she gave us a little pot of the honey her bees make, to say thank you. Do you remember?’

The little girl nodded, her eyes bright with the memory of that honey which had been so delicious. She licked her lips.

‘Run straight to the hearth now. Get one of the baskets. Put two loaves of bread in it, and some apples, and some walnuts. As much as will fit. You can eat some if you get hungry along the way, and whatever’s left you’ll give to Goodwife Gostanza, and tell her it’s from me. Tell her that here we are all sleeping and that I beg her, for the love of God, to take you in. Take the goat with you, too. Her milk will feed you both.’

‘And afterwards shall I come home?’ asked the little girl.

‘You will never come home. You would not find us here. You would find no one.’

‘Where will you be?’

‘In a beautiful place. Where the Virgin Mary is.’

‘Why can I not come with you?’

‘Because you’re still too young. You will join us once you’re as tall as your father.’

‘So Vanna and Gemma cannot go with you either.’

‘That’s enough, Cate. Do as you are told. Fill the basket. Put on Vanna’s grey shawl, and wear Gemma’s heavy cape on top of that, the red one, and go to Goodwife Gostanza. You won’t lose your way. Just follow the path along the riverbank. Go, before it gets dark. Go!’

She felt her energy ebbing away. Her eyelids were heavy, and when she tried, with great effort, to lift them, she saw only black. She feared Cate would still be in the farmhouse when the men arrived to take them all away.

‘Go!’ she repeated threateningly. ‘At once! Else you’ll anger me!’

It broke her heart to bid the child farewell in this way, but no time remained.

The little girl hurriedly did as she was asked. She filled the basket, put the halter on the goat, wrapped herself in the shawl and the cape, and set off towards the river. She was already a good way from the farmhouse when she noticed that the dog, the bigger one, had followed her. ‘Go back!’ she said. Her mother hadn’t mentioned the dog. But it had no intention of obeying.

She walked and walked. There was no risk of her losing her way, she simply needed to stay close to the river’s edge. The child did not stop to eat the apples or the walnuts. She wanted to be sure to arrive before

nightfall. The wood began to fill with rustling noises. The birds sought the safety of the treetops. Darkness fell, but there was a moon, and its reflection shone out from the water and illuminated the stones and the cracks and the tree roots that surfaced along the path. Would she have to wake Goodwife Gostanza, if the hour were late when she arrived? Would the old woman scold her? Would she send her away?

Goodwife Gostanza, though, was not at home. The door was ajar, the lamp unlit. The child knew how to light it, and did so. She saw that the copper pot on the table had been overturned. But the old woman's grey cat sat next to it, so she reasoned that he must be to blame – for this and for the trampled bundles of dried herbs lying scattered on the floor. She called out, and called out again. No one replied. She climbed up into the hayloft, but it too was empty. As she circled the house, she noticed that the pretty beehive she remembered from her previous visit was missing. Gostanza had told them it needed to be moved from time to time, so that it was always near whichever flowers were in bloom. She imagined the old woman had gone off to move the bees, that she must still be travelling, and that tomorrow she would be home. Now, however, the child was hungry and also very tired. She ate an apple and a little bread. She milked the goat using an

earthenware bowl the cat had knocked to the floor and that had ended up under the table, and she drank the milk. Then she looked for the old woman's bed, she climbed onto it, using the cape as a blanket, she shed a few tears, and she fell asleep. She was certain that old Gostanza would be back in the morning. She was certain that her mother had sent her to a place where she would be safe, a place where someone would keep her from harm. The goat fell asleep too. So did the dog, and so did the old woman's cat.

The following morning the little girl awoke gently confused, not immediately sure where she was. Then she remembered. And she sat down to wait. The dog wandered off to hunt for food. The goat came to find her, bleating to be milked. Cate drank the milk and ate almost all of the walnuts from her basket. Behind the cottage she found a little henhouse and three hens. There were two eggs. She took them into the house but didn't eat them. She put them aside for old Gostanza, who would be hungry when she arrived. But Gostanza didn't come back. The little girl waited. She finished all of the food she had brought with her, and she ate the eggs too, piercing their shells with a pin in order to suck them. With the copper pot, she collected water from the river, taking care not to lean out too far and fall in and be dragged away by the currents, as her

mother had so often cautioned her. Darkness fell, and she slept on the old woman's bed for a second night.

The following day she continued her vigil. But Gostanza did not return. Towards midday, Cate stepped out onto the grass in front of the cottage and picked leaves from the plants she had been taught were safe to eat. Since she didn't know how a fire should be lit in that unfamiliar home, she ate them raw. She knew it would make her belly ache later, but she was terribly hungry. In the afternoon she walked a little way into the wood and found some mushrooms and some strawberries. The dog trailed behind her wherever she went, as if to keep guard. It barked at an adder that crossed their path and chased it off.

Gostanza hadn't come back. The third night arrived and the little girl now began to worry. She feared that the old woman had gone to meet the Virgin Mary too. Perhaps her mother had not been informed.

Her fear was well-founded. Her mother hadn't known that, two days before the rest of them, Gostanza, too, had been overcome with sleep, and that, warned by the Searcher who toured the land around the village, the men had come to carry her away on their wagon, taking her off to the pit where the plague dead were covered with quicklime or burned. They had come hastily, fearful of the contagion. In

their fear, they had not even bothered to ransack the cottage, or to loot what few poor furnishings it had. Nor had they taken the hens from the coop. Although one man – the most expert among them – had thrown a black cloth over the beehive and had carried it off on his back.

Gostanza would never return. As the third morning dawned, the little girl began – dimly and confusedly – to understand as much, and decided to make her way back to her parents' farmhouse where everything was at least familiar to her – the animals, the tools, the well, the hearth, her parents' big bed and that of her grandparents, the smaller cots of straw on which the youngsters slept. Back to the farmhouse from which – a quiver of hope – her family had perhaps not yet departed; the farmhouse where they would listen and would agree to take her with them. Her mother would be angry at her disobedience, she would use harsh words and punish her. But was staying here not a crueller punishment – waiting and waiting in this strange and unfamiliar home?

She tied a rope to the goat's halter and fetched the now-empty basket. She wondered whether she should take the chickens with her, but couldn't think how to carry them. She wrapped herself up in the shawl and the cape and, the day still young, set off for home.

They arrived at the house before sundown. The dog and the goat saw where they were and made their way straight to the farmyard. Cate cried out, 'I've come back!', but no one replied. She ran into her parents' bedroom. The bed was empty. And so was that of her grandparents. And so were the cots where her sisters slept. The two cows and the mule and many objects from the house were missing. Some were still there but broken, or in disarray. They had left in a hurry, she thought. Leaving behind them a great silence which enveloped her as though it were a second cape.

Then she heard her father's voice asking, merrily, 'Who'll help me chop the wood?'

He hadn't left with the others, then; he had waited for her. A great wave of relief surged through her heart. 'I will help you!' she replied, running into the courtyard behind the farmhouse, running towards the voice she had heard. No one was there, nor could she see any wood or hatchets. 'Indoors with you now, there's a storm on the way!' shouted her father. The voice came from the top of the big tree. Had he really climbed up there to knock down walnuts at this time of night? Cate peered up through the branches, astonished. The dusky sky was cloudless; the air was still. What storm? Was her father teasing her? Cracking a joke at the expense of the little girl who had just returned? Was

that why he was hiding up amid the leaves? Then she heard the whirr of wings flapping, and caught sight of something black swooping rapidly down and perching on the lowest of the branches. A bright yellow beak tapped her shoulder. 'Who are you? Who are you? Who are you?' asked the mynah bird. A bird her father had brought back from the fair, one May Day, a few years earlier. A bird he had taught to imitate his voice. Just a few phrases. And a couple of others that the bird had learned for himself just by listening. 'I'm Cate,' said the child, in case he hadn't understood.

As for the child, she now realized with great sorrow that she had been deceived. Her father was not there. There was no one at the farmhouse any longer. There was no longer anyone at old Gostanza's cottage. They had all departed. There was no one anywhere. She was alone in the world. But she was at least home, with her animals.

The dog pressed its wet nose into the palm of her hand.

CHAPTER TWO

During the first year of the great famine, when his wife had died in childbirth, leaving him with two lads still two and nine years old, the blacksmith Sestilio Salvadoreschi had decided it would be wise, once the requisite months of mourning had passed, to take another wife who could attend to the house and the boys. The elder of the two, whose name was Lorenzo, already helped him out a little in the smithy, and was a sensible well-mannered lad, his manners learned from his mother who, as a girl, had been in service in Cerro Alto, in the household of Signor Lomi – the richest and most influential in the town, but also the most cultured and refined.

Even after their wedding, the blacksmith's wife had remained on good terms with her former employers, to whom she paid visits from time to time, accompanied

by the children. They made her presents of cast-off clothes, the occasional quart of chickpeas or millet, and sometimes olives and cheese, but above all – and for this she was the most grateful – they offered the salve of kind words and consoled her on those occasions when her husband had been in his cups and his blows had rained down hard. During those visits, Lorenzo was allowed to play with Signor Lomi's children, of whom there were seven – boys and girls, and some of them his own age –, children who had been taught not to scorn common folk, especially not lads and lasses as young as themselves. From time to time Signor Lomi had taken him for walks in the countryside together with his own children, teaching them all the names of plants and insects and, on evening walks, the constellations in the sky. Signor Lomi was a man of eccentric character, much criticised – behind his back – by people of good taste, because he had also chosen to offer his daughters an education of a kind inappropriate for females, instructing them in the fundamentals of Latin, grammar, music and geometry and, as we have seen, in the science of natural history as observed in the field. To those who dared make remonstrations to his face, he replied that Galileo himself had provided the very same form of education to his own two daughters, both of whom had then become nuns.

Herbs, adders, crickets and streams were familiar to Lorenzo too, but grammar and geometry were not, and this pained him. One of Lomi's little girls had made him a present of an old sheet of well-worn paper on which a song, or perhaps a prayer, was printed, and had taught him a few of the letters on it, but not enough of them for its meaning to be clear. Lorenzo treasured it and kept it hidden beneath the sack of rushes on which he slept.

When she had begun to sense death approaching, his mother had instructed him to take care of his younger brother, whose name was Ippolito, and in addition to his other duties helping his father out in the forge, Lorenzo now had to take the toddler everywhere he went. He loved the child tenderly, but Ippolito's age and maternal indulgence had made the babe exuberant and capricious, and he was therefore perpetually mischievous.

When their father announced that he had chosen a new bride and that the following week a stepmother would be joining their household, Lorenzo was greatly relieved, although the memory of the mother whose place this stranger was coming to fill seemed yet more poignant. He was, though, convinced that Ippolito was in need of a womanly tenderness that he himself could not provide.

The new wife arrived. She was a young widow and brought with her a little boy who was still suckling. The blacksmith was content and failed to notice that, after just a few days, far from caring for him as though he were her own, the woman had taken a dislike to Ippolito and left him wrapped around Lorenzo's neck or placed him outside the door – a rival to her own child and bothersome to her. And she often slapped him for being too boisterous, almost as though she relished his yelps and tears. And she never sufficiently filled his bowl with millet porridge, so Lorenzo was forced to eat less of his own.

The lad complained to his father, but the man, whose new wife made him more than happy in bed and showered him with flattery, shouted at his son and flung a piece of iron he'd been hammering on the anvil at the boy, who would have been badly maimed had it hit him. Two days later, however, and as though, from up in heaven, his dead first wife were avenging her little ones, a horse the blacksmith was shoeing reared up and kicked him hard in the head. The surgeon was called but, as soon as he saw it, pronounced the wound mortal, and a few hours later Salvadoreschi did indeed die. The new wife wept, tore her clothes, and made great show of her grief. But she also sent straight for the scribe, to

record that it was she who inherited the forge and the house and everything in it. The scribe observed that a portion was perhaps due to the two sons born of the first marriage, who might also consider themselves heirs. 'If I tend to them and maintain them until they are adults, and if I arrange for them to learn a trade,' replied the woman, 'their part will be consumed in costs.' And she said it with so many flattering smiles that the scribe found himself – or wanted to be – convinced.

For the two young orphans there now began a period of insufficient food and lavish cuffings, often leaving them black and blue. As for the meagre nutrition, their stepmother had no difficulty explaining away to the townsfolk the sight of two thin and pallid boys, because the ongoing famine had worsened and in the surrounding countryside many went hungry, and many made their bread of acorn flour or ate weeds which left them ill with terrible gripe.

The woman and her son, who in the meantime had been weaned, instead ate well and heartily: polenta made of millet or of maize, cheese and fatty mutton, chicken broth and eggs, all bought with the money paid her by the man to whom she had rented out Salvadoreschi's forge. Lorenzo no longer had time to care for his brother, or to go out into

the countryside to set traps or gather wild berries and mushrooms with which to dampen the little one's hunger, because his stepmother had hired him out along with the smithy, and his new master expected him, slight as he was, to pump the bellows from dawn to dusk. But some of the local women began to mutter about it, especially when they saw the widow's toddler gambolling, fat and strong, and taking his first little steps, while Ippolito, in ragged clothes, sat languishing on the doorstep all day long and didn't grow, and hadn't even the energy to be naughty or to yell and cry as he had when his father was still around.

This chatter worried the widow, who feared the scribe might choose to return and denounce her and oblige her to forgo a part of the inheritance. She therefore resolved to rid herself of those two encumbrances, but in such a way that none of the townsfolk could accuse her of doing ill.

So she put out word that a relative of her two stepsons, a distant cousin on their dead mother's side, a rich man possessed of every comfort, who lived with his wife in a parish ten miles from Montieri and had remained childless, had sent for the two boys who were his only heirs. And she herself would accompany them, hiring a cart and mule for the journey.

Lorenzo did not remember his mother ever having spoken of this cousin, but was so relieved that he and his brother would be leaving behind that household and its privations that he jumped cheerfully into the cart, carrying with him what few rags they possessed: a small bundle, inside which there nestled that old sheet of paper once given him by the Lomis' daughter, and on it the words of a song.

The stepmother left her own little boy with an old woman who lived nearby, and climbed into the front of the cart. She whipped the mule to urge it on, eager to make her way home before sunset. She didn't take the high road but turned off along tracks unfamiliar to Lorenzo and overgrown with weeds and bushes. They passed a swamp and then a copse of small oak trees and then an old meadow in which the grass had ceased to grow. They reached a strange clearing where, poking out amid the brambles, there were flowers of a kind that need no food or water.

'These are heaven-sent!' exclaimed the stepmother, bringing the mule to a halt. 'Now you need not present yourselves empty-handed when you meet your lady aunt! And I know from experience that where such flowers grow, delicious mushrooms are always to be found. Come now, climb down from the cart and

gather them. Take this basket. And of the flowers make a posy. I will wait for you here.'

The two lads did as they were asked. The flowers were plentiful and growing alongside them there were indeed mushrooms, which Ippolito eagerly began to pick and to eat, raw as they were. Lorenzo instead placed them carefully into the basket.

When the stepmother saw that they were absorbed in their harvesting and that their backs were turned to the cart, she turned it hastily around and whipped the mule, and set off back along the track they had taken, disappearing amid the oak trees.

Lorenzo realized she had fled and abandoned them only after many minutes had passed. He was mightily distressed, not out of any fondness for her, but because he had no idea where shelter might be found for himself and his brother in such a wild place. Nor did he know where his cousin lived, and for the very first time it crossed his mind that this cousin might not be real, and that the woman had simply invented him so that she might take the boys out of the town and leave them here. He gathered Ippolito into his arms and began to look for the track along which they had arrived, intending to walk back into town, but many paths led off from the clearing, all pointing in different directions, and he could remember no landmarks or

signs that might help him distinguish the track their stepmother had taken. Meanwhile dusk had fallen, and with the darkness came cold. Ippolito began to cry. Recognising that they were lost, Lorenzo was overcome with sadness and dejection, made worse by the thought that that cruel woman had driven off with the bundle of rags and, with it, his old sheet of paper and the words of the song.

He did not, however, give in to despair. He decided that if they were to avoid being attacked by wild beasts, it would be wisest to spend the night not in the shelter of the undergrowth but high up in the branches of a tree. So, tying his brother to his back with the sleeves of his doublet, he chose a trunk that looked easy to climb and began to scale it. Once they had reached a point high enough and had settled themselves into a fork that seemed strong enough to bear their weight, he glanced around, his eyes scanning the surrounding gloom, and much was his delight when he caught sight of a light flickering, out beyond the beech wood. It didn't seem too far off, so – reasoning that the route would be perilous in the darkness – Lorenzo made a mental note of the most distinctive and unusually shaped treetops framing the spot. Then, somewhat comforted, he laid his head on the branch and, weak with fatigue, fell asleep.

Back in the town, the stepmother regaled all who would listen with tales of the warm welcome the two brothers had received from the cousin's family, and of how prosperous and abounding in resources his farm was, even in a time of famine. And to those who enquired as to the name of the family and the place, she replied with an invented answer, a lie she had prepared in advance so that no one could ever, out of sheer curiosity and hoping to greet them, go looking for Salvadoreschi's two orphaned sons.

But up in heaven, once again, the two lads' mother was apparently preparing her revenge for so much shameless cruelty, and the very next morning the ill-meaning stepmother awoke with a terrible fever, her body livid with the swellings which were the mark of the disease that had, over recent months, begun to sweep through the parish and which would soon dispatch the majority of its inhabitants, innocent and guilty alike, applying no distinction.

Roused by the rising sun, Lorenzo climbed down from the tree with his brother still strapped to his back, and set off in the direction of the spot in which he seen the tiny flicker of light. After an hour's walking, they came across a low building made of stones and small branches, like the huts shepherds improvise while on

the move in search of fresh pastures. Here, however, there lived not a shepherd but an anchorite who had withdrawn from the world to pray and do penance. He had two goats living with him, and offered the young boys what little he could in the way of succour, and said he knew the way back to Montieri, and would happily travel with them as soon as they had rested and eaten. But once he heard of their stepmother's wicked deeds and intentions, he advised them not to turn back, but instead to make their way to the Keeper of Orphans who, as the magistrate appointed to the task by the Grand Duke himself, would find kindly folk to foster them and would ensure they recovered all that was rightfully theirs. Ippolito, though, was dreadfully weakened and in no condition to venture out on a journey which must inevitably be made on foot and which would take several days to complete, given that the hermit possessed neither cart nor a beast which could pull one. The old man, who had some small knowledge of herbs and medicine, enquired of Lorenzo as to his brother's age, and upon learning that Ippolito was four years old, remarked, 'But he looks like a babe mere months old. See, he struggles to stay on his feet.' Lorenzo, he warned, must prepare himself for the worst. For far too long his brother had been deprived of sufficient nourishment, and his body was

now so shrunken, his strength now so diminished, that nothing more could be done to restore it. 'Many have perished in this way since the famine began,' he explained. 'The famine is not to blame,' said Lorenzo. 'The fault lies with my father's wife.'

He refused to accept the grim verdict. So, heeding the boy's pleas, and with what little his poor hovel furnished, the old man prepared a porridge of milk and millet and attempted to feed the little one. But the child could no longer swallow and his head drooped to one side, and the food trickled out of his open mouth.

On the second day, Ippolito died. Lorenzo's grief was so bitter that he would not leave the little grave and begged the hermit to let him remain. He did not want to return to the town. His rancour was directed not only at his stepmother but also at the townsfolk who had failed to defend the two boys. The old man said, 'One day you will wish to return. But you may stay here with me for now.'

Lorenzo lived in the hut for many years, serving and assisting the holy man as the latter grew weak with age. He and the friar prayed together, and when he saw the old man's breviary and realised the hermit could read, he begged to be taught. He told him of the sheet of paper with words on it which his stepmother had

taken away on the cart, and of Signor Lomi's daughter who had presented him with that gift. 'When I am gone, instead of the Keeper of Orphans, you must go to Signor Lomi and ask him to take you in,' the old man said. And Lorenzo promised to do so.

The years went by, and throughout the parish the pestilence wreaked its carnage. But the contagion never reached the hermit's cell, where Lorenzo grew into a healthy and vigorous young man. And it never returned to Ca' del Nero, where little Catherine grew up utterly alone.

Bianca Pitzorno Spells

SORTILEGI

A beautiful girl, a winter too cold, a spreading fear: the story of too free a woman, the story of a witch.

Caterina can't read or write, but when her parents told her she would have to cope by herself she wasn't afraid. She knows how to move in the woods, how to start a fire, but she doesn't know that the monatti took her family away and she thinks that she is alone in Vallebuja. She has only her goat and her talking blackbird. Until in the village people starts getting angry: it's her who gave way to the plague, it's her the culpable of all their disgraces! It's her, the witch!

BIANCA PITZORNO (Sassari, 1942) is author of about 50 books, many of which are bestselling titles in Italy and abroad. She translated Tolkien, Sylvia Plath, David Grossman, Töve Jansson. Among her novels: *La bambina col falcone*, *Ascolta il mio cuore*, *La bambinaia francese*, *La vita sessuale dei nostril antenati* and, for Bompiani, *Giuni Russo* and *Il sogno della macchina da cucire*.

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