



MARINA
JARRE
I PADRI LONTANI

BOMPIANI





MARINA JARRE
OUR DISTANT FATHERS

translated from the Italian
by Julia MacGibbon

SAMPLE COPY

BOMPIANI

THE CIRCLE OF LIGHT

To my sister, Sisi

Some days the sky over Turin is immense. On sultry summer days when heat blankets the horizon from morning onwards and to one side it screens the hills and to the other it screens the mountains. At sunrise the trees rustle in great leafy ripples, in a slow unbroken movement which expands across the city. The overhead sky is a yellowish grey, opaque and uniform, cloudless and immobile, and beneath this sky the swallows swoop and chirp. A little later, sometime around eight o'clock, the trees begin undulating more slowly, enfolding the birdsong, until their movement comes to a stop, the sky turns a violent yellow and the noise of traffic fills the streets.

I sometimes catch Gianni or some of his friends talking about the Turin of their childhood or adolescence, back when everyone used to go skating at the "Italia": this is where the footbridge over the railway was, that's where we used to walk past the brothels, or along Via Roma in the days when its colonnades still stooped over all the old shops. Turin came to a halt at the Mauriziano hospital, after which the fields began.

When they talk about that Turin, Gianni and his friends aren't remotely melancholy; there's nothing they mourn. I've heard Gianni complain only about the tracks of the number 8 tram which were

ripped up a few years back. ‘They’ll see,’ he said vindictively, ‘when all the petrol runs out!’ And one time, walking through the Valentino park, he also complained about the botanical gardens’ gigantic araucaria tree whose severed trunk – an enormous grey ruin – still pokes out from the railings.

He talks about people, and as he talks the city contracts into a tight circle in which everyone knows everyone else.

– She had bowlegs when she was little, – he says of a woman passing by.

– You know her?

– No, but we went to primary school together; she was at the Silvio Pellico too.

He doesn’t mourn the old Turin, I tell myself, because he hasn’t lost it. He hasn’t lost his childhood.

I often envy other people’s childhoods. I even find myself suddenly envious of a baby in a pram or young pregnant women with their neat pretty bellies. The envy springs from my eternal embarrassment, the discomfort of having to ask, of being left out; and from the nostalgia that I, unlike them, feel for the old Turin they come from, those immutable babies in their prams and the slim young woman with her pretty belly.

The nostalgia which Gianni and his friends appear not to feel feeds, in fact, on the things I don’t know, on the things I haven’t seen, on the smells I haven’t smelled, on the life of that person I haven’t been.

I have lived in Turin for well over thirty years and the new city which has sprung up in a ring around the old core is one I know intimately. It has matured and aged alongside me, with its huge avenues to the south and to the west uninterruptedly lined with apartment blocks, with its new detached homes in the residential neighbourhoods up in the hills, with the eternally foggy and sparser suburbs out

towards the motorway to Milan, where petrol stations seem to dominate at street level and, above them, glittering in the night, the words on the advertising hoardings.

I spent one summer in Turin in the company of a botanical field guide. At five o’clock I would leave the house and walk the length of the enclosure surrounding the park in the centre of town, and on through the Crocetta quarter. I wandered through the municipal gardens and, as I did so, I identified the trees, comparing them with the descriptions and illustrations in the book.

The summer breeze lifted dusty scraps of litter up towards the horse chestnuts’ thick canopy. In our local park a Japanese pagoda tree was in bloom, while in the little park in Via Bertolotti the Persian silk tress were losing their flowers. In the Lamamora Gardens the leaves of the Judas trees, which sometimes turn dark blue at sunset, with those storms that continually circle the city in summer, like black walls opening up and closing in, first to the north and then, moments later, to the south... The Judas trees, as I was saying, were of a pale, intense green, shot through with azure.

Looking around me – that must be a wingnut or an ailanthus – I felt brief waves of solidarity, which was vague and generalised but, in any case, regarded those who, like me, walked the streets of Turin in the summer.

As I walked through each area, street after street, along pavements dirty with dust, scraps of paper, melted ice-cream, condoms, syringes, dog mess, the street became the city, the only conceivable city, indistinguishable from all the others. And its people, and I, with them on the pavement, became entirely interchangeable.

New blocks of housing sprung up on new roads, muddy and unremittingly bare; initially fragile in their scattered isolation, then neatened up amid circles of soil with skinny trees – *Celtis australis*?

– or, without warning, linear ranks of upright maples furrowing the big car park between the San Giovanni Vecchio hospital and the old stock exchange. Random changes, likely to make way for others; daring transformations effected by invisible hands overnight. The phone boxes were of questionable taste – perfect facsimiles of time machines or tele-transporters from a science-fiction film, and very obviously telephone boxes, and so proof, yet again, of the everyday necessity, of the inevitability, of migrations through time and space.

This is the nameless place, the equivalent of other places. And this is my time, equal to the time of others. I won't be fleeing again. As a little girl I often fantasised about running away from home. Italy was the country I wanted to escape to. Italy, my mother's homeland, where it was always warm and we stayed out in the garden for hours on end. And what did it matter that my summer holidays were accompanied by diarrhoea, brought on by too much fruit picked unripe from the tree.

My sister and I were born in Riga.

A photo of my five-year-old self, hair pulled back into two thick bunches either side of a tiny face, dressed in the pretty little corduroy dress chosen, like all the others, by my mother, with the thin indoors pinafore on top. I'm standing beside the doll's house, with one hand on its flat roof, holding down my baby doll, Willi. Next to the cage that belonged to Pippo the canary. I'm half smiling a soft, stubborn smile and looking into the distance, off to one side.

With the same half smile above an obstinate little chin, yet again turned away from the camera, in another photograph I'm sitting next to my mother and sister, who instead looks straight ahead with bright curious eyes. My mother, in profile, turning towards me, wears a proud and emotional grin. She has two tiny crow's feet.

Time invaded my life when my sister and I arrived at Torre Pellice. For the very first time it gave me a past, a thickness into which I could sink, and an escape from questions and surprises. The story of my early childhood was all I had left of my previous life, because in the space of a few weeks I swapped country, language and family circumstances.

The changing seasons seemed to regulate our domestic life in compliance with ancient rural customs of which not even our grandmother – daughter of by-then-comfortably-off middle-class parents – had any direct experience.

Despite which, in her kitchen garden, year after year, the herbs re-presented themselves. Herbs that her Provençal Huguenot mother had brought from her own kitchen garden near Nîmes to her husband's Waldensian kitchen garden. And from there they had been transplanted to my grandmother's garden when she, in turn, married, passing from one house to another just like the lovely pale-walnut Provençal furniture.

The wood sorrel that we stirred into our spinach.

The borage for omelettes and for frying in batter.

The chervil, which in addition to omelettes, also served to flavour vegetable soups. My grandmother sprinkled a pinch of wood sorrel into her omelettes, too.

The chives.

The wild thyme.

The pea herb which was only ever used to flavour peas, along with parsley, during the brief annual period in which we actually ate them; in other words, when they were actually growing in our garden.

All of these herbs had French names, as did the rhubarb that my grandmother used to make one of her '*tartes aux fruits*', and the

horseradish that we grated to serve with boiled meat. And the kitchen utensils had French names, and the furniture, clothes, the fruits in the orchard, the grapes that we laid out to dry on wooden boards in the attic, and the slightly bitter chestnut honey.

The little New Testament was also French, with its shiny black cover and very thin pages, and which was bought for me as soon as I arrived in Torre Pellice. The little book delighted me; you had to turn the pages with care in order not to rip them, and since I loved books with a physical passion, I still remember its smell. With this New Testament we went to Sunday school, and the first French I ever pronounced that wasn't homespun was that of the verses I had to learn by rote from one Sunday to the next.

All round the house there are mountains. My grandmother tells me that, when I was a year old, on summer evenings when I couldn't sleep she would carry me onto the balcony to look at them. And I, who hailed from an immense plain, pointed at them in wonder.

In the distance, on the right-hand side of the valley, Monte Granello; in the middle, Monte Palavas; to the left, Bric Bucie; directly in front of our house, beyond the meadows and beyond the Pellice river, the hill that climbs up towards Rorà. Then behind the house – you have to move to the far edge of the balcony to see it – Monte Vandalino and the Castelluzzo spur. The mountains don't close the valley off: over every hill and along the stony beds of the mountain streams paths run and passes open up via which one can escape towards other mountains.

Place names were frequently invoked, in our family, and were – they too – pregnant with temporal associations. The butter, wrapped in big green leaves, and the *seiras*, in its little wigs of fresh hay, were brought down to us from the Sella Veja, down along the Angrogna valley, the length of which my grandfather had crossed every day

when he was a little boy – five kilometres there and five kilometres back – to go to school. On Sundays we sometimes walked as far as the ruins of the fort built by Victor Amadeus II. Below it sat the old Catholic quarter. The Catholics, too, were a place and a time – one indistinguishable from the other. Implacably. They were a wall of which we rarely spoke, but of which we were always conscious.

I was twelve the last time I saw my father – he and my mother were divorcing and he had come to spend a few days with us at Torre Pellice, where we had, for two years, been living with my grandmother – and we said goodbye in Vicolo Dagotti, the lane where my grandparents' house stood. I may have been setting off for school; I know I was alone. My sister had probably gone on ahead. Just as I was about to turn into the main road, my father, who had stopped at the end of the lane, ran towards me and, reaching me, swept me up in his arms and, weeping, kissed me on the mouth. That gesture – so out of keeping with the way we normally behaved – shocked and disgusted me. When he set me back down, I ran off without saying goodbye and left him there in the lane, a tall man in his dark coat.

As I ran, turning into the main road, I wiped my mouth with my hand and asked myself insistently: what did he think he was doing? And simultaneously I asked myself: who does he think he is?

That astonishment, however, was the inverse of the astonishment I had felt at my mother's tears. Her tears had left me feeling detached, while my father's sudden and eccentric gesture, the spontaneity of his guileless gesture, had clutched at something in me. Something that wasn't there... Something absent.

I sensed immediately that this absence was inappropriate, long before I came to know that, there in Vicolo Dagotti, I was seeing him for

the very last time, a tall man in his dark coat who stood bolt upright as he faced the Germans who shot him in Riga in the October or the November of 1941.

A culpability he and I shared. That of not having known one another. I know almost nothing about him. I have only scattered childhood memories. I have no idea how he and my mother met. For a long time I had no idea why they married. I don't know the date of his death. That of his birth I gleaned from my parents' divorce papers.

Before leaving, that final time, he had given me a watch. A big watch with a shape – an irregular quadrilateral – and numbers – Roman numerals – that I really didn't like. Years before, he had given us a doll as tall as I was, which wouldn't fit in any doll's bed. He gave us one doll at a time and didn't bother saying which one of us it was for: when he went to the World's Fair in Paris he brought back a black baby doll that my sister immediately claimed for herself even though, when he bought it, my father wouldn't have had the faintest idea which of us it was for. During one of the visits arranged via lawyers during our final months in Latvia, he had, poor man, given us huge soft toys. White rabbits. Horrible things, bigger than their real-life equivalents; impossible to play with.

He never did send on my toy tea set, which I continued to ask for in all the letters I wrote to him from Torre Pellice. The little porcelain tea set, a present from my mother, had been left behind at our house, together with my toys, my books and my dolls. We had had to leave one morning, bringing nothing with us, pretending we were on our way to school. Instead we had met up with our mother at the house she had moved to following the separation.

Now and then I still dream of having to pack our bags and not managing to collect the things I need. Generally I dream of having to flee with my own babies and having to choose which of their clothes

to take with us. I also have to hurriedly bundle up the blankets, before the imminent catastrophe comes to pass.

I wore that watch for a very long time and, when it broke, several years went by before I finally decided to replace it with a tiny one. I conserved the broken watch, huge and ungainly, amid the rest of my clutter, and then I threw it out during a house move.

I have conserved nothing else of my father, not even a photo or a letter. Not even the last letter he wrote in '41, immediately after the Germans occupied Riga. I cannot for the life of me remember what happened to that letter, which for a few years remained among my papers, torn and crumpled by someone, but I don't know who. My grandmother hated our father and was more than capable of trying to eliminate any trace of him. Although it's far from unlikely that I myself threw the letter away, during one of my clean-ups.

Of that letter, written in his illegible scrawl, I remember only a single phrase, which he had underlined: 'because you must both remember that you, too, are Jewish.'

My father's death has sat in my life like a hidden seed, and as I have lived and grown older it has grown in my memory, not unlike a long love affair, nourished by the tenderness I felt for the young bodies of my children, their gestures and their little laughs, and the little limbs and gestures and laughs of their young friends. From this there sprung – tardily, as is always the case with me – my adult capacity for compassion, like the adventitious roots of a jasmine plant which emerge in order to find their way back to the earth from which they originate. These are the only roots I acknowledge as my own.

I had joined Giorgio near Carrara, at his house in Fossola, in September. I would marry the following year – I had met Gianni three months earlier and we were looking for a house, and it was only the difficulty of finding one that had prevented us from getting married sooner. Giorgio left a few years later, for Argentina, where he, in turn, got married.

In the mornings we bought warm *focaccia* at a bakery in Fossola, and white grapes – for lunch – and we took the tram down to the marina, the same tram that ferried the marble workers to and fro and on whose seats I saw them sitting, exhausted.

We were the only people on the beach; it was a lovely September and in its sunshine we harvested the grapes in the vineyard at the foot of Giorgio's vegetable garden.

So he taught me to swim. He never once berated me and he praised me constantly. The first two strokes I managed were a baptism into a life of the flesh that begins anew every time I go swimming. Even today I come home from the pool with limbs and spirit refreshed, despite stinking of chlorine.

After swimming we lay on the sand and Giorgio taught me how to play bridge, which I haven't played since. We sunk the cards into the sand and we didn't talk about anything at all until the sun, lowering itself into the sea, sent us home.

Perhaps it is the very artifice of our emotions, the constructedness of them, which fine-tunes us for old age. When I, a mature and wrinkled Indian brave, sit in a circle of young people and teach them – not on the basis of my own experience, because like any medicine man, I impart only collective wisdom – I feel a tranquillity, a confident expansiveness evidently very different from the chronic self-consciousness I felt when I was younger.

Even with young women I avoid describing my personal history, but I happily offer them unflattering examples of what I once was – clumsy and embarrassed and ingenuous –, which smooths their titers: I've done alright, now let's see what you're made of. But like my grandmother, who once felt compassion for me, now I, too, feel compassion for these young women, and I try not to add to their burdens, and I try to conceal the disappointments yet to come. Yet I wonder if it isn't my eternal ingenuousness – which is not innocence but unfamiliarity – that drives me to tell fairy-tales to people who have already dissected and demolished all those fantasies.

One of the daydreams into which I currently escape: I am sitting on a beach – I am facing the sea and, far away on the horizon, HMS Bounty –, right at the point where the waves lap the sand, and I am wearing a bathing costume, my head hidden in a big straw hat, black glasses on my nose. I am reading. Around me I hear them babbling their familiar stories, and – curved over my book, my hand concealing my chin in a characteristic pose that sometimes hides even my mouth, while I slowly scan the sea – I imagine I look like an old English spinster. I am, actually, very clean, I don't wash my knickers in the sink, and I adore both the head of the local police and the heir to the throne; and so I develop and abandon attachments that are easily made and unmade, and I also recognise in their stories – in those of the women – the resigned and rational lucidity of my own reveries.

Perhaps I have always been a bit of an old woman.

In a family of beautiful women – my grandmother, my mother, and now my daughter, – I was not beautiful (not straightforwardly beautiful). Nowadays when I look in the mirror I find my wrinkles beautiful, but an instant later I give it no further thought.

I don't mind the fact that my grandchildren don't look like me; for that matter, I never minded whether or not my children resembled me. I, too, don't much resemble my parents, and a jumbled collection of features inherited from each of my forebears repeat themselves in me: my mother's thin eyebrows; the sharp bright gaze I remember my father having – for all that his eyes were black like my sister's, and mine are light brown. I have my maternal grandmother's good hair, the big long-fingered hands of my father, my mother's nice colouring. But on the whole I feel as though I'm contained within a featureless inner self, and I seem sometimes to resemble only my sister, whom I look very unlike. But when I laugh and cry, like her, I wrinkle my nose.

As a woman, it was my fate to self-generate; I gave birth to myself when I gave birth to my children. Yet I have always thought and fantasised about – and desired – men. Even the fruit of that – which follows on from physical attraction and, in reality, cools and discourages the intimacy –, even that wore the ornate come-hither plumage of a courting. I did truly want to be a woman, but I didn't immediately feel that I was. That faceless inner self of mine was also sexless; between what I wanted to be and what I was there lay an indecisiveness. And so the happiest moment of my life, the triumphant confirmation that I was effectively a woman – ergo my definitive decision to be one – was the instant in which I felt my baby girl detach from me, with a gentle but very decisive and painless incision, preceded by (although to me it seemed simultaneous) the clasp of the forceps. Precisely like fruit snapped from the branch of a tree.

Even today she continues to embody my womanhood; I love walking, anonymous, behind her, hidden by her beauty.

As I typed I heard my mother coughing in the room next door and walking along the corridor, and it seemed to me that my plan to portray her – she who was so reserved and diffident – was perhaps a form of betrayal. Yet another betrayal. On my way out I would hide the sheets I had already filled with words, and once, when she asked me if I was writing something, I said no. Sometimes her presence seemed to be a physical hindrance to my writing.

I was beginning to realise that I didn't want to describe her, to find appropriate phrases, to recreate significant moments. An authentic miserliness was holding me back. I couldn't bring myself to allow her any experiences in which she hadn't been being my mother, and I was trying to smother her with unrelenting comparisons which I could barely stop myself from making malicious. No light-hearted episodes came to mind – none of those funny observations of hers (about herself, as well as others) that softened her sarcasm. I didn't know how to evoke her sonorous voice with its buzzing catarrhal r's. I recalled nothing except her silence or – its antithesis – her cutting remarks and stormy tantrums.

So I hesitated over whether to document facts, to redact, to control – and thus, and why not, exorcise – or even quite simply give up: I haven't understood, I haven't accepted and I don't know how to represent it. To sink once again into the ice of Riga's wintry sea.

Amid this protracted uncertainty, I eventually realized that the lines of words so painfully produced, erased and rewritten were simply a visceral cry for help and could never be more than that; the book should only have had to tackle itself, yet I was making it my accomplice.

I also made of it a monument onto which I chiselled my comforting and self-justifying conclusions. But while, atop their tomb, the stony gothic hands of the Earl and Countess of Arundel have been joined

together by an ingenious – and meddling – art restorer, and thus, perhaps, touch a sentimental nerve in the hearts of the public who find consolation in this peaceful death, it remains a reconstruction and concerns neither the living nor the dead. And is looking for peace by means of this book not, in reality, another misrepresentation? Life alone can bring peace or war, and that's what the book must describe.

So I wrote and rewrote, attempting to cut a path from myself to what I wrote and from there to those who would read it, and from the reader back to the book, untangling myself from the text and the text from me.

Meanwhile we had had to move house and were living in a small flat on the first floor of an old building in the centre of town – vaulted ceiling, deep windows, elegant fittings, gloomy in the winter and with a courtyard that often stank in the summer. I wrote with the bedside light switched on, even during the daytime. I moved around amid my plants, which we had brought down with us – from a bright open square to this long low balcony between the houses –, and I wondered whether or not to give them a splash of water. I liked letting the water rain down into the courtyard.

There were just the three of us now: my mother, Gianni and I.

Of those final years with my mother, the episodes and brief periods I can piece together were, at the end of the day, serene. She and I were in better health, Gianni was as tactful and patient as ever, our children were supportive and caring; little by little, as age weakened her, my mother began to trust me. She once praised a book of mine and lamented the fact that it hadn't been as successful as it deserved. When my sister came to see her a few weeks before she died, she asked her, 'Where's my daughter?'

'But I'm here,' said Sisi.

'Not you, the other one,' she replied.

Ailing and bedridden and being cared for by me, one evening she suddenly said, 'The Lord really hasn't spared you anything.'

That was the only time I ever heard her utter God's name.

Then, hesitant and fishing for the right words, she added, 'First your father, then four children to bring up, and now me.' She broke off and then, after a couple of minutes of silence, she concluded, 'You were...' (almost as though she were talking of something in the past that she had never previously noticed). 'You were the Waldensian and Sisi was the Jew.'

And with these words – which were undoubtedly meant to 'do me justice' and perhaps also to thank me –, in her heart she divided us yet again.

Marina Jarre

Distant Fathers

I PADRI LONTANI

An author to rediscover.

A story in autobiographic form, that unfurls from the author's native country, Latvia, during the 1920s and 30s to the Waldensian Valleys just outside the metropolitan spread of Turin, and in the city itself in these days, but with a narration devoid of any nostalgic fluff. The family figures and environment – an elusive and very handsome father, a cultured and severe mother, a sister, the grandparents, the new family Marina creates in Italy – undergo a strict perspective check. The narrative voice speaks to itself, to the key characters in the narrator's life and to the reader, facing with courage the passage from childhood to adolescence and the relationship with inaccessible parents. This story is the author's masterpiece, the book in which her precise, poetic, and extraordinary writing reaches its peak.

MARINA JARRE was born in Riga, Latvia, in 1925, and lived in Italy from 1935 until her death in 2016. The character psychological analysis, cultural identity and autobiographical themes are the central points of her novels and stories. Here we recall *Il tramviere impazzito*, *Negli occhi di una ragazza*, *Un leggero accento straniero*, *Viaggio a Ninive*, *Galambra*, *Ascanio and Margherita*, *Tre giorni alla fine di luglio*, *Un altro pezzo di mondo*, *Ti ho aspettato*, *Simone*, *Ritorno in Lettonia* (winner of 2004 Grinzane Cavour Prize), *Il silenzio di Mosca* and *Fuochi*.

"I'm never sure about my gestures: there is no accord between me and the surrounding space! When I move, I have to disentangle myself from thousands of invisible knots."

Upon all the things in her life, Jarre casts the same detached, alienating and slightly ironic gaze.

Marta Barone

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FICTION

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