

**Alba de Céspedes**

*Dalla parte di lei*

**(lit. *On Her Side*)**

Translated from the Italian by FRANCES FRENAYE

*From childhood's hour I have not been*

*As others were; I have not seen*

*As others saw; I could not bring*

*My passions from a common spring.*

*From the same source I have not taken*

*My sorrow; I could not awaken*

*My heart to joy at the same tone;*

*And all I loved, I loved alone.*

—POE

I first met Francesco Minelli in Rome on the 20th of October, 1941. I was writing my thesis, the last requirement for my degree, and for a year my father had been gradually going blind from cataracts. We were living in one of the new apartment houses along the Tiber in the Flaminio district, where we had moved immediately after my mother's death. I was an only child, although before I was born a brother whom I never knew, something of a child prodigy, drowned when he was only three years old. We had photographs of him all over the house, naked except for a white shirt slipping off his round little shoulders, or lying flat on his stomach on a bear rug. The one my mother liked best showed him standing erect with one hand stretched toward the keyboard of a piano; she always maintained that had he lived he would have been a second Mozart. My brother's name was Alessandro, and when I was born a few months after his death they called me Alessandra in order to perpetuate his memory and in the hope that I might inherit his remarkable gifts. This tie to my dead brother burdened my early years; and even later on I seldom escaped it. My parents . never scolded me without observing that I had failed to live up to my name. And vice versa, whenever I actually did get good marks or displayed any other commendable quality, they virtually gave Alessandro the credit. This denial of my individuality made me shy and rebellious. As time passed, I thought I noticed an increase of parental esteem; but they only gradually forgot my dead brother.

My mother employed a medium called Ottavia and a three-legged ouija board to communicate with my brother's spirit. His presence, a consolation to my mother, filled me with foreboding. I didn't doubt for a moment that he lived on in me, but, contrary to my parents' way of thinking, I felt it was merely in order to suggest wicked deeds, perverse thoughts, and unhealthy desires, to which I might just as well give in because I could not possibly combat them. In other words, to me Alessandro stood for the evil one or the devil. Here he is, I thought to myself; and he's the master. I imagined he could control me the way he did the ouija board.

I was often left alone in the house in the care of an old servant called Sista. My father was always at his office, and my mother too was away for a large part of the day. She was a piano teacher, and I later came to realize that she might have asserted considerable talent had she been able to go in for pure artistic expression instead of adapting herself to the demands of the rich families of her pupils. Before going out she always saw to it that I had something with which to amuse myself during her absence. I did not care for rough games, so she usually installed me in the little cane chair and arranged swatches of colored cloth, shells, and a few books on the low table beside me. Under her affectionate guidance I learned how to read and write at an early age, but this feat was of course attributed to Alessandro. The result was that I read a good many books that were over my head, although the selection she made was such as to provide me with a solid literary background.

After kissing me as passionately as if she were going far, far away, my mother would go, leaving me to myself. There would be a rattle of plates in the kitchen, then the gaunt shadow of Sista gliding through the hall to her room where every day at dusk I could hear her mumble her rosary. Knowing no one could catch me, I would leave the books and the shells behind and explore the house. We lived in the strictest economy, and I was forbidden to turn on the light; so I groped about in the shadows, holding my arms out in front of me like a sleepwalker. I touched heavy old pieces of furniture, which at this hour seemed to come out of their solid repose and acquire a mysterious animation; I opened doors and searched with feverish curiosity through chests of drawers. When all the rooms were finally invaded by darkness I squatted in a corner, overcome by a mixture of fear and enjoyment.

In summer I used to sit at a window overlooking the courtyard, overgrown with wisteria, which divided our house from a convent. Swallows would wheel down to rest in the shade, and the sound of their arrival drew me at once to the window. There I lingered, watching the birds, the changing pattern of the clouds in the sky, and what I could see of the secret life of the nuns, whose enlarged shadows flitted rapidly across the white blinds. The swallows' cruel cry stimulated me to wild fancies, and I took this strange state of mind for the presence of Alessandro.

At times I sought refuge with Sista, who used to sit near the stove that filled the kitchen with a red glow. When my mother came in and switched on the light, there I sat in a state of stupor brought on by the darkness and heat. She would pick me up in her arms as if in apology for her absence and tell me about her day.

My father usually came home late, as the southerners do. We would hear his long key in the lock. Most of the time we were in the kitchen, but before the key had turned completely my mother ran a hand over her hair and ensconced herself, with me beside her, on a stiff sofa in the dining room. She would pick up a book and pretend to be absorbed in it until finally she called out in joyfully surprised tones: "Is that you, Ariberto?" During the early years of my life my mother acted out this little scene every evening, and for a long time I could not fathom its meaning; yet at the same time I was fascinated by the harmonious ring of her voice through the house, lending my father's ugly name such a romantic sound.

My father was a tall, powerfully built man with his hair cut stiffly like a brush. When as a grown-up I saw pictures of him as a young man I understood why he had had such success with the ladies. He had deep-set, black eyes, thick, sensual lips, and always wore the traditional dark suit of a minor government employee. He talked very little, contenting himself for the most part with shaking his head in disapproval of what my mother said. She told of things she had seen or heard in the streets, embellishing them as she went along and adding a running commentary of her own, while my father looked at her and shook his head.

They quarreled frequently, without making noisy scenes, but throwing out brief, barbed phrases at each other in a low voice. If it had not been for the repressed angry look in their eyes I should never have known they

were quarreling. At such times Sista, who was usually lurking just behind the door, whisked me off to the kitchen and made me say the rosary with her.

Meanwhile my parents would shut themselves up in their room. After Sista and I lapsed into silence I feared the sudden appearance in the doorway of one of the spirits called up by Ottavia the medium, which I childishly imagined as creaking skeletons. "I'm afraid, Sista," I would whisper, and Sista would say, "Afraid of what?" But her voice wavered, and she would glance in the direction of my mother's room as if she too were afraid.

We could hear them speaking softly, but I could never catch a single word they said. The real index of their tumult was the silence that reigned in the dark hallway and the four other rooms, an insidious silence which crept out from under the door and permeated the rest of the house like leaking gas. Finally Sista let her knitting drop to her lap, her hands trembling. Then, with plain signs of impatience and anxiety, she led me to my own room, where she hurriedly undressed me and tucked me in bed. I complied with her wishes and let her turn out the light, still awed by the silence emanating from my parents. In the course of such nights my mother often tiptoed in, bent over my bed, and convulsively embraced me. She did not put the light on, and all I could see was her white nightgown; but I threw my arms around her neck and returned her kisses. A second later she was gone, and I fell back to sleep in ex-haustion.

My mother's name was Eleonora, and from her I inherited my blonde hair. She was so fair that when she sat against the light her hair seemed pure white, and I looked at her with astonishment. She had blue eyes and a very clear skin, inherited from her Austrian mother, a well known actress who had given up the stage in order to marry my grandfather, an Italian artillery officer. In fact, that name was given to my mother as a memento of Ibsen's *Doll's House*, in which my grandmother liked to play on gala evenings. Two or three times a year, on the rare occasions when my mother allowed herself an afternoon off, she would seat me beside her and take out of the "picture box" a number of photographs of my grandmother. She looked so stylish in her stage costumes, with feather-trimmed hats and pearls strung in her loose hair, that I could hardly believe she was a member of our family, one who might have come to see us, passing through the downstairs doorway, where the porter, a part-time shoe-maker, made the air ring with his hammering. I knew by heart the names of the roles in which she had appeared. My mother wanted me to be familiar with the theater, and so she told me the plots of many plays and praised me for speaking of their heroes and heroines as if they were present among us. These hours, I treasured in my memory. Sista sat all the while in one corner of the room, with her hands folded under her apron, as if to assert by her presence the truth of such marvelous stories.

In the same box were photographs of my father's relatives, who were little more than peasants with small holdings in the Abruzzi region. The women had full breasts under their tight black bodices, and their hair was parted in the middle. One of the pictures was of my paternal grandfather, wearing a black jacket and a flowing bow tie. "They're good people," my mother commented. "Countryfolk, you know." They often sent us bags of flour and baskets of delicious stuffed figs, but none of the women had a name like Desdemona, Juliet, or Ophelia. I preferred Shakespeare's tragic heroines to all their sweetmeats and tacitly joined in my mother's unspoken scorn. We opened their parcels in an almost condescending manner; only Sista appreciated the good things that came in them and stored them carefully away.

Sista virtually worshiped my mother. She had been used to working for low-class women who used vulgar language and had no interest in anything beyond their own kitchen cupboards. Hence the singular personality of her new mistress fascinated her from the start. When my father was out of the house she followed my mother every-where, making up at night for the work she had let drop during the day. As soon as my mother sat down at the piano she left whatever she was doing, tucked up her apron, and stationed herself in the drawing room, taking as much pleasure in scales and exercises as in Mozart sonatas.

Sista sat by preference in the shadows; looking back on my childhood, I can see her beady Sardinian eyes gleaming in the darkness. What bound her to our house was the irresistible attraction of my mother. She had to overcome religious scruples in order to remain in our service, for my mother never went to Mass nor gave me any re-ligious education. Sista probably thought that living with us was a mortal sin, admitted as much to her confessor and resolved to break away, but could not actually bring herself to do it. When my mother was away the house must have seemed to her like a lifeless corpse. If her mistress was late in returning Sista at once imagined that such a distracted person could only have been run over by a car or a tram. At such times I sensed a mute cry in her throat as she crouched motionless in the kitchen with her hands on the beads of her rosary or held over the brazier. Then I too became gripped by unreasonable fear and huddled close to her side. Our sadness would grow with the slowly approaching darkness, until my mother finally appeared at the door, gaily calling out, "I'm home!" as if in answer to our unspoken plea.

Sista waited upon my father in a loyal and deferent manner. She respected his position as master of the house, yet, whenever she had some request, she addressed herself to him more readily, because she knew that he came from the same humble origins as herself. His squalid love affairs did not upset her, for in both her native village and the big city she had often seen married men carry on in the same way.

For a long time I could not understand why my parents had married; how they first happened to meet, I never did discover. My father was a commonplace white-collar employee and family man. His interests were narrow, and his conversation limited to a discontented account of office rivalries. His outward appearance had nothing intellectual about it; his pronounced height and girth and broad shoulders gave an impression of overbearing physical strength, while his typically Mediterranean black eyes were as moist and melting as ripe figs. Only his hands, on one of which he wore a gold snake ring, were distinguished. Extraordinarily well shaped, they reflected the glory of an ancient race. Their delicate soft skin seemed to burn from hot blood flowing just below the surface, and it was this hidden warmth that gave me the first intimation of what had attracted my mother to him.

My parents' room was next to mine, and sometimes I stayed awake at night kneeling on my bed with my ears pressed against the wall. I was devoured with jealousy, and at such times it seemed to me that only "Alessandro" could have prompted me to such base behavior. One day, when I was not yet ten years old, I surprised my father and mother embracing each other with their backs turned to me. One of my father's hands was on my mother's hip, tapping it greedily. She was wearing a lightweight dress and must have felt the heat of his skin; but plainly it did not displease her. Suddenly he placed his lips on her neck. I imagined that his lips must be as burning as his hands, and that they would leave a red mark on her sensitive white skin. I waited for her to repel him with one of her characteristic brusque gestures, but instead she leaned heavily against him. Turning to run away, I bumped into a chair, and they wheeled about in surprise. "What's the matter, Sandi dear?" my mother asked. Then, catching sight of my taut face, she added, with an empty and mannered laugh: "Are you jealous? Tell me." I could not answer, only stare at her. I went back to my room, suffering acutely from my mother's betrayal. I could still see my father's conspiratorial smile, and for the first time I thought of him as an enemy, an intruder in our feminine world.

We lived in a large gray apartment house on the Via Paolo Emilio, which had been built before the turn of the century. The entrance was narrow, dark, and dirty because, as I have indicated, the porter had little time to spare from his cobbling and his wife, a slovenly creature, took little care of the house. Only a small skylight in the roof lit the dark, winding stairway. In spite of the building's dubious appearance, the tenants were for the most part respectable lower middle-class people. The men worked all day and came home at a regular hour every evening with a newspaper under an arm. Through the day, the house was the undisputed domain of the women, who went constantly up and down the dark stairs: with a marketing bag first empty and then full, or a bottle of milk wrapped in a newspaper; with a lunch box in one hand as they took the children to school in the morning, their blue pinafores sticking out from under coats that had grown too

short. They climbed the stairs hastily without looking to either side; they knew by heart the scribblings that disfigured the walls, and with their hands they had worn the wooden banister thin. Only the boys and girls tripped down the stairs happily, drawn by the outdoors. The boys in the house made little impression on my memory. When they were small they messed about all day on the sidewalk, and later they began to play ball in the school playground near by. Then, as they grew up, they went into their fathers' offices and shared their same routine. Outside, the house looked empty and sad; but the large courtyard within was a lung through which it drew an abundant life of its own. It was lined with narrow, rusty iron balconies, which gave some idea of the age and economic status of the tenants to whom they belonged. Some people crowded them with chicken coops, others with children's toys. Ours was decked out with plants.

In the courtyard the women enjoyed the kind of ease and intimacy that is found in a boarding school or an institution. Their relationship was based less on the fact that they lived under a common roof than on an awareness of the drudgery they shared. A whole round of daily tasks and hardships bound them unconsciously together and made them indulgent of one another's failings. Without the necessity of posing before masculine eyes, they showed their true selves. As at a convent with the sounding of the chapel bell, the day officially began with the throwing open of the first shutters. Every woman took upon herself the tasks of the house and found peace in the thought that, above and below, her companions were making the same familiar gestures and wearing the same faded dressing gowns. No one of them dared to pause in her routine, for fear of putting the whole machinery out of gear. However, in everything that they did they dimly perceived a certain poetic quality. A rope run from one balcony to another for hanging up the wash was something like a friendly hand, and baskets were raised and lowered from one floor to the next to carry some borrowed kitchen utensil or foodstuff. During the morning the women did not have time to talk; the most they attempted was: "What a nice day!" In the afternoon, the courtyard was empty and silent; behind the windows one could guess at spotlessly tidy kitchens. On the balconies a few old creatures sat over their sewing, and servant girls shelled peas or peeled potatoes into a pot. Toward evening when they went inside to cook dinner, I had the courtyard to myself.

On summer nights the men often came out after dinner to sit in their shirt sleeves or even in their pajamas on the balconies, and I could see the tips of their cigarettes gleaming in the darkness. The women said good evening to one another stiffly, in a tone of voice quite different from that in which they spoke in the daytime. Some-times they talked about the ailments of their children, but they soon showed signs of fatigue and went inside, closing the shutters behind them and leaving nothing but black silence between one balcony and the next. My mother very seldom came out on the balcony at all, and then only in order to water her flowers. The rareness of her appearances struck the neighbors as condescending; but at the same time it aroused their respect. Our family, poor as it was, enjoyed a particular consideration because of my mother's natural beauty, proud carriage, and serene good humor. There were some other women of refinement in the house, schoolteachers or office workers before their marriage; but my mother exchanged with them no more than the briefest salutation or comment on the weather and the price of groceries. The only exception to this rule was a woman on the floor above us, called Lydia.

My mother often took me to her apartment to play with Fulvia, her daughter. We two children were left to our own devices in a playroom full of inexpensive toys. Our mothers sat back on Lydia's bed and whispered to each other with such intensity that when we came to ask them for a scarf, a pen point, or a piece of paper for our games, they gave it to us at once on condition that we leave them strictly alone. At first I could not understand what my mother and that woman could have in common. But in a short time I found myself falling little by little under the influence of the daughter, who soon became my very best friend. Fulvia looked older than I although she was actually some months younger. She was a dark-haired beauty with pronounced and vivacious features, and at the age of twelve or thirteen she was so rounded out that, when we went out with Sista, men stopped to look at her. There was in her a close re-semblance to her mother, a stoutish, fresh-skinned, attractive woman whose shimmering silk dresses were cut so low as to reveal the

cleft between her breasts. Lydia and Fulvia lived for the most part alone, since Signor Celanti was a traveling salesman. He was like a stranger in his own house, for they did not conceal the fact that his occasional presence upset their normal schedule. When he was at home they ate their meals hurriedly, went to bed early, and answered the telephone in guarded phrases. The mother feigned endless headaches, and the child treated him to an exhibition of her most unpleasant behavior. All the regular visitors, such as my mother, suspended their visits as soon as they heard Lydia say, "Domenico is here"; and, whether by accident or design, the apartment was so uncomfortable and disorderly that Signor Celanti soon set out again on his travels, muttering the praises of hotel life. No sooner had Signor Celanti gone than Lydia and Fulvia fell back into their usual habits. Lydia held long telephone conversations and then went out, leaving a trail of cheap perfume behind her. She was off to see the captain, who, as Fulvia and I well knew, was the subject of her whispered confidences to my mother. She never spoke of him except by his rank—"My friend the captain says this or that"—almost as if she did not know his name. This did not strike as out of the way, for other women in the house often made equally vague references to "my friend the lawyer," or "my friend the engineer." Lydia told of lovers' meetings, long walks, and *billets doux* while my mother listened to every detail with sympathetic trepidation. As I grew older I noticed that my mother's visits to her friend generally took place the day after one of the evenings when she had shut herself up in silence with my father. Her friendship with Lydia was an almost vicious form of curiosity. They first had come to know each other over Fulvia's piano lessons. Lydia came to knock at our door, but fearing that arriving unannounced, she might find the apartment in embarrassing disorder, she at first refused to come in. As a matter of fact, her knock had flabbergasted us completely; we were not used to being called upon for even so much as a pinch of salt. Lydia later admitted that she had come only because she was anxious to see my mother after all that she had heard about her. In any case my mother insisted on leading her into our dark and airless drawing room and took a liking to her immediately. Lydia was as freshly scented and brightly colored as a newly watered flower. My mother was pale, and her figure was not fully developed, so that she admired Lydia's full-blown breasts, which seemed to live a life of their own, quite apart from that of their owner. After the infliction of a few music lessons upon the reluctant Fulvia, who only wanted to learn to play the latest popular songs, the two women struck up a friendship. My mother went punctually to the lessons; but as soon as she came to the door Lydia called from her room, "Come here, Eleonora," offered her a cigarette and poured out the secrets of her heart, hour after hour. I was jealous of Lydia. Upon Sista's instigation I dared one evening to go ask my mother to come home. "Tell my mother that it's very late," I said scowlingly to Lydia when she opened the door. "Come in and tell her yourself," she answered. I had rarely been in anyone else's home, and I was curious to see how others lived. When Lydia closed the door behind me I began gaping at some prints of mythological subjects, nymphs dancing in the meadows. "This is Fulvia," Lydia interrupted. "I'm sure you'll be friends." It was a hot summer day, and Fulvia was lounging about in a long voile dress that belonged to her mother. She wore lipstick, and her hair was on top of her head. "I'm Gloria Swanson," she said; and then, seeing that I had not caught on to the game, she undid my braids. "I'll dress you up like Lillian Gish," she explained. Soon Fulvia was as attached to me as Lydia was to my mother. They were attracted, no doubt, by our ingenuousness and by an unconscious desire to upset the orderly placidity of our existence. Stimulated by our easily aroused astonishment, they revealed all sorts of secrets about the house where we were living. The women with whom we had rubbed elbows for years on the stairway were transformed into heroines as romantic as those my grandmother had impersonated on the stage. At last we understood the reason for the silence of the courtyard in the afternoon. Once they had discharged their thankless morning duties the women rebelled against the narrow stuffiness of their lives; they fled from the dark rooms, the gray kitchens, and the courtyard that mutely awaited the end of another wasted day. Only old women, bent over their sewing, were left to mount guard in the freshly scrubbed apartments, and they did not betray their younger sisters; in fact they contrived to second them in every possible way, as if in tacit alliance. For they shared a silent scorn for the masculine order of things, a repressed bitterness that had been handed down from generation to generation.

When the men got up in the morning they put on their neatly pressed clothes, gulped down their coffee, and went out into the bracing air, leaving their family worries behind them together with their stuffy homes, the disheveled beds they slept in, and the dirty breakfast dishes. As soon as they came into the house at noon they would ask "Is lunch ready?" They took off their jackets and sat down at the table in their worn suspenders. When the food was served they more often than not made dampening comments like "The spaghetti is undercooked," or "The rice is overdone." After lunch they sat in the only comfortable chair in the dining room reading from their newspapers and drawing the most dire conclusions. Food prices always seemed to be going up while salaries went down. This could only mean that their wives must pare expenses to the bone. They never found anything to be glad about in the papers. It was soon time to return to their offices, and they left noisily, every apartment door slamming at approximately the same time as the other doors on the floors above and below. When they came back again in the evening, the children were on their way to bed and the weary day was over. Once more they peeled off their jackets, sat down beside the radio, and listened to the news. They had nothing to say, not even so much as "How are you feeling?" or "Aren't you tired?" or "That's a pretty dress." They had no small talk, and rarely joked or smiled. When they did say something to their wives it was "You always do thus and so," a phrase which lumped them with children, mothers-in-law and maidservants, a lazy, extravagant and ungrateful bunch of women.

Nevertheless, according to the custom of the middle class in the south, each one of these stagnant marriages had been preceded by a long and romantic engagement. The young man had written passionate love letters, waited for hours to see his beloved appear at a window and followed her when she went strolling with her mother. Some-times the girls had waited for years before they could marry, usually because their fiancés didn't have steady jobs or enough money to set up housekeeping. With loving hands these women had prepared their trousseaus and dreamed of their future happiness. But it had all turned to ashes, and they were condemned to this exhausting routine, this round of kitchen and children.

Still the women went on from one day to the next without complaint. At first they had wanted to remind their husbands of their girlish aspirations, and had spent many a night in tears while their husbands slept unfeelingly at their sides. They had had recourse to coquetry, guile, pretended fainting spells, and had even taken their husbands for walks in the shady lanes where they had once walked together as lovers. But this last stratagem usually turned against them, for in the very place where the betrothed had exchanged vows and kisses, where they had trembled with amorous curiosity and desire, husband and wife now had only the most indifferent things to say to each other. During the first years of their marriage many of these women had fits of hysterical weeping, and one of them, Lydia said, had tried to poison herself with an overdose of veronal. Others, with strong religious convictions, resigned themselves to old age and unattractiveness. But the majority simply sent their husbands off to the office and the children to the park with the servant. Everyone left the house on private business or pleasure, without stopping to ask them what they were going to do. There was little need to ask, after one look at the piles of clothes waiting to be ironed or mended.

In the winter, Fulvia said, the cold weather kept the women close to the fire or the kitchen stove. But in the spring and summer, when the odor of mimosa and honeysuckle penetrated the courtyard, the women threw open their windows and heeded the call of the wheeling swallows. Their patience came to an end, and, shaking off their remorse with a hasty "Jesus, forgive me" as they passed the image of the Sacred Heart in the hall, they scurried into their rooms to change their clothes. When they came out they were completely transformed in black dresses with a flower print and floppy wide-brimmed hats that shaded their faces. Powdered and painted, with net gloves on their hands, they came to show themselves to their elders. The old women did not look up; they recognized the smell of the perfume and the resolute tone of voice that said: "I'm going out, now." Even with a son's wife, they sympathized and kept faith.

The lovers, Fulvia told me as she pointed them out through the window, usually waited at the corner. Everyone in the neighborhood knew them for what they were, men often a little younger and of a slightly



better social class. I had always imagined a lover as romantically handsome and well dressed, and I was surprised to find that most of them did not live up to these qualifications.

My mother and I, vaguely troubled by Lydia's and Fulvia's stories, always went home in silence. I would go straight to bed, and my mother, after putting out the light, would sit for a moment beside me; if my father called her at a time like this she answered in a dry and contemptuous tone. Meanwhile Alessandro tormented me. Before my eyes danced the love letters which Fulvia told me were delivered by servant girls or the old porter downstairs. I wished I could steal and read them all. My mother lingered by my bed in silence, then went away without kissing me good night. Soon Sista came in and woke me from my dozing. "You've been to see *those women*," she said. "Say an act of contrition and a Hail Mary."

At this point two new factors came into our life: my mother's acquaintance with the Pierce family and the first séances with the medium Ottavia. The Pierces were of English origin and had moved that year from Florence to Rome. The mother, a rich American, used her money to buy works of art and aid struggling young artists and musicians. They lived in a villa on the Janiculum which had an enchanting view, with church domes framed in the windows like family portraits and the Tiber winding in and out among its bridges like a ribbon threaded in a piece of lace. Often my mother proposed that we go up to the Janiculum for a Sunday walk in order that my father and I might admire the Pierces' garden, and sometimes we wandered in as far as the inside gates. There my mother pointed out the three large windows on the second floor. This was the music room, with a grand piano which Mrs. Pierce had ordered all the way from America and a harp, her own preferred instrument. The villa was a fine example of post-Renaissance architecture, but the thickness of the surrounding vegetation made it impossible to look into the garden. We saw some handsome big dogs, and my mother told me there were peacocks on the lawn; but these I never glimpsed. Both of us were fascinated by the house; but my father, perhaps with a poor man's natural resentment toward people leading a life of such ostentatious leisure, did not share our enthusiasm and would urge us away to drink lemonade at the café near by, or else refuse point-blank to hang about the gate "like a beggar." At the end of every Sunday afternoon he took us to the café. I had always been very keen on ices; but after gazing at the Pierces' villa I was usually in a pensive and distracted mood and sat playing with my spoon until most of the ice had melted into a little pool on my plate. My mother did the same, and this annoyed my father beyond words, for he wrongly interpreted it as dissatisfaction with our financial standing and scorn for his inability to make more money.

In reality my mother and I were not in the least concerned about the way we lived. She wore the same clothes year after year, and her occasional attempts to freshen them up with a pin or ribbon only served to accentuate their outmoded style. She had no furs, only a wrinkled black coat which she wore all winter long; and the beautiful thick hair coiled at the back of her neck was hidden by hats so plain that even an old woman would have scorned them. These Sunday afternoon walks were our only amusement. Both of us gazed at the villa so ardently because we took delight in the tall trees around the house in an almost human arrangement of groups and couples. We envied the Pierces for living among them. Of course this was only one of the privileges they enjoyed, and my mother did at times say that they were lucky because their money allowed them to lead a life of their own choosing.

Deep in these thoughts, we sat at the sidewalk café. Around other iron tables were similar family groups. All about us were cheap apartment buildings, the windows crowded with people looking resentfully down at us until we finally cleaned our plates. A tram line ran close to the sidewalk, and, every time a car went by, the noise drowned out our desultory conversation. My thoughts kept returning to the garden gate, to the tall trees covered with moss and ivy, to the green lawns where peacocks I had never seen were walking, and to the arched second-foot windows, with a grand piano and a harp reposing in the shadows behind them. My

mother loved that piano not only for its excellent tone but also because she did not have to use it to teach tedious scales and exercises; she could play whatever she liked on it, just as if she were in her own home. The circumstances under which she had been called to the Pierces' villa were unusual. When she had gone there the first time the lady of the house had not received her in the usual perfunctory manner and hurriedly left her alone with her new pupil. Instead, she had offered her a cup of tea and talked at length of her travels, her art collection, and her family. Her husband was a businessman who collected Brazilian butterflies in his spare time; her older daughter was married and lived in London, and two younger children, Hervey and Arletta, lived with her. Hervey, she noted in passing, spent most of his time visiting health resorts.

Arletta was to be my mother's charge; but the purpose was less to teach her to play the piano than to arouse her interest in music as other tutors were going to stimulate it in poetry and painting. Arletta, Mrs. Pierce confessed in a low voice, was totally devoid of artistic sensibility. She preferred jazz songs to chamber music and cheap novels to literature. To the rest of the family this was very distressing; and indeed it was one of the reasons why Hervey was so often absent from Rome. Prolonged contact with so different a sister annoyed him. In fact he had only recently left Rome and was going to stay away for a year.

A few minutes later Arletta came into the room. My mother had imagined her as enterprising, vivacious, and argumentative, but now found herself face to face with a plump, blonde creature, homely and sluggish. She looked expectantly at my mother as if hoping to find an escape from the critical opinion of her own family, and offered at once to show her the music room.

The room was half dark, and the trees just outside the windows gave it the greenish, under-water color of an aquarium. The piano was obscurely outlined, like an island, in one corner of the room, and the dull gold of the harp shone through the cloud of dust particles in the sun's rays. The only other furnishings were a few Empire chairs, with a lyre design on their backs, and two couches in which deep hollows had been worn. Near one window four music stands threw transparent shadows resembling skeletons against the white wall. My mother and Arletta walked on tiptoe, fearful of disturbing the silence and immobility of the room. Suddenly the girl halted by the window: the light falling upon her white arms and white dress made her seem like a floating jellyfish.

"I'm afraid," she said. "My brother doesn't like me to come into this room." And she seemed to be really afraid. "I haven't any gift at all for music. In fact, it is positively hateful to me. I don't know why, but I can't help it. Hervey is quite right. He will travel any distance just to hear a certain pianist, and when he's here he practically lives in this room with his records and his violin. He doesn't want me to come in here; maybe he's afraid that something of me will remain in the air and disturb him even after I've gone. It's all very painful, almost as if I had some mysterious contagious disease. You must cure me, perhaps beginning with very easy pieces of the kind they teach children. Somehow I'll grit my teeth and bear it. I must get over this condition. I care more for my brother Hervey than for anyone else on the earth." She said these last words in a subdued tone of voice.

My mother took her by the hand and thanked her for her frankness. Then she threw open a window as if to lighten the mystery of the room. The branch of a fir tree, which apparently had been lying in wait behind it, sprang into the room. Still the place remained secretive and impenetrable, and the musical instruments seemed to conceal the thoughts and feelings of human beings. "It's Hervey," Arletta repeated, looking around fearfully. And my mother too began to be ill at ease.

"Not even my mother dares to come in here to play when he's not home," Arletta said, pointing to a chair near the harp. "When my mother plays Hervey stretches out on the couch and shuts his eyes to listen." "And what about you?" "I stay in my room or walk at the opposite end of the garden where he can't see me." My mother started to demur at Hervey's strange behavior, but Arletta came at once to his defense: "Hervey is an artist, you know. He not only plays the violin, but composes on the piano as well. Mother says his pieces are

very fine. No, the fault is all mine. Lady Randall—my sister Shirley, who lives in London—plays the piano beautifully."

In order to take on this new pupil my mother had to give up some others, since twice a week she spent most of the afternoon at the Pierces' villa. My father argued against it, saying that she risked losing her regulars and might not be able to get them back if the Pierces should suddenly go away; but my mother was obstinate in her decision. On the days when she was to go to Arletta she was as restless as if she had been invited to a party. She got up early and went over and over on the piano the pieces she intended to play.

With the exclusive affection I felt for her I should have been very jealous had it not been that she came back from the Pierces in an unusually happy humor, with brisk steps ringing cheerfully through the dark apartment.

Often she brought cakes or candies which the Pierces had given her. I ate them without pleasure, and my father was visibly annoyed. He must have feared that after glimpsing a life so different from ours my mother would be discontented with the daily round. Most of her other pupils came from lower middle-class families and were learning music in order to teach in their turn. They gave her very little satisfaction, and never did she meet anyone of interest at their homes. It was only in order to contribute to our household expenses that she went out in every sort of weather, climbed into a crowded tram, went up and down stairways as sordid as our own. I was glad that she found relaxation in the afternoons she spent at the Pierces', and willingly helped Sista relieve her of some of her domestic burdens. I learned to mend my clothes, and really enjoyed sitting over the work near my favorite window with my thoughts free to wander where they would.

Of late my thoughts had been considerably disturbed by what Ottavia the medium had revealed about the mysterious and terrifying characters who lived in the twilight sky. Ottavia was an old acquaintance of the Celantis, and Fulvia had often spoken to me about her when we were left alone. Once I had seen her on the stairs, a well built, middle-aged woman with gray hair cropped in an almost masculine style. She carried a large bag, filled with sacred pictures, religious medals strung on red ribbons, and little packages of herbs to be used as protection against the evil eye. With her was a fifteen-year-old boy, introduced as her nephew, whose head was clean-shaved even in winter. Ottavia's left leg was shorter than the right, so that she limped; but she was not in the least mortified, and her step even rang out in an almost arrogant manner. Enea, the boy, followed her at a respectful distance, always dressed in black, with stockings and gloves, which gave him the appearance of a seminarian. His dark, melting eyes, under bushy eyebrows, reminded me of my father.