

12. TWO DIFFERENT SPECIES OF ANIMALS

Santino drove slowly up the winding road towards Naro. At each bend, the view widened: the sea, below, became increasingly vast and the mountain, above, smaller and smaller. Scorched by the sun, the land planted with wheat looked like liquid gold. Cars belonging to the other guests were heading in his same direction, and they almost formed a procession.

Once they had reached Naro, the drive to Villa Mennulia would have taken no time at all, and it was Assunta herself, encouraged by the beautiful weather—blue sky, sun strong but not too hot—who suggested they park and walk the rest of the way.

Santino watched her step out of the car, measuring her movements, and looking very elegant in the dress he had bought for her. Sewn by two seamstresses from Palermo—sisters famous for their attention to detail—the dress, of a burnished gold, its bodice embroidered with beads, was a sight to behold. Assunta still looked like a girl, her body supple and firm. “You look beautiful,” Santino told her, offering his arm, which she took with a smile. Together they walked towards the main street, overlooked by the gates of the aristocratic palaces and the façades of the churches, some of which were open for worship, while others, attached to convents, opened only for High Mass. Naro had been a district capital when Sicily was under Bourbon rule, and it had a seminary and a medieval castle that was no longer in use but was still majestic. There was a solemn air about the village, with the eighteenth-century stairways that followed the slope of the land, and the ochre-coloured tuff gleaming in the sun.

They set off without delay towards Villa Mennulia, down a white road from which they had a view of the almond grove that covered the hill as far as the eye could see. The age-old plants and trees, having lived through war and devastation, still had the boldness and pride of ancient times. There were also large clumps of carob trees, some old and some younger ones that had grown back after being ravaged by lightning. Near the gates of the villa pots of flowering oleanders had been placed. Assunta said to her son: “It means a lot, this wedding, to the Mennulias”. And she pulled a face.

As they walked, they found themselves caught up in a small group of wedding guests, whom Santino knew by sight. They introduced themselves to Assunta and started walking beside them. Santino quivered with embarrassment: they were vulgar people he didn’t want to mix with, and it irked him to see his mother strut conspicuously beside those overdressed and heavily made-up women. He took her by the arm: “Let’s hurry, Ma... They’ve reserved seats for us, and it’ll look bad if we’re late.”

They outpaced the small group, made up of men squeezed into suits that looked too tight—perhaps because they weren’t new anymore, or perhaps to show how well-built, as well as wealthy, those who wore them were—and of women fiddling with hats and hairstyles they weren’t used to wearing. Even the children seemed boorish, thought Santino irritably, all dressed up like miniature adults. There was a great abundance of jewellery on show: the less well-off women had borrowed pieces from wealthier relatives, who were sure that their generosity wouldn’t go unnoticed and unappreciated by the rest of the guests.

Santino and Assunta stepped under the golden stone arch of the entrance and continued along the cobblestones. The scent of the oleanders was strong. The Mennulias had done all they could to spruce up the old garden, having the dry branches cut and the hedges and bushes pruned, and to restore the tuff stone, which, according to the custom, had been carefully scrubbed for the occasion. At the entrance to the small church the bride's relatives were already waiting; the groom would appear at the appropriate time.

As soon as he saw Santino, Peppe took a confident step towards him. He bowed slightly in the direction of Assunta, and with a muttered "excuse us" pulled Santino away from his mother. "This is it! We've done it!" he said to his friend, hugging him, and planting a kiss on his cheek. "Thanks for being here," he went on, "I'll be with you when your time comes." The two men shared a kind of masculine intimacy that derives, more than from the strength of the bond, from the trust the more powerful man places in his younger, less powerful counterpart, who returns that trust in kind. "You were right to bring your mother. There's no other woman here who can compete."

Assunta's eyes calmly surveyed the scene, while giving the impression that she wasn't looking at anything in particular: an elaborate survival technique she'd honed over many years of marriage. Though she couldn't help but feel the other guests staring at her—mean people, with long memories—she was able to ignore them.

Santino and Peppe scanned the reception hall with a satisfied sense of fullness. In front of them stood the family church that hadn't been opened in at least half a century, the little wall that ran alongside it lined with moss-stained statues. "Beautiful," said Peppe solemnly, as if he were totting up a commercial value he wasn't used to calculating. "Beautiful, but not for us."

Before he could stop himself, Santino blurted out a question that sounded surreptitious: "Would you live here?"

"Well... I guess I could get used to it," Peppe replied. "I could." And then he added, more firmly: "But now we've a wedding to go to." And they walked into the church.

Shining on the altar were the twelve silver candelabra from the Mennulia household, which had been divided up among the various branches of the family, reunited now as they once had been—perhaps for the last time—for the momentous occasion. The guests stared at them admiringly, commenting in more or less hushed tones. Some claimed to know their worth to the penny; others were adamant that there had originally been eighteen of them, and suspected that the missing six candelabra had been sold off to raise money, perhaps in Palermo or maybe even in Catania, away from prying eyes. What was certain was that they set the altar ablaze with silver, a spectacle that did not go unnoticed.

Silence fell, as always, when the bride made her entrance.

The organ, which was a tad out-of-tune on the higher notes, struck up the wedding march from *Lohengrin*, and Matilde Mennulia proceeded down the aisle, holding her father's arm on the slightly worn red carpet. When they reached the altar, the baron handed her over to Peppe Giaele who was waiting for her there. Crowned with a diamond tiara, her hair gathered at the nape of her neck in a chignon adorned with white rosettes, the bride's hairstyle emphasised her long, bony and slightly

lopsided face, where two close-set eyes shone and a sharp nose protruded. Matilde was not good-looking—not in the way her father was, gaunt but upright, with broad shoulders and long hands, and a face striking for its full lips and the celestine depths of its pupils. The suit he wore was not of new design, but fitted him perfectly, shattering any competition from the rich sartorial vanity exhibited by the other men present.

Baron Mennulia took his place in the first pew next to his wife. They flashed smiles at the guests that were polite but strained. On the other side of the aisle stood Peppe Giaele's father—his mother had passed away—next to a woman who had introduced herself as the groom's aunt, and who was barely visible under the wide brims of a pink organza hat.

"At least we'll have grandchildren," sighed the baroness.

"But they won't carry our name. The Mennulias are finished," he countered.

The baron was seen furtively wiping his eyes. They were tears of spite and sorrow, which the guests mistook for paternal affection.

The wedding ceremony was over quickly. The priest seemed to hurry through it and even the vows were exchanged without much gravitas. Everyone felt overwhelmed by the majesty of the twelve silver candelabra.

Peppe took Matilde's hand and contemplated the heavy wedding ring on her finger. When it came to the benediction, the organ began to play again, and the music accompanied the guests as they trickled out. Schubert's *Ave Maria*, made a little unsteady by that ever-sinking C, wafted through the courtyard, where there gathered the huddles of guests who hadn't been able to get a seat inside and the attendants waiting for orders. Their expressions, more often than not, betrayed inquisitiveness rather than emotion, as they all waited in silence for the bride and groom to emerge. The sun was high.

When Peppe and Matilde eventually appeared in the portico, resonant applause erupted. This was then echoed by a rustling of leaves and a squawking of frightened birds, which took flight and circled over the clearing in front of the church, before returning to settle on their branches, their curiosity unsated.

Tables had been laid in the inner courtyard for lunch. The long buffet tables were resplendent, covered with embroidered tablecloths from the Mennulia household which the Carmelite nuns of Palermo had festooned with a bounty of flowers and fruit. Like the tablecloths, Matilde's gown also hailed from the past. It was made of rustling moiré silk and combined with a veil of Brussels lace that had belonged to her great-great-grandmother, and hung from her tiara to the train of her dress. Though there had been no way to get the tiara cleaned, for it was the only surviving piece of family jewellery, the diamonds in Matilde's ears were dazzling. They had been gifted to her by Peppe's father, who now admired them, relishing every twinkle of the stones, oblivious even to the smiles of his daughter-in-law.

On the main buffet table the chicken galantine was displayed, sliced and arranged on long oval plates, accompanied by Olivier salad sprinkled with parsley leaves. Arranged in rows, there followed platters of meat and fish, finely prepared, and

ready to welcome forks and spoons but recomposed into elaborate shapes: the fish was fish-shaped, the meat expertly assembled.

Waiters came from the kitchens carrying large silver trays with circular casserole dishes of steaming baked pasta, a tuft of basil in the middle garnishing the parmesan and breadcrumb crust.

Flocks of women peeled away from the mass of guests and hurried toward the buffet tables. They seemed almost ungainly, despite their elegant attire, disregarding the composure that the occasion demanded. What drove them was a mixture of gluttony and curiosity, the desire to consume that untouched table with their eyes—before the onslaught of the other guests—and revel in its grandeur or criticise it. There were men, too, among their ranks, motivated only by genuine gluttony.

Choosing to be alone for a moment, the groom surveyed his wife and the assault on the buffet tables contentedly, as if it all now was his. Right on schedule, the musicians silently took their seats on the reception hall's stage, going over the agreed-upon setlist with him one more time. Eventually they struck up a light waltz in C major, which floated through the air without prompting anyone to dance.

Santino roamed among the guests, recognising the men of power and influence. The purpose of all this magnificent spectacle, after all, was precisely that: to let everyone know just how crucial connections were for a building developer. It didn't matter if politicians and administrators changed; whoever was in power, whatever party they belonged to, the important thing was to have them on your side. Santino also spotted two bishops and the nephew of a cardinal from far away, who was engaged to the daughter of a Christian Democrat politician.

The food and drink put everyone in high spirits, especially when the wedding cake was wheeled out, met with gasps of approval and delight. Three-tiered, snow-white, decorated with a flock of meringue birds and topped with a silver dove spreading its wings, it was a true masterpiece of patisserie. But such outpouring of emotion was the preserve of only a small minority. One did not go to weddings to be merry, but to feast the eyes; to eat, preferably well; and to criticise, preferably with good cause—and a wedding such as this presented ample opportunities. There was, of course, the social divide, the abyss between classes, evident even to the untrained eye. It was as if two different species of animals were moving around inside the same enclosure, studying each other: the new rich invited by the Giaeles and the no longer rich of the Mennulia family. The former were excited, piqued by curiosity, the latter obliged to defend their dilapidated position as graciously as they could.

Between these two circled another, timeless species—that of the officials, local and regional. This species was the most resilient, seemingly removed from the fray and yet well-accustomed, due to the vagaries of their status, to curry favour with equal diligence among winners and losers, the clumsy and the refined, the arrogant and the subservient. As the wedding cake sunk into creamy ruins and the orchestra played on, the three species split apart and mingled, each participating in the social ritual to which they had been summoned. There was a new family on the scene, providing an inviting pretext for gossip. And it was all too easy to spot the gaffes and excesses of the new

money, where their behaviour strayed into the grotesque and the pathetic. A skilled photographer would have caught the contrasts, the rifts, the comedy and despair.

The bride and groom seemed determined to do their best. During the reception it had become clear to everyone what the essence of their union was: if there was no passion between them, there was certainly harmony. Passion could be found elsewhere, and if handled with dignity, the arrangement would make everyone happy, even Matilde.

Peppe took Santino under his arm and led him to a bench lined with a long, padded cushion of white canvas. Without so much as a nod, he let his friend know he had designs on the girl who was sitting there quietly finishing her cake. Her glossy brown hair was pulled back by a silver clip, and she had languid honey-coloured eyes. Peppe's eyes caressed her face and he was proud of what he saw, a conquest that would lend particular prestige to his status as a married man. He elbowed Santino and said, "That's the daughter of a chief physician, and I'm going to fuck her."

The dancing began. Assunta was approached by a bull of a man who introduced himself as a colleague of Peppe Giaele's. "I've heard about you, but you're even tastier than I'd been told," he said. Assunta blushed and for once didn't know what to say. She was rescued, in her hesitancy, by a passer-by who flashed a vacant smile and asked: "Do you two know each other?" Pushing past, he left an embarrassed silence in his wake. Only then did the man invite Assunta to dance. Putting his hand on her hip as he led her onto the dance floor, he whispered: "No, we don't, do we..."

From a distance, Santino intercepted his mother's puzzled smile, which he could not quite decipher, and he turned away in search of a quiet spot to sit down. Thoughts were running through his head. It's all so over the top, he mused, but that's the way it is. Maybe you needed to overdo things a little to get a seat at the table.

Santino mentally reviewed the plans he had made for the coming year. He had to hurry up, for there were tenders he absolutely needed to win, now that he knew the right people, or most of them. He felt too young and suddenly also very mature, like he had almost made it but still had a long way to go. He was poised between the innocence of youth and the shrewdness of experience. He made a mental note to talk with his friend Giovanni, who was now perhaps more in the know about the awarding of these contracts. It was the only path available for him, as a Sicilian in Sicily.

Santino was astonished by the boldness of his ambitious, arduous thinking. And as though it were the inevitable consequence of that realization, he searched the crowd for the type of person with whom he hadn't yet had the opportunity to rub shoulders. He seemed to recognise some among the faces of those who had peered at him while he was with Peppe. He had no way of knowing for sure. It was all on his shoulders. Just as everything that would happen from then on would always be his responsibility, one he could not share with anyone.

There was a rustling of birds. They began to whirl in a spiral that gradually dispersed in the bright blue of the early afternoon. Santino felt tired. He held his head in his hands and lowered it, closed his eyes and then covered them with his hands.

"Is something the matter?"

Santino came to his senses and saw Baron Mennulia standing tall over him.

"Oh, no, not at all..."

The baron laid a light hand on his shoulder. "Everything will be fine."

Santino allowed himself to ask a question that might have seemed inappropriate: "Why are you using the future tense?"

"We live in an imperfect world. There are those who have the privilege of looking forward and those who have only the past."

Santino studied him. "I'd like to deepen our acquaintance," he found himself saying without even realising it.

"There is no time for that."

Above the courtyard, another flutter of doves dotted the blue slice of sky.

"You are from Sciacca, aren't you?", asked the baron.

And when Santino nodded, the baron continued: "I've seldom been there. I don't know it... I am of those who travel reluctantly. They tell me that you know my son-in-law well. He has got what he wanted." The baron was silent for a moment. "And wants a whole lot more. But do not let him torment you. Chin up."

In the late afternoon light, the goodbyes were rushed, as if everyone were waiting to go elsewhere. The guests flocked towards the cars parked outside the gate. Assunta sat regally in the middle of that disorderly stream of people, neither waving goodbye nor being waved to. A sense of contentment had swelled inside her, but she did not know why. There she stood, waiting for her son and the future that now accompanied him.

At that moment, the sea suddenly changed colour, flickering, as a fiery red band appeared on the horizon. The sun was beginning to set. The sky was the colour of cobalt.