

Excerpt from

THE FREE WOMEN OF MAGLIANO

by

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Today a patient arrived from Florence, a psychiatric case, young, fresh, and tall, with the look of physical health. When I entered the ward she was sitting in bed and eating with gusto. Her shirt was open so one breast was freely visible. She had no modesty, not even the pretense of modesty. She is suffering from “schizophrenia,” the mental illness that splits a personality causing the individual to become disordered and irrational.

All the nurses, male and female, are of peasant origin, from centuries-old farming families.

It’s April, raining all the time, and it’s cold again. The nurses have long faces, fearing frost.

The asylum is on a hill, a small hill, on the vast plain of Lucca. The hill is called Santa Maria delle grazie. The nearest town is Magliano, and that's the name that is well-known in the province of Lucca. Having been to Magliano jokingly means having been insane.

Every now and then the grim life of the nurses is briefly interrupted by a death. The first question the nurses ask themselves, upon hearing that one of their own has died, is whether that nurse was permanent or temporary.

If he was permanent someone rejoices and his eyes shine: he will take his place. If he was temporary there is general indifference.

Smooth rounds this morning. Viola has calmed down a bit. She looks like a dragonfly. Slender, spirited, agile. She is still all church singing but she is in a serene mood. She is still in her cell. Naked, a mattress on the floor. She is in a solitude that she doesn't feel at all.

(Slender women, as the years go by, retain their youthful air more.)

Sbisà has nasal tuberculosis; you would imagine there was a rodent gnawing away in the middle of her face. She is Venetian; pale, obedient. Madness drives her to rave deliriously, against her will. This morning, in despair, she said: "the words just rush out of me, I have to talk, I can't, I can't take it anymore."

It was clear that in some way she wished for a solution, that is, peace, which can also be death.

It's still raining and the patients are all in the common rooms screaming and gesticulating wildly. In these rooms called "lounges" there is the stench of animals and dampness.

The asylum is divided into male and female wards. Each ward is ordered and ranked according to the degree of agitation and risk. It starts from the tranquil ones and goes up to the ones who are agitated, who have deliriums; some, like animals, chew their cud and breathe.

In the asylum everything takes place within the walls. It is a fortress that holds 1,039 mentally ill individuals, about 200 nurses and, at this time 1 doctor and 19 nuns.

There is a Capuchin nun who these days is always thinking about her iritis, an eye inflammation that comes from hyperuricaemia.

Oresta del Deo, who professes to be famished and starving, is a corpulent, 265-pound woman who steals bread and sandwich fillings from the stupid patients. She is sensitive to my compliments, which get a smile out of her (for a moment her covetous, greedy black eyes, encircled with folds of fat, gleam).

She is a psycho-degenerate, a deviant, she loves evil immoderately. She is an elementary school teacher. I examined her a few years ago. She is about 60 years old. At times she strikes the other patients. Occasionally she's come across some who give it right back to her.

Panconi, in her forties, with a mustache and the dialect of Massa-Carrara, says that when she sees Sister Pia she feels like strangling her. To keep from doing so, she starts screaming and gesticulating wildly.

The monitoring-observation unit is full. It means sending a less disruptive patient to "Central," where they are monitored less. Maybe tomorrow morning I'll send Sarti, who cries whenever I examine her, as if she were skin and I were stinging nettle. She is an old woman always cloaked in sadness, her eyes a watery lake.

She is less disruptive, and the observation-monitoring is completely full; she is becoming like an egg.

I'm in my little room in which I've lived and breathed for about ten years. The deliriums of 1,040 mentally disturbed individuals live and breathe in all the other rooms that make up this huge tenement house. Almost all of them live in nightshirts, Don Quixotes with no one to love them, nor can they travel on a nag in the moonlight; their deliriums resound on the modest mute walls, while all around them is the faint stench of sweat.

This morning, while I was lazily lying in bed, Messeri knocked at the door of my room; a former mental patient, treated here, he typed my writings for me. Even before I saw him I recognized him by his voice.

Since he may have been expecting it, I gave him a pack of cigarettes, and he replied with a courtesy that sane people lack, "I won't smoke them, I'll keep them as a memento."

Just yesterday I was reading in Tommaseo's diary that when he received the money for the trip from Manzoni's mother as a "loan," he wrote in his diary, "I will travel on foot, that money I will keep as a memento." Both the former alcoholic Messeri and Tommaseo later smoked the cigarettes and spent the money, forgetting about the memento.

Sister Maria, refined and delicate, understands everything but gets involved in the asylum's affairs only just enough to avoid being noticed.

*Inside:* all is calm.

I examined Marzi. She was admitted here because she wanted to throw herself down a well. Her face is still, her eyes strabismic, she listens but seems not to hear in addition to not understanding.

In her village she fell in love with a married man, a town clerk; she kept thinking of him, and finally one morning she showed up and confessed her love. He took advantage of her only once. From that day on she began to feel cursed with shamelessness, and repeatedly tried to plan what might be called melodramas rather than suicides, infantile yet extremely pathetic.

Today I examined her because she wants to return home, to her sister, to live among the fields. I suspect that she is still in love, that is, that she is still the plaything of love's obscure force.

Today I had calls made to the caretaker Masini (his story: he loves Italy, he would like it to be great and orderly; he was a fascist; he was removed from office, then returned to service; I saw to it that he was promoted to caretaker; he is very shrewd and has a natural gift for discovering other people's sins in a flash), and to Sister Giacinta and Sister Vincenza to see if there was anything new. Receiving negative responses, I did not go *inside*, that is, I did not see or speak with the mental patients.

When the "agitated" patients in the ward eat, they seem like animals.

The use of a comb for appearance is very important. The patients (especially the calmer ones) have their hair combed in the morning by the nurses, but, nevertheless, it becomes filthy and tangled; limp and dull, it's a grimy mop, adding to the already blank, absent expression of the face.

Like animals in their lairs: the shivering patients inside their cells. Because they are prone to slashing and would not stop destroying and breaking things, they can't be given a bed or mattress, or even a sheet or blanket, so they lie "on the algae," the sea grass that waves and bows at the rocks. That they can tear as much as they like, and then its strands mingle with their hair, work their way between the lips, inside the mouth, and if the patient is really having a fit, the seaweed will be strewn all over the cell. Afterward if the patient feels chilly she makes it into a pile and burrows into it.

"Naked in the cell, on the algae," the nun is heard repeating.

The cells are cramped rooms with bare walls; in one corner there's a grilled vent, which in winter sends out warm air from the central heating.

The door has a peephole in the middle, with very thick glass so it can't be broken even with one's fists; through this peephole a nurse occasionally monitors the patient.

The cells are divided into simple cells and security cells; the simple ones have a window of normal size, at the usual height (but with very thick glass and a lockable latch); the security cell, on the other hand, has a small window high above that can't be reached even by jumping.

This measure is applied for the "agitated": patients who can stay "in the field" with all the others, given that they don't attack, or if they strike others they do so infrequently, and all in all are not savage. The savage ones, on the other hand, are put in a cell, and if the patient doesn't destroy things she has a bed and a chamber pot, if she wrecks things, everything is taken from her and she is then put "on the algae," naked.

Of course, there is constant fluctuation and a distinction to be made between these two types; a particular method is applied in each case, always sympathetic to the patient.

"The agitated" ward is the most vivid, violent, primal ward. To get there you go down some wide stairs, walk down a vast corridor that borders the gardens, and you're at its door.

Outside there is life, youth, beauty, a bright joy; and locked up in here are a thousand mentally ill individuals, prisoners of their deliriums, sweaty, filthy, pitiable.

The asylum is full of flowers, but you can't see them.

The asylum's nurses are all country people, born in the surrounding farmlands or in nearby hamlets; they own a piece of land, which in Lucca's plain is very fruitful; their wives are employed at Cucirini coat factory, or as cigar-makers at Toscano; all things considered, and because they live a frugal life, they are doing just fine.

But since the asylum is in the country, being nurses has not opened their minds; they have in no way become city people. They are country folk, through and through, and they're happy that way. They see the asylum as financial aid for their families, and they treat the patients with the discernment, and also the detachment, that farmers have when pruning the vines. Nevertheless they maintain a solid human core at all times, even if you have to scrape off some bark to get there. Since the maximum distance of their horizon extends only as far as the asylum, they would like their children to be employed there; at this time in Italy many young people are unemployed. More fervently they would like to see them find a place here to assure them a decent living. A nurse's salary is actually meager for a city dweller whose only job is that, but for a country farmer it's that much money to put aside entirely or almost. And the nurses are very cautious and wary in protecting this good fortune of theirs, so that by fraternal accord – unlike with other matters where they are in perpetual discord, worse than neighboring farmers – they unanimously avoid saying a word about this subject to anyone and, if questioned, evade any discussion.

Once the job of assisting the patients (for them not a strenuous one) is done, the nurses return to the fields, take off their uniforms, and work the land. Since they have never left the country setting, they can't imagine anything but work, and on Sundays, wine at the tavern.

And the nurses put so much passion into this thirst that sometimes, hearing them, it's become contagious. Farmers are insensitive; they see nothing but themselves, just like plants, whose roots drink as much as nature allows.

(I'll stop writing because it is lovingly springtime outside).

Berlucchi is a hopelessly "depressed" patient; she weeps, that is, she sheds limpid tears saying that she is to blame for everything and that they should kill her because it is the least punishment she deserves. Today her despair, her sense of guilt was so great that she banged her head against the wall to smash it. Her age is approaching fifty, she's thin, at one time surely full of grace, but it's her limpid-watery eyes that one remembers; she is not suffering terribly, she *thinks* sadly, and her eyes express this.

At night in the patients' chambers, the stench of animals and screams.

Every morning a patient who looks like a pale mouse, her eyes always curious though they are not searching for anything specific, asks me to drain fluid from her lungs, to examine her. She says that she has pleurisy, that she's sick, she's "at her last breath."

She has been examined: she's fat, soft, and very healthy.

Every morning she invariably implores me to perform exploratory punctures in the pleuras with the same tone of voice, the same pale mouse face that is curious but searching for nothing in particular.

It is not as if this woman has an objective that she doggedly wants to achieve; she has only that one thought, pleurisy, and having no other thoughts, readily, effortlessly, reiterates that one thought.

That's the fear, the desert, all the rest of the immense field gone. Where is the multitude of emotions that reside in every person?

Moreover, that one thought she has is like a poor little tree dangling frantically in the air, its roots detached from the ground.

Sbisà (whom I have already mentioned) is rather gracious, pale, still young. For twenty years tuberculosis has haunted her; her body is littered with scarred abscesses; her face has remained sweet. She has tuberculosis inside her nose, in the septum, which has been consumed by it, but fortunately it doesn't show on the outside. Tuberculosis is at her core; over time she has not withstood it, and because of that unremitting nightmare, she developed deliriums.

On Easter Day she passed out in church and now she thinks that she will be taken to prison for having fainted, that tuberculosis will sweep her to ever darker, more isolated places. She adds that everyone in her family is dead and so she has lost even the last individuals who could help her against the tuberculosis that drags her along.

As she says this, Sbisà weeps like Our Lady of Sorrows.

Sbisà has very beautiful black eyes, always teary with melancholy and a forbearance that, strangely enough, shimmers with profound joy.

Later I'll talk about Mrs. Maresca, with her long thick hair, one of the "agitated," who is voluptuously stirred by sex, the expression of her face and body gripped by pagan eros, but now Clerici appears, a hieratic statue, over seventy years old, for whom I have contended (or seemed to contend) with death more than three or four times.

She is an old woman who holds out her clasped hands as if offering them up to the sky, like a tragic actress. Grief is her banner, and her voice limpidly flows with grief. She is like a spring that, rather than water, pours forth sincere tears. Her delirium is so logical and simple, and spoken in tones so persuasive that the beautiful youthful eyes of a young girl who happens to hear her swells with tears. Those university students came to visit the asylum from Pisa about sixty days ago, to be precise. Almost unwillingly, I began to show them the madness, which though illogical, lives within the walls of the asylum in 1,040 mentally ill individuals. To demonstrate to them, to make those young people see the mental debilities of joy and grief, I presented two contrasting patients, and for grief it was Clerici. She was introduced and, spontaneously, as she's done since she's been a patient here, she went on talking about her grief, her delirium of guilt and ruin, her voice high-pitched, like a lonesome pulley in an oasis, whistling as it hoists up a bucket of miraculous water. Listening to such a candid voice, the students, male and female (the latter more numerous and resplendent to my eyes), were petrified at first, then moved, and as I mentioned, I saw a very young girl whose large black eyes were swollen with tears.

Clerici implores like an Arab I once heard in the desert: it was the only time I observed grief in an Arab. He was moving along, swaying over a small dune, and had a red, or rather purple handkerchief in his hand that resembled bloody flesh. His robe left his sun parched shins exposed as he went up and down that small mound of sand, calling

to the little grandson who had died at dawn that day, speaking with him, and explaining to him what the future would be. That old man had gone some distance away from his tent, and thinking that no one could hear him, gave way to grief on that lonely dune, the handkerchief he held in his hands used to wipe away his tears and to recall, to give his grandson a sign.

He went on like that all afternoon and most of the night; by dawn he was gone.

Instead, Clerici had been going on endlessly, night and day, for more than two years; sturdy and still as a statue, each and every time with genuine sincerity. She is an aristocrat, if aristocracy means humility, forbearance, crystalline logic in the face of misfortune. Her hair is pure white, her facial features drawn by thoughts nourished by grief; her body is painfully thin; her voice pathetic and human. Like the voice of birds chirping serenely, it elicits joy, as does her human passion. Her name is: Maria Clerici.

These patients are shadows whose roots lie outside of reality, yet they have our image (even if not precisely), mine and yours, O reader. But what's more mysterious is that tomorrow, recovered, they might have the perfect image, then relapse to being absent again, nothing but words, deliriums. Thus it is our uncertain equilibrium that vacillates, and we are boastful and at the same time humble, for we are merely men capable of conflicting things, throughout the generations, like the compass rose.

Returning from nighttime rounds of the women's wards: proceeding by degrees from the peaceful wards to the agitated, the eroticism becomes more primitive and the sharp rancid stench of the human animal gradually intensifies. The "agitated" flung themselves at me from their beds, in their nightshirts, naked, as I fled. The nurse who tried to restrain them laughed slyly, as if to say that all other women were like that too, but "the others," those outside, couldn't act like that because they were "sane."

Berlusconi, the self-accusatory delusional, the one who never tired of acutely imploring, like a tragic actress, that she be killed because everything was all her fault, secretly stuck a knitting needle near her heart, positioning it so that all but the tip appeared to prick the skin of her left breast, while the other tip emerged in the back.

She put it there in the morning, and the nurses noticed it in the early evening.

For two years Berlusconi has been shouting, "I'm horrible, kill me, I'm to blame, save the asylum, save the patients, kill me." Indeed a few days ago she tried to crack her head against the wall.

Yesterday morning she managed to get hold of a knitting needle that another patient kept hidden to knit, and with the help of a hairpin, she jabbed it into her chest.

She had judged the location right: she stuck it just where she felt her heart beating. However, the needle, either because it didn't have a sharp point (it was an old, blunt knitting needle), or because the direction wasn't exactly accurate but slightly lower, it slipped past the heart without piecing it. And Berlusconi, who thought she would be quickly meeting death, kept plunging it in; the needle went through anterior and posterior pleuras and lungs, and still she lived.

Towards evening, the nurses noticed a dark tip emerging under Berlusconi's breast and alerted the doctor, who finally grasped the tip and pulled it; the tip grew into a knitting needle and when he'd already pulled out nearly two inches of it, the needle

grazing the walls of the heart transmitted pulsations, with the patient, like a tragic puppet, shaking her head at each tug. The doctor suspects that the needle is planted in her heart and, if he takes it out, she will hemorrhage and die; he calls another doctor, namely me, to be a witness.

The decision is made to remove the needle, which is pulled out; it was 10 inches long.

The patient remains alive, and keeps screaming how she is cursed, how she is to blame for horrendous wrongs she has already committed and future ones that she will commit.

This happened on the evening of the 22nd; today, the 24th, the patient is still alive and shows no disorders, only once did she cough and spit up slightly pink. Yesterday she had a fever of 101.3; this morning 99.3. Of course her delirium is very vivid, it's so strong that she believes in it as if it were a religion and the source her of all her courage.

This patient's eyes are very clear, very beautiful, and, on certain days when she is not so seized by delirium, she has seemed to me to be of almost razor-sharp intelligence.

Now that it is no longer there in the observation ward, the knitting needle that penetrated the lungs, grazed the edge of the heart, begins to live; from an ordinary knitting needle it has become a bright star. It was not supposed to be there in the observation ward and instead, not only was it there, it was used. The farmer-nurses *whose responsibility it was*, who should have seen it, find it, report it, are now forced to think about this ever so harmless, till then domestic, knitting needle, for fear of disciplinary and legal penalties.

Already several have whispered to me, "you, doctor, defend us." And I hope that, in the event, I will use whatever astuteness I can to defend them.

Berlusconi tonight is 98.9.

From my window, as usual in spring, at this hour (it's seven o'clock in the evening), there is a cacophony of birds chirping as they hop about or settle among the dense foliage of the oaks.