

GIULIANA SALVI
CLEMENTINA
Einaudi, March 2025

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Prologue

pages 3-29

Lecce, June 8th, 1948

- I can hear you, you know. I can hear you and I can see you.

Clementina, in the kitchen doorway, has untied her braids and her hair, silver and wavy, is falling below her hips.

She marches in toward Maria and shows her a lock in the palm of her hand. - You have to cut it for me.

In response, her sister gulps down the second glass of wine. Then she shakes her head firmly and continues turning *pittule*¹ in the boiling oil. - *Ma cce si ssuto*?² I'm not cutting anything for you.

Francesco pours her some wine. - Mom, you want to cut it right now, when we're getting ready for supper?

Clementina takes a sip of Negramaro and nods to her son to pour some more. Holding her glass, she goes to open the window. Condensation has formed on the panes, and the room is immersed in the smell of fried food and smoke. He's sitting as his usual place at the head of the table, in the middle of the room. - And your wife?

- She went to lie down on the bed, this humidity gets to her. Her calves are swollen and she's a bit short of breath. I'll go see how she's doing.

¹ Small balls of leavened dough, either empty or filled, fried in extra virgin olive oil. A specialty of Apulia's culinary tradition.

² (Apulian dialect) What's the matter with you?

Maria comes closer to her. - Her belly dropped a whole lot. It looks like Giuliana has ten babies in there.

- You have to cut it for me. My hair, you need to cut it.
- I'm not cutting anything. *Oggi nu te senti filu bbonu, te³* -. Maria blows on the boiling *pittula* before tasting it.
- You're obsessed with your hair and now you have to cut it? And you have to ask me of all people? Cut it yourself if you dare -. She positions the *pittula* on the plate, puts down the skimmer and touches her hair. - It's still soft. At your age, it should be bristly and sparse. Like mine.
- You've got greasy hands.

Maria lets go of the lock. - Tomorrow. If you're still convinced, I'll cut it tomorrow.

Clementina raises her glass of Negramaro, the two women clink their glasses, eye to eye, and drink what's left of their wine.

- Giuliana's waters broke! - Francesco is sweating and short of breath when he suddenly appears in the kitchen. - She's doubled over in pain, with cramps and vomiting, she needs to go to the hospital, now!

- Oh, dear Jesus, - Maria leaps to her feet but she immediately has to sit down again. - The wine...

- Let's go, I'll help you -. It's Clementina who rushes to Giuliana with Francesco. They find her sitting on the floor, holding her belly tight.

- I can't stay still but I can't get up either, - the woman whispers before screaming for the next contraction.

Clementina grabs her son's arm. - Where is the car?

- At the corner.
- Go get it. Bring it in front of the house, I'll come down with Giuliana in a minute.

Francesco hesitates, first he looks at his wife, then at his mother who's fixing his shirt collar: - It's all right. But now we need the car.

He kisses his wife on the forehead and rushes outside.

Clementina wraps Giuliana's waist and brushes a sweaty lock away from her forehead. - Breathe, dear. You know how to do it -. She regrets untying her braids. Now all that hair feels bulky, it makes her hot and gets stuck everywhere.

- I've never seen you like this, - Giuliana grunts before dropping her head back.

Clementina almost lifts her up to get her to her feet. - We have to walk to the car.

³ (dialect) You're not feeling well today.

- Distract me a bit, I beg of you, - murmurs her daughter-in-law, exhausted, as they're making their way towards the corridor.

- Tomorrow Maria's going to cut it. My hair, I mean.

Giuliana stops and grips her arm tightly.

- Breathe, dear, breathe.

- It's more painful than with Anna.

- Each time it's different, - whispers Clementina. - But then it goes away, you know it does.

Giuliana exhales hard and nods. - It's good to cut it. If you cut it, it grows stronger, - she screams again.

Maria, who's leaning on the wall of the corridor, sees them coming and starts waiving her arms. - The baby chose the right day to be born!

Clementina gets closer to her daughter-in-law's ear raising her chin toward her sister. - She's a bit drunk.

Near the front door, Giuliana stops and doubles over. Clementina lifts her face up and smiles. - It's like a wave, indulge the pain and don't resist it.

- I can't take it anymore, - mutters Giuliana, - they're too close -. Another one arrives and she instinctively grabs Clementina's hair, she pulls at a lock thick as a rope to hang on to, and bellows. Clementina doesn't let out a sound, she swallows and keeps on nodding. - Indulge it, dear, indulge it, - she keeps on whispering gently, praying that the contraction will end soon. This is not how she imagined she would lose her hair.

- The car is right here! - yells Francesco.

Giuliana, still hanging onto Clementina's hair, shakes her head firmly. - I won't make it to the hospital. Believe me.

- You're going to make it, dear, of course you're going to make it.

Emira and Maria are standing in the entryway, when Clementina comes back in. They look like two statues of the Virgin Mary, one young and the other old, though.

- Everything all right? - her daughter asks.

- And the child? - asks Clementina, who has a habit of answering questions with other questions.

- Anna just fell asleep. I put her in your room, 'cause on my bed there's Giuliana's vomit.

- Good. Come on, let's go have dinner, we must celebrate this baby that's about to be born -. She makes her way between the two women toward the kitchen.

- The table is set in the living room, - says Maria. - But isn't it bad luck to celebrate beforehand?

Clementina squeezes her hand. - Bad luck doesn't exist. And this baby must be celebrated now. Because it's already here. - And she quickly goes back to the kitchen.

- Too bad for the fried *pittule*... - complains Maria on her niece's arm.
- At least let's put on some music! What a majestic mane she has, though!

Clementina is dozing off on the bed with little Anna, who has woken up three times already searching for her mother.

The doorbell startles her. She pulls herself up, careful not to wake up her niece who seems to have found her sleeping position: lying on her back with her hands touching over her head.

The clock marks four in the morning.

Before she has time to open the door, Maria steps in front of her. - It was Francesco, Tina!

- Keep it down, - she points at Anna sleeping on the bed.
- He came to tell us that they're okay, both Giuliana and *lu piccinnu*⁴.
- Is it a boy?
- It's Cesare -. Maria takes her hands. - It's Cesare, - she repeats smiling. Then she holds her tight.

Lecce, September 1916

- Who do I belong to?

Filippo was frowning at his mother, with his ruffled curls and large, slightly downturned eyes. At six years old, he seemed made of paper maché to her. She could have squeezed him tight or barely touched him, in any case sooner or later he would have crumpled up, flaking apart. It was a fear she had carried since giving birth to him, and that had never left her.

- Who asked you?

He didn't answer and put on a long face. Whether he was sad or angry didn't really matter, Clementina had many chores to attend to, but she wanted to clear that issue immediately, before her son's introverted and fragile mind started to twist it around.

⁴ (dialect) The little one.

She put the documents down on the desk that had been her father's, and leaned on the back of the chair. - If people want to know, answer they can ask your mother, and tell them my first name and my last name too, then add it's none of their business who you belong to. Is that clear?

- Do I have to say my last name too?

- Of course. Who are we without our last name?

Filippo didn't move.

- What else?

Still silence.

- Filippo, you see I'm busy, - she showed him the papers scattered on the table. The books that as always didn't add up.

- They say I'm the son of Misses Martello. A fatherless child, - he blurted out, staring at the floor.

Emira suddenly appeared in the doorway: - I like being the daughter of Misses Martello!

- Shut up! - ordered her brother, all red in the face.

Clementina went to kneel at the boy's eye level, while Emira jumped around the study. - You do have a last name. And it's not Martello -. She curled one of the child's messy locks around her finger.

He relaxed a bit.

- Come on, take your sister and go to aunt Maria to ask if she needs help with dinner, so I can finish here.

- It was the heads man who said it, - whispered Filippo while taking Emira's hand.

- And who is the heads man?

- The man who keeps children's heads hanging outside the door to his shop.

Clementina clapped her hands: - Go now -. She led her children out and closed the door. An acrid whiff hit her nose. The smell of mold penetrated there too, in the least humid part of the house; with the bedrooms they had solved the problem by leaving the windows wide open day and night during the summer months, the hottest, and by wiping the infiltrated walls with warm water and wine vinegar. But at that point they needed to address also the studio and the hall, and they would have to do it now, in September, because winter would be coming soon and she had no intention of making the children spend other cold and humid months.

She glanced at the portrait of Cesare that she had placed on the desk, but swiftly looked away. She was ashamed of Filippo's worn-out pants, of Emira's dirty hair and of Francesco, who was almost one, and whom people had renamed the Intruder.

Then she picked up the sheet of paper on the desk. The short story she had written the previous night. She felt ashamed of that too, of having wasted time on useless things instead of sleeping. But she needed to write. She had always needed it. The only habit of her old life that she had taken with her.

Leaving Rome to come back to Lecce, eight months before, she hadn't imagined she would find her parents' house in such a state, and her sisters, who were living on their father's pension, incapable of maintaining it.

«We can't do it, Tina, - Anna had confessed. - Big houses need money. With the war, there's barely enough to feed us».

She had felt a great sense a guilt and hadn't said anything else. She had asked for her father's book of accounts and had studied it to figure out how to feed everyone and keep the promise she had made to Cesare.

When the train had whistled, months before, at the station in Rome, she had held little Francesco close. The child, wrapped in a black shawl, was sleeping unaware, while Filippo stared at his shoes and Emira played at drawing with her breath and fingers on the condensed dirty glass of the railway carriage. Anna, who had come to help her during the trip, wouldn't stop smiling. But Clementina had caught her many times while she was wiping away her tears, thinking she was asleep.

As young girls, the three Martello sisters had been very close. Now Clementina knew she had to salvage that relationship. She felt she was behind and at fault: she had turned up in their life as Misses with three young children, four more mouths to feed. She felt awkward and envied her sisters for the way they looked at each other, a code she had once shared too and now couldn't decipher. She also regretted that she had reproached Maria for speaking in dialect. An intimate language that her parents had never allowed and Maria now seemed to claim. That land, red like blood, was her land, and language was the formula she had chosen, the only decision she had been granted and had angrily claimed.

«Dad would look daggers at you if he heard you», Clementina had told her one evening, as she was carrying the jug with the dirty water to be emptied in the street.

«No, Tina. If dad could see us now, he'd say that *sai addú nasci e nu ssai addú mueri*⁵».

Clementina had stood still, surprised by the brisk way with which she had dismissed her, while Maria had gone outside with her head held

⁵ (dialect) You know where you're born and you don't know where you die.

up high and the jug in her hands. She had clenched her fists and choked back tears. She wouldn't cry. Not anymore.

The next morning, at dawn, Anna had sneaked into her bed and, as when they were children, had wrapped her legs around Clementina's. «Your feet are always freezing, dear Tina».

«I had an argument with Maria last night».

«I know».

«Of course you do.»

«Don't be jealous of us. It's not fair. We were happy for you when you left for Rome, for the life you lived there».

Clementina had sat upright and had started to untie the two braids she kept to sleep in.

«Give it here. I'll do it». Anna had made her turn her back to her and had taken her hair. With the brush she had found on the nightstand she had started to comb her sister's long mane. «When we came back to Lecce with mom and dad we missed you so much. We spent our days imagining you in Rome with Cesare, walking around the city center, having ice-cream in piazza Esedra».

Clementina had felt a knot in her stomach. Anna, as always, had noticed. «Don't overthink it. You and Maria are two hotheads. But you're worse. Her thick skin is fake, you know that. Yours, the one you brought back with you from Rome, scares me».

That morning, Clementina and Maria were sitting at the kitchen table looking worried. The ongoing war had exacerbated the usual problems: between the rise in the price of bread and the shortage of wheat, putting something nourishing on the table had become a challenge.

- We need to send Pantalea to find something in the fields. Even the scraps.

- What fields, Tina? - Maria leaned toward her. - We have fields and I didn't know? Also, the fields are worse off than ever. We could try asking for the benefit.

- They won't give it to us. We don't have men who are fighting, you know that.

Maria sighed nervously.

- Read this -. Clementina raised a piece of paper towards her sister, who wiped her hands on her apron before taking it. - Maybe we should sell our last pieces of jewelry too.

- Tina... - Maria put down the paper carefully.

- Tomorrow morning I'll go to the pawn shop, but this time I'll make the price. Call Anna, she has to agree too.

- What do you want to do, an accord? It's not about agreeing or not. There's no other solution. Either we sell or we starve. First us, and then the children.

Anna was sitting in the hall, on the armchair that once had belonged to her mother, next to the window overlooking the inner street. Maria, standing with her apron still dirty, was behind her.

Clementina had shown them the documents, the finances which again didn't add up: Cesare's pension, too meagre, and their father's, which was more substantial but not enough for all of them.

- But we've already sold so much. We gave away almost everything, what we're left with is of important sentimental value, you can't, we can't get rid of it like this -. Anna stared at them, pleading. Out of the three, she had always been the most emotional, the most fragile.

- Nothing is done just for the sake of it, - answered Maria.

- I know. It's that I'd never imagined it would be so hard -. Anna looked at her shoes, that were worn out on the point and on the heel. - Tina, I would do anything for the children -. Then she suddenly stood up. - Let's do it. Let's sell what we have left. But we'll keep one each, it will be a keepsake for the children -. With some trouble she took off the diamond and amethyst ring she wore on the ring finger of her right hand. - This is the only one I'll keep. It was the gift that dad gave to mom when I was born.

- Maria? - said Clementina.

- I don't want any jewelry. I don't wear it and I don't know what to do with it.

- Maria, remember it's for the children. We'll keep three pieces for them, for when they'll grow up, - Anna smiled.

Maria dropped on the sofa and looked at her nails covered in flour; the kitchen was her passion and her punishment, she always knew when there was almost no food left and she was forced to add ingredients that had gone bad to the table. - I'll keep mom's pearls, the Sunday ones.

- You, Tina, take your time in choosing -. Anna put a hand on her shoulder. - Not Cesare's gifts, don't do this to yourself.

Clementina gently took her hand off. - I have to go now. There's something I need to take care of.

The ceramics resembling children'd heads were hanging outside of the shop, each of them with a different sneer.

- Is your boss here? - Clementina asked the young apprentice who was working in the small studio overlooking the alley, before piazza Sant'Oronzo.

- He'll be back shortly, *signò*. *È iuto a fa' na cunsegn⁶*, - he said with a strong accent from Foggia. - Move a bit from the furnace, or else *v'arrucnat⁷* -. He gestured to go to the corner.

- Will he be long? - she asked him while she studied him stirring the wax, and every now and then poking the fire that would model it with its heat. She thought he couldn't be older than fifteen or sixteen, even if his muscles were as big as a grown man's. She wondered why he wasn't at the front together with the others.

- We don't know, *signò*. When he 's supposed to be back, he'll be back.

- I'll stop by another time, then. I've got some errands to run.

It felt like her mother's jewelry in her purse had turned into heavy rocks.

- Should I tell him something?

- I'll be back later.

- As you wish, *signò*.

The boy turned toward her. He had a gauze on his face and half of his face was burned. Clementina said goodbye and left.

After a few steps, she bumped into the man who, judging by the clothes and empty wheelbarrow, she imagined was the artisan.

- Are you the owner? - she asked pointing at the studio.

- What do you need? - the man smiled eloquently, looking at her from head to toe.

- I don't need anything. But perhaps you'll be kind enough to avoid certain words that could upset a child who walks by your studio every day.

- What are you talking about? - the artisan came closer.

Clementina didn't move. - My son told me that yesterday you called him in an unpleasant and inappropriate way.

- Ah, so the little stick is your son? I know who you are. You are the widow, the daughter of the vice-prefect -. The man was talking at a palm

⁶ (dialect) ma'am. He's out for a delivery.

⁷ (dialect) you'll get burned.

from her face. - Come on, don't be *lisciusa*⁸, you've come all this way to reprimand me?

Clementina tensed up and forced herself not to lower her eyes. She knew what she wanted to yell at him but she had no more saliva, or mouth or voice.

- All dressed in black. You look good in black, - the man's rotten breath crept into her nostrils. Then he walked away.

Clementina stood in the street, stunned and humiliated. She felt tears swelling up in her eyes and hated herself for allowing that man to treat her that way, and then she hated herself even more for not being able to stand up to him, for deciding to go talk to him alone and most of all, for taking her mother's jewelry and stuffing it into her purse like a thief.

Maria, standing in front of the kitchen table, was kneading chestnut flour and water for the bread together with the maid Pantalea. - Tina, what are you doing already home?

Clementina clung firmly to her bag. - Where's Anna?

- In her room. Have you done everything?

- Pantalea, could you be so kind to leave us for a moment.

Anna entered the kitchen while Pantalea left.

Clementina emptied her purse on the table. All the jewelry was still there.

- Didn't you go to the pawn shop? - Anna picked up a gold bracelet. It had been donna Emira's, her mother always wore it at receptions.

- We'd saved them because they were mom's favorite and we'll keep them, - said Clementina. - We've already given up so much.

Anna rested her hand on hers. - You're ice-cold. As always.

- *Manu fridda, core caldu*⁹, - intervened Maria. - And the payments? The reminder?

- We'll take care of it.

In that moment, Emira came into the kitchen and ran to her mother.

- Filippo won't play with me, - she was grumbling.

- So play by yourself. You mustn't always follow your brother around, learn to make do.

- Tina! - Anna leaned over her niece. - Come with me, dear, let's go see if we can find some ribbons.

⁸ (dialect) fussy.

⁹ (dialect) Cold hand, warm heart.

Clementina, perfectly still, was staring at the jewelry on the table.

Maria took her apron off and placed it next to the jewelry. - Why did you answer the child like that?

- I'm upset.

- The girl is three, she can't understand our problems.

Clementina grabbed the apron and gave it back to her sister.

- The sooner she understands she has to make do, the better.

With a determined stride, she left the kitchen.

You would have done the same, she said to Cesare's portrait, that evening, sitting at the desk. And that was also their jewelry, but the additional mouths to feed are mine. Ours. Anyway, those earrings you gave to me were too flashy. She waited to see what hue her husband's eyes would take. And regarding the matter of that petty man, the artisan, I know I shouldn't have gone but since you're not here I thought that I have to become a bit of a man too. He never would've breathed on you and he definitely never would have looked you up and down in such a disgusting way.

I'm afraid that whatever I do, I'll do it wrong, even with the children. Yet I pray to God every night and every morning to find a solution.

Sometimes I wonder where God is. Where is God, Cesare? Hasn't he already put us to the test? Hasn't he tested my faith?

A noise outside the room startled her. It seemed that in that house everyone was spying on her.

- Who's there?

No answer. No shadow along the crack of the door. She picked up the lamp and, careful not to make any sound, she leaned on the wooden panel, she was sure she could hear someone breathing. She grabbed the handle and pulled hard. She came face to face with Filippo.

- So we're eavesdropping now? You should have gone to bed ages ago.

- Francesco's crying.

- I can't hear anything.

- Because aunt Anna came and took him.

Clementina stared at him. - That's it?

- When are we starting with the lessons? You said in September, and half of it already went by, - he stated confidently, leaning on the wall with his hands behind his back.

- You're right. We'll start this Monday.

- And afterwards I'll go to a real school?

- Of course. We've already talked about it. You'll attend elementary school here with me, and then I'll enroll you in middle school. But don't think about it now, it's five years away. Five years is a long time, trust me.

- I'm six years old. I'm not a child anymore, mom, I can help you.

- You already help me a lot. And you'll help me even more if you go to bed now.

- But...

- Do as I say.

Filippo turned toward the corridor and started to go, but then stopped again. - Mom?

- What?

- Who were you talking to?

Clementina looked at her son, thin and straight, in his light blue pajama Anna had sewn for him.

- With dad. Sometimes I talk to him.

Filippo opened his eyes wide. - And does he answer you?

- I just need him to listen.

- And how do you know he's listening?

- When you pray, you know the Lord is listening. It's not like he'll answer you, but you know he does. It's the same with dad. You can talk to him too if you feel like it.

Filippo smiled hesitantly.

- Go to bed now, - she said ruffling his curls. Then she closed the door and sat back at the desk. She looked at the picture and it seemed that Cesare was finally smiling at her. *The people you love don't die.*

- What are you doing? - Emira sneaked quietly into her brother's bed.

- Who are you talking to? It's night time.

- Shush. Go back to sleep -. Filippo pulled the cover up to his chin.

- I don't like to sleep. And also, you were talking. I know because I heard you, I was awake, - she exclaimed curling up next to him.

- You're making me hot this way. You're too little, you can't understand these things, - he closed his eyes.

- I am not little, I'm three years old.

- Mira, will you let me sleep?

- Only if you tell me who you were talking to -. She sat upright and leaned her back on the headboard of the bed.

- Oh, all right. But promise you won't tell anyone.

She smiled and offered her pinkie. - Agreed.

- With dad, - he answered joining his finger to his sister's.
- But dad is not here, - she broke off. - Dad is a star now.
- Who told you he's a star?
- Aunt Anna. I don't like that dad is a star.

Emira's face saddened, and he noticed. - What's the matter now?

Emira slipped down from the bed to the window. - There are too many moons. And the stars are in the wrong place.

Filippo got near her. Their breath clouded the window glass a bit. - No, silly. Those are lights, - he told her putting a hand on her shoulder. - See? The stars are up above. Come on, let's go back to bed, - he tried to take her hand but she insisted: - I'm telling you, the stars are in the wrong place.

- If you think so, - he gave in, going back to bed.

Emira didn't move. She stayed to look at the sky. If her father really was a star, as aunt Anna had told her, then stars were lying. Anyway, what was the point of them staying up there in the sky, so far away, all mixed together so it was impossible to make out which one was her father?

That night, Emira decided she would never believe the stars. That their shining up there, having everyone pray to them without bothering to say hello, to send a nod, made them useless and detestable. Real things, she thought without thinking, need to be touched and felt.

No, either dad wasn't a star, or the stars were all in the wrong place.

Lecce, February 1922

- You should stop with the mourning, Tina. All this black isn't good for us.

Anna was watching her sister on the hall wicker chair that they had purchased at the Friday market.

- Mira asked me what you were like as a child, - she went on cautiously.

- And what did you answer?
- That you never were a child.

Clementina put the book down on her legs and gave her a questioning look.

- Anyway, I didn't know what to say. In the end, I told her you were like her. She's still young, what was I supposed to do?

- I am nothing like her.

- Precisely.

- And what did she answer?

- Nothing. But she seemed satisfied.

- Let's hope so.

- Your daughter is pining for you -. Anna was trying to wind the thread through the needle's eye. - I can't see very well anymore up close, you know? - she rubbed the thread on the palm of her hand. - This way it should go in.

- She got a bit rigid, don't you think? Emira, I mean.

- I did it! - Anna bit on the thread, satisfied. - Rigid, you say? I'd say sensible.

- She was more cheerful when she was little.

- She's nine.

Yes, I know, - sighed Clementina while Maria entered the hall out of breath with her coat still on. - There you are. I was freezing out there!

- What's the matter, dear? - Anna put down the cross stitch canvas on the small table in front of her.

Maria ignored her and planted her feet firmly in front of Clementina. - I was walking by the Basilica of Santa Croce, and Lucia stopped me, it was so cold, I was freezing. Anyway, - she went on without catching her breath, - she said if I could ask you a big favor: if you could please let her Oronzo study with you and Filippo, in the afternoon. She implied it would be such a huge favor. A gift.

- And you came running home to tell us this? - Anna asked.

Maria gulped down the water that in the meantime Clementina had brought her. - I ran because I had the turnips on the stove, good thing Pantalea noticed. Anyway, Lucia says that Filippo is the best in his class and the credit must belong to you, since he's only studied with you. She added that Oronzo, although he has been followed by a tutor, doesn't understand a thing.

Clementina started walking restlessly up and down the hall. Then she suddenly stopped to stare at the fire in the fireplace, that was slowly going out. - We need more firewood. Do we have it?

- Tina, did you hear me? She said that she'll wait for you on Monday morning at eight o'clock sharp, at the entrance of the college, so you can tell her what you have decided.

- Well, can't she take care of it? She seems like an educated woman,
- asked Anna.

- *Cce sacciu*¹⁰, - Maria was rubbing her hands near the fire.

Clementina kept on staring at the flames that were losing intensity.
- She's got seven to think about. I understand if she can't keep track of all of them.

- Will you at least think about it?

- First I'll talk to Filippo about it. If they'll be studying together, he has to agree too.

- Seems fair, - Anna replied. And she went back working distractedly on her cross stitch.

The afternoon of the following Friday, Oronzo was seated at the writing desk next to Francesco. She had put them in the studio because the kitchen, the warmest room of the house where her son usually studied, had suddenly seemed too intimate to her, a place unfit for concentration.

At the beginning of September, at eleven years old, Filippo had been admitted to *Collegio Argento*, the Silver College. From that moment on, Clementina had started to supervise him only for his afternoon homework, while her mornings were dedicated to Emira and Francesco's education.

Oronzo was staring at her from behind the thick lenses of his round glasses, smiling. His mother had warned her that the boy was far behind, and that the Jesuits were threatening to make him repeat the whole year, and it was no wonder why. He couldn't keep his concentration for more than ten minutes.

- Your son doesn't know things because you can't find a way to make him listen, - she told the woman when she came to pick him up.

She looked at her, pleading. - Please don't tell me he's a hopeless case too.

- I wouldn't dream of it. And after just a single lesson. Let me try for one more week, five afternoons Monday through Friday.

- Clementina, thank you so much, - Lucia shook her hand and walked to the entrance door where Oronzo was waiting. - Say goodbye to Mrs Clementina, and thank you.

- Thank you, - he mumbled. Since his mother had stepped in the house, he had fallen silent.

¹⁰ (dialect) How do I know?

- Every afternoon? - complained Filippo as soon as they had left. - I can't concentrate, mom, Oronzo asks too many questions. And he never stands still, like in class. But there the professors punish him by sending him behind the blackboard, - he added sinking his teeth in a half-rotten yellow apple.

- Does it happen often?

- Always. I even feel sorry for him, that's why I let him copy my math homework.

- Come on, go prepare your things for tomorrow.

Filippo didn't move.

- What's the matter?

She noticed that her son was staring at the spoiled spot of the apple.

- I'll throw this away.

- Let me see, - she tore a small part of the apple with her teeth. - This is the sweetest, - she told him swallowing the bruised slice.

- I could study in the kitchen, as always, while you help him in the study.

- And who's going to check on you?

- I can check on myself.

Clementina thought about it. The idea wasn't wrong. She followed Filippo more for maternal self-sacrifice than a real need on his part, since he had always managed perfectly on his own.

- In the evening, after dinner, we'll go over your homework together. He nodded smugly.

- Now go prepare and call your brother and sister for dinner.

She watched him walk away calmly with the apple core still in his hand, his ruffled curls needed a trimming. His long, slender legs looked like stems of a flower.

- Francesco!

Anna glared at him, but her annoyance lasted as long as one of his sly smiles. - You shouldn't make such a noise while you're having your soup, - she added more softly. She couldn't resist her nephew's smile, he was always cheerful.

Clementina sat at the head of the table. - Why such a hurry? We wait for everyone before starting to eat.

- Pass the plate, Tina - Maria reached toward her sister. - Pantalea, this broth seems a little bland.

The woman gave her a questioning look.

- Bland. It needs salt, Pantalea. *Ddissapitu*¹¹.
- *Laggiu messu lu sale*¹².
- Don't take offence now. Even the turnips are *ddissapite*, - Maria pointed at the tray in the center of the table. Pantalea went to grab a jar and placed it in front of her. - I got old, but not too old *c'ha ma dimenticu lu sale e lu pepe*¹³! - she exclaimed leaving the kitchen.
- What, she took offence? - asked Clementina.
- Maria gestured not to think about it. - Who wants more broth?
- On Monday Oronzo will come study here with me, - Clementina declared curtly.
- Anna declined the broth offer. - It's an important commitment, Tina, are you sure?
- He's also a bit slow, - added Maria under her breath.
- Filippo shook his head. - I'll come study here in the kitchen aunt Maria, as always.
- Of course, dear. If we manage to get some sugar I'll bake you cinnamon cookies. I'll be very quiet, so I won't distract you, you know. I wouldn't dare.
- Have you decided to help him? - Anna asked cautiously.
- I haven't decided anything. I gave myself five days, and if I realize it's not working, I'll tell Lucia on Friday.
- It's up to you, dear, it's not like we have to tell you what to do. It's just that you already have Emira and Francesco in the morning, and Francesco in the afternoon with homework.
- Filippo will study on his own.
- Clementina looked at her son, who smiled smugly. She knew that by granting him that solution she had filled him with pride, and he couldn't wait for it to be Monday to face his favorite condition: solitude.

After dinner, Clementina closed herself in her study, as always.

Cesare's portrait stared at her from the desk. *I'm still very hesitant, you know? This thing with Oronzo is a great responsibility. And even if now things are going a bit better, we're still far from what we promised each other. But I'll make it. One way or the other we'll make it. And you know how much I love History and Literature, so after all I...*

- Who are you talking to? - Maria was watching her from the doorway, her arms crossed on her dirty apron.

¹¹ (dialect) Bland.

¹² (dialect) I did put salt.

¹³ (dialect) to forget salt and pepper!

- Who should I be talking to? I'm alone here.

Maria looked around the room that once had been the studio of their father, the vice-prefect of the city, and was now occupied by their older sister. That's how it had been right from the start, when six years before she had arrived from Rome with her three children, and had taken over the household and that wretched family. Only one room hadn't been occupied nor arranged. Clementina had locked it out of awe and respect: their parents' bedroom.

Maria untied her apron. - I sent Pantalea to bed and rolled out the dough for tomorrow. I'm going to sleep.

- Goodnight.

- Are you going to stay up late?

- I have to check this month's accounts and then I'll follow you.

- Are you thinking about Oronzo?

Clementina gave herself away by looking at Cesare's picture.

- Up to now you've done well. We come from horrible years, Tina, *ogni pietra azza parite*¹⁴.

As soon as Maria had left, Clementina took the picture and dusted it with the sleeve of her black dress. Anna was right, she could've stopped with the mourning she had been wearing for years. She hadn't even had the courage to tell her sister that that choice made her feel good. That the fact she didn't have to think about what to wear, what colors to match, gave her a sense of freedom. The only one she had. Black didn't mean mourning anymore. Dark clothes had become an announcement to others: ignore me. And don't annoy me.

She stared pensively into Cesare's face: his deep large eyes like Francesco's, his hooked nose that Filippo and Emira had inherited, his soft wavy hair that she had loved to ruffle up jokingly, one evening of many years prior. She had let him see her with her hair down only on their first wedding night, and he had been fascinated by that dark mane, long and fragrant.

She held the picture close to her heart and closed her eyes: *I'll keep that promise. I made it first to you and then also to myself. We came to Lecce for this too.*

¹⁴ (dialect) every rock helps to build a wall.

Caserta, March 2nd, 1907

Clementina was walking along the central nave of the church of San Michele Arcangelo on the arm of her father. She was smiling, suddenly calm.

The knot in her stomach that had prevented her from eating that morning had disappeared. She just felt the weight of her hand enveloped in the lace glove, holding tight to her father's, Francesco Martello. She was floating like a feather and she was happy, because usually her body wasn't light at all, it carried all kinds of burdens: her mother's moods, Anna's fragility, Maria's whims and her dad's strict rules. Now she couldn't feel it at all, despite the fact that the *guimpe* was squeezing her from the chest to the neck like petals ready to support her face.

Halfway along the nave, she managed to catch a glimpse of Cesare's profile standing at the altar. She felt like laughing, and stifled the impulse by swallowing. Then she lowered her eyes and raised them again only when they were face to face. He lightly touched the knot of his tie, smiled at her and the two dimples Clementina knew so well appeared in his cheeks.

Sitting on the first bench, Anna and Maria were holding hands, crying.

The bedroom reserved for the newlyweds for the first wedding night was the guest room on the last floor of the villa in piazza Margherita, in the center of Caserta, assigned to the family for Francesco Martello's new position as vice-prefect of the city.

Cesare came out of the bathroom and looked around. There was no trace of his wife. Then he heard moaning from the corner of the room. He moved closer, fastening the strap of the pajama pants he had just put on, and bent over to check. Clementina was curled up on the floor and was holding her knees to her chest.

Cesare slipped beside her while she was murmuring hesitantly: - I'm sorry.

- For what?

Clementina covered her face with her hands. : - I don't know -. She turned toward him with a combative motion. Cesare was smiling. His dimples animated his face, but they also made him more shrewd, less sincere.

Clementina calmed down and reached out to caress the two small spaces on both sides of his mouth. - How is it possible you don't know who you got them from?

- When I was little, my mother used to say it had been the angels.

- Did you believe her?

Cesare put his hand on hers. - Don't I look like someone whose cheeks angels would pinch?

Clementina smiled. - Well... - she pulled away from his hand.

Cesare became serious, his dimples disappeared. - Tina, it doesn't have to happen necessarily tonight.

- Yes it does. Otherwise the wedding won't be valid.

- Says who?

- Mom. And don Angelo.

Cesare looked around theatrically, and lifted up the sheet to check under the bed.

- What are you doing?

- I'm looking for don Angelo.

- Don't make fun of me.

- I'm not looking for your mother. She might really be under the bed.

- Stop it! - Clementina was smiling and serious at the same time. - Can we really wait?

Cesare leaned toward her. - Is that what you want?

- I don't know what I want.

- That's not like you.

- And how would you know? - her voice came out harsher than she intended.

Cesare stood up.

- I'm sorry, - she repeated.

- Stop apologizing.

His eyes were veiled. Clementina didn't understand, but she felt that her husband's look was concealing desire, not sadness. She had been waiting for that moment for months, and fantasizing about what would happen. But now she found herself insecure and fragile, as never before. And the worst part was that she even felt offended by the suggestion they should wait. She wasn't sure of anything anymore. This annoyed her more than everything else.

- Will you tell me what you're thinking about?

Clementina took courage and stood up. Her legs hurt. She closed her silk robe that fell to her feet. - I can't.

Cesare followed her as she went to sit at the dressing table and carefully untied the braid her sisters had coiffed. Her hair, black and shiny, fell straight down to the stool.

- You're all gestures, Tina. But your thoughts, the ones in your head, you need to learn how to say them out loud.

She hesitated. - I can write them down -. She looked unsure if she should go on. - Let's take it slow, all right?

Cesare rolled her hair in his hand, leaving her neck exposed, he leaned over and placed his lips on her nape. Clementina closed her eyes for an instant, but she immediately opened them again. Cesare untied her robe without any rush, and then he let his hand slip into her nightgown, down to her breast. Clementina, who was watching their two bodies in the mirror, was surprised to find them beautiful. She liked her image that she didn't want to bring into focus, overlapping his. She liked the black disheveled hair wrapped around her husband's arm.

She repeated his words to herself, «You're all gestures», and was happy about them. Because her thoughts were the most precious thing she had, and perhaps someday she would have shared them. She really wanted to. But that moment hadn't arrived yet.

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Lecce, February 1922

- May our Lord bless your heart!

Lucia was clinging to the fat arm of Oronzo, who was huddled on the green velvet sofa in the hall of the Martello house.

The afternoons which Clementina had reserved for the boy were over, and that evening the woman, when she had come to get her son, had squeezed her in a heartfelt hug. - You've got magic in your words, the gift! There's no other explanation as to how you managed with my scoundrel son.

- I apologize for the cold, - said Clementina, who had taken a seat on the armchair. - We usually keep the fireplace going, but we hadn't realized the firewood was ending.

- Forget the cold, I'm so happy that I'm sweating! I'm hot now, look - the woman quickly unbuttoned her coat. - Well, I don't want to waste more of your time, but I have to confess. If today you had told me Oronzo couldn't come anymore, I would've pulled him out of school and my husband would've sent him to become a minister. Better to have a son who's a priest than stupid.

Clementina smiled at Oronzo. - Dear, why don't you go look for Filippo?

The boy wriggled out of his mother's grip and head down disappeared into the corridor.

- Yes, go on, Oronzo, Mrs Clementina and I need to talk a bit. Tell me, what kind of arrangements do we want to make?

- Oronzo's problem is concentration. Once you've captured his interest, he becomes passionate, he strives, he wants to succeed. But he needs frequent breaks. He needs to be looked after.

Lucia nodded impatiently. - So he can continue to come. You'll keep him, won't you?

- Here's the thing. I would be glad to keep Oronzo, the boy is proper, polite and I even find him endearing, but as I told you, he needs someone dedicated only to him. A person who is capable of captivating him. In the mornings I have lessons with Emira and look after Francesco, and in the afternoon I have to supervise Filippo... - she didn't finish the sentence, hoping that the woman would get the message.

- Are you telling me you're not going to help him anymore? My husband's not joking, he'll really close him in the seminary.

- My advice is to ask a tutor. A good one.

- We already tried! - Lucia stood up abruptly. - I apologize, I didn't want to yell. It's that it didn't go well, Oronzo didn't feel comfortable. He couldn't talk to him. He told me he couldn't even look the teacher we got him in the eye.

As she stood in front of her, the woman seemed even bigger to her.

- I'll pay you!

Clementina stared at her, stunned. - What are you saying?

- Of course, what a fool I've been not to think about it before, - Lucia sat down again and smiled enthusiastically. - Clementina, without taking offense, you're so good, you're better than a tutor. I'll pay you the same way I would pay him.

- Lucia, you understand that I cannot accept it -. Clementina started walking back and forth in the hall. - I have no qualifications to teach, and also... - embarrassment was drying her throat.

- What do qualifications have anything to do with this, pardon me, - Lucia objected, buttoning back up her coat. - You proved it with your children. The girl, Emira, that you educate, and the little one who speaks better than me, not to mention Filippo, who allow me, scares me for how serious he is. My Oronzo after just five days seems another person. Even the professor, the French one, the handsome one, - she whispered under her breath, - even he told me that he tested him orally yesterday morning and was left speechless. That he was ready to send him back to his place, but Oronzo answered to almost everything. This is why he needs to study with you. Don't say no, I beg of you. You decide the price.

- I wouldn't even know what to propose. And I told you I have a time problem.

Lucia was about to say something, but she changed her mind. - I understand. I'll leave you, I won't impose myself on you any longer.

Clementina escorted her in the corridor.

Waiting for the boy, they didn't speak. Lucia was staring at her shoes, disheartened, and Clementina wasn't sure if she should feel more offended or embarrassed.

Oronzo arrived followed by Filippo, who first said goodbye to Lucia and then, with a pat on his back, to his classmate. - See you on Monday, *beddhru*¹⁵! - he added before disappearing into the kitchen.

- Cover up, dear, it's freezing outside, - Clementina gave Oronzo's his scarf, - not that it's warm in here, - she added under her breath.

- Thank you, Mrs teacher Clementina, see you on Monday! - Oronzo was staring at her behind his thick lenses.

- Well actually, no...

- No Monday, no Tuesday, nothing at all! Mrs Clementina can't have lessons with you.

He didn't say anything, not a gesture of annoyance or sadness. The reaction of who is used to succumb, to not have it his way, to give up.

- Come on, let's go, - Lucia pulled him close. - Goodbye, Clementina, you were good to us, so patient. I am very grateful. I really mean it.

Her resentment had already dissolved a bit.

Before closing the door, a smirk similar to a smile escaped Clementina. She was heartbroken for Oronzo, but what the woman had offered her was inconceivable. She couldn't invent herself as a teacher overnight, she didn't find it fair nor honest.

¹⁵ (dialect) beautiful, in the sense of «my friend».

Maria came in while she was still staring at the front door. - What's with the long face?

- I hadn't noticed you were out.

- I bumped into a crestfallen Oronzo, Lucia told me he's not coming back.

- She asked me to supervise him everyday. As a tutor. She said that this week professor Germain, the French teacher, congratulated her over her son's oral test. We had prepared for it together, on Wednesday afternoon.

- Tina, that's quite a responsibility. To follow the boy every day, I mean. Come with me, I need to wash my hands.

Clementina didn't move. - She said she'll pay me.

Maria turned around suddenly.

- And how much will she give you?

- I didn't ask.

Her sister put her face right in front of hers. - So we're turning our nose up at money, now?

- What are you saying, Maria, you're talking about money to me, really? - she lowered her voice. - I know we need the money.

- Remember that Filippo will have to go to university. Or have you forgotten? Then there's Emira. And what about Francesco? What are you going to do, heads or tails? You can and you can't?

- Lower your voice, - ordered Clementina. - You can't invent yourself as a teacher overnight. I don't have the competence to do it.

- Why, what have you done with Filippo all these years? And what are you doing with Mira and Francesco now? It seems to me they're doing quite alright.

- Those are my children. I know them. I can improvise.

- Oh come on, when do you ever improvise? Do you think I haven't seen you reading those manuals late at night? Do you think we haven't noticed you studying and revising like a pupil? You're a teacher a lot more than those priests.

Anna appeared from the bedroom, fixing her hair with an ivory clip that wouldn't fasten. - What are you doing whispering in the corridor like thieves?

- Give it to me, I'll take care of it, - Clementina grabbed the clip, grateful for that interruption.

- Lucia asked her to teach Oronzo, and to help him with his homework every afternoon.

Anna stared at Maria while Clementina was smoothing a lock of her hair. - It's a great responsibility, Maria, I understand if she doesn't feel like it.

- Of course. Fearful as usual, Anna. It's that she said she would pay her.

Clementina firmly stuck the clip in Anna's hair.

- Do you think you should accept? - Anna asked her.

Clementina didn't answer.

- Tina, you have to decide.

- I am asking you both. If I take on this responsibility, you must share it with me. We'll do it together.

- Let's do it! - exclaimed Maria.

- But I said no. How would that make me look?

- You're allowed to change your mind. - Anna took her hand and grabbed Maria's too. - An income will lighten our hearts.

Emira, sitting to read in her bedroom, was listening to them whispering in the corridor. She raised her eyes from the mythology book she was studying, and she watched them through the open door of her room: her mother had long black tied-up braids and her usual dress, black as well. She was still thin but now more than ever, with that upright position that made her look ethereal and distant. Then aunt Anna, paler than her. She knew she had been very beautiful when she was young, she had seen her in pictures. She was beautiful now too, but much less than in portraits. Maria was giving her her back, her body heavier than her sisters'. They were all the same height, and although different in their features and manners, they seemed part of a single magical and indefinite entity. She imagined they were the daughters of a cyclops, one of those mythical creatures she read about in books. Her mother definitely came from other worlds. Once she had sneaked into her bedroom and had watched her while she was sleeping. For a moment she had thought of curling up next to her, but she hadn't had the courage. Then Clementina had started moaning, gritting her teeth and shaking her head without grace on the cushion. Emira had touched her hand lightly, she wanted to wake her up from that nightmare, maybe the same one that had startled her too in her sleep, just moments before. Clementina had relaxed and Emira had convinced herself that it was thanks to her. She had gone back to watch her sleep other times, then once Clementina had woken up suddenly while she was sitting on the bed. Her mother hadn't said anything, and after a while she had closed her eyes again. Emira hadn't gone to her room anymore.

That night Clementina tossed and turned in her bed. She couldn't fall asleep. Making that decision had upset her more than she thought. In the life that had hit her when everything had changed, she had reinvented herself as a teacher for her children. She had promised Cesare and it had never been a burden. She loved to guide and prepare her children in the subjects she had studied as a young girl. During the years she spent with Cesare, she never would have had the courage to imagine herself like this. She felt at fault to even think it. And there had been yet another life, before Cesare, before motherhood, when she had educated her dolls, the cloth ones with button eyes sewn together by Pantalea.

She struggled to find that time again. She attended the Dorothean Sisters school. A gift granted to her only, the eldest. Her mind went back to her Roman house in the Monti Parioli. She put the dolls on the bed to teach them what she had learned that morning in class. Maria and Anna were allowed to listen as long as they didn't interrupt, that Maria regularly did, until Pantalea came to call them for their snack.

Every week she wrote on «Cinderella», an illustrated children's periodical, to solve the riddles that were given to the readers. She always guessed. And then she had written her first short story: about a runaway canary who, after discovering the world, had preferred to go back to its cage. She had read it in front of family and guests at Christmas Eve.

She got up rapidly from the bed, the damp cold of the room didn't stop her. Tiptoeing so as not to wake anyone she headed to her studio, to the bookcase where she kept the few volumes she was able to take with her from Rome, and where she had collected also her father's. She rummaged through the shelves for a few minutes. It was her father who had had her short stories printed, in the spring of many years ago. She was about to give up and go back to bed, when she saw it. The small volume was at the bottom, dusty and hidden between two manuals of Civil Law.

She started to leaf through it. *Other pages of Tina's notebook*, Rome, Mantellate Printing Press, 1902. The frontispiece had a dedication: «To you, Maria, Anna, Emilia, my beloved sisters».

Emilia. The name of her lost sister clenched her stomach. She closed the booklet firmly and without care put it back in its place. Before leaving the room she glanced at Cesare's portrait on the desk: *I'll get paid to teach a boy*, she scornfully said to his gentle face. *Do you remember when I used to spend my afternoons writing, making up stories and reading? As of today, enough of that. I don't have time anymore and around me there's nothing worth telling about. It's only fair.*

She stood there for a few minutes, waiting for his answer. Her husband's eyes remained still. Clementina sighed, and went back to bed, depleted.

- Mrs Salvi? Madame? Mrs Salvi, a moment, please.

Professor Germain, the History, Geography and French teacher, caught up with her in the inner courtyard of *Collegio Argento*.

- Forgive me, madame, may I borrow some of your time? If you'll allow me.

- Is it about Filippo?

- No, it's not about him. Your son is exceptional. It's about Oronzo.

Clementina held her breath. That tall bearded tutor intimidated her.

She was sure he would reprimand her for inventing herself as a teacher during those four months. He would say that Oronzo hadn't improved at all and she would have been more successful with decoupage. All the sticky heat of that morning of June hit her, making her suddenly feel extremely weak.

The man stopped in front of her. - Are you feeling all right? You're pale.

He towered over her by at least ten centimeters.

- Yes, I'm all right - she answered with her mouth dry, taking out her fan.

- Please follow me inside, in a cool empty classroom. What do you say? - he suggested rolling his every 'r'.

About him, Clementina knew that he was originally from the South of France and that after a few years in Milan, he had moved to Lecce to teach at the city college.

She walked after him without saying a word, her head down. Once inside, she sat at the first desk. - Am I having a test? - she asked with false amusement. She was dying inside. She started to vigorously flap her green and blue flowered fan.

- A test? Of course not, madame. I was actually searching for you because we are surprised, I mean all of us teachers, for Oronzo's metamorphosis. *Inexplicabile*! Or at least we believed, until his mother told me about you.

Clementina swallowed. - May I ask you for a glass of water?

- Of course.

As soon as professor Germain left the classroom, Clementina stood up. She didn't feel comfortable sitting behind a desk, put there to be judged by such a well-read man.

- Madame - Germain offered her a full glass. - I know that Oronzo studies with you in the afternoon.

- I'm an impostor - she admitted sitting down again.

He burst out laughing. A deep, warm and guttural laugh.

- Are you laughing at me?

Germain scratched his beard and didn't answer. He couldn't be more than fifty. Clementina found him handsome, and was ashamed of that thought. The professor was lean, he had high sharp cheekbones, and almond-shaped eyes that appeared to have come out from another world.

- It started by chance - she explained herself. - Mrs Rocchi asked me the favor to have him study with Filippo to help him catch up a bit. The first time it didn't go well, Oronzo was distracted, and really agitated.

- He has trouble concentrating. But here, madame, we make no concessions. Those who fall behind lose their way. It happens often.

- I am familiar with how strict you are. With Filippo it even works well. But students are not all the same.

- Of course. Nevertheless, the quality of education we offer cannot be questioned.

- Absolutely. I would never take the liberty of judging.

- I wasn't reprimanding you.

His white teeth, slightly overlapping, stood out behind his thick beard. - You did an excellent job. I wanted to tell you. And I wanted to understand how you did it.

Clementina picked up his scent distinctly: a mix of honey and tangerine. She imagined that someone could see them from the outside: two tall and thin figures, both dressed in black, one in front of the other in an empty classroom. That closeness made her tense up. - I don't have a specific method.

A large fly came in from the open window and started buzzing around them.

Professor Germain waved it away without too much fuss. - You should definitely invent one. It's the basis of every discipline. If there is no method, there can't be study. Science, without method, would be an infinite series of questions left unanswered.

- I'm afraid I cannot separate my role as a mother from that of a teacher. This is why I feel like a charlatan posing as someone she's not.

- But you would like to teach. Correct?

Clementina couldn't smell the honey and tangerine anymore. She thought she had gotten used to it. She got up and went to open the window wider. The fly, that had kept banging onto the same glass, flew away.

- I liked helping Oronzo. Seeing him slowly managing, with the tools I was giving him -. Outside the window, two Jesuits were walking by in the courtyard.

- Your approach intrigues me. I must confess that I have tested Filippo many times over the course of the year, I knew he had been home schooled and his distracted temperament misled me. Your son is very prepared and it is thanks to you.

Clementina went back to the desk where she had left her purse. - I really need to go now.

Germain started closing the windows, with precision he put on the locks to block them and then rearranged the chairs he had moved. - I'll walk you.

They headed together toward the exit, silently. In the doorway, Clementina stepped back to allow the servant who was washing the floor to pass between them. - I will see you in September then.

- Madame, - he stopped her. - I would like to ask for your permission to send you a few students. Young boys who need some help, some support in view of the start of the school year.

His 'r's were getting more and more pronounced.

- You flatter me. But as I have already told you, I am not a teacher.

- But you also said that you liked helping Oronzo. And think about the results Filippo is obtaining.

- That is only thanks to him.

- It would be only for a few months, - he insisted.

Clementina turned toward the street, irritated.

- *Pardonnez-moi*, - concluded professor Germain, - I won't insist. But please, think about it.

The following week, Clementina stormed into the kitchen interrupting Maria who was wiping the dirt off of *meloncelle*¹⁶. - Filippo's professor is here, he came without notice.

- How rude to insist like this...

- Please don't leave me alone with him, come with me in the living room, - said Clementina as her sister was taking off her apron.

- *Aggiu capito Tina, sciamu*¹⁷ -. Maria preceded her in the corridor. - But we don't have anything to offer him. Showing up like this, without a word. Is it the French way?

Clementina shook her head. - Keep your calm.

¹⁶ A vegetable typically found in Apulia, it is a variety of melon similar to cucumbers.

¹⁷ (dialect) I got it, Tina, let's go.

- Professor, this is my sister, Miss Maria Martello -. The man, standing in front of the sofa, put his hand out.

- *Enchantée!* - said Maria, suddenly serene. - You're French, right? - and invited him to sit.

Clementina looked at her, surprised at that sudden metamorphosis: she kept staring at him, bewitched.

- From Carcassone. It's a small village in the South of France. I smell something delicious coming from the kitchen, it reminds me of home. Do you know cassoulet and Minervois?

- Relatives of yours?

Clementina collapsed in the armchair.

- Oh no, - he laughed heartily. - They're a typical dish of my area and an excellent red wine to accompany it.

- I'm such a fool... - Maria laughed back.

Clementina felt she had lost her.

- I have some warm cinnamon cookies, if you want to taste them. Would you like a coffee? Some water, perhaps?

Clementina tried to catch her sister's eye, to no avail.

- I don't want to disturb you. I was impolite to show up like this, I won't waste your time, - he turned to Clementina.

Maria had no intention of being excluded from the conversation. - I'm sure I would be able to make this cassoulette you were talking about better than your mother, - she said.

- Maria!

- Oh, well, definitely better than my mother. I don't think she ever set foot once in a kitchen.

- Forgive us, it's that we can't hold back here when we're talking about food -. Clementina glared at her sister.

- To be honest, I would love to taste your cassoulet someday.

- Cassoulet... - she repeated fanning herself with her hand. - What an elegant name. It must be a difficult dish, incredibly refined.

- I'm afraid I'm not familiar with the recipe, but I can state with confidence that there's nothing refined about it: it's meat and beans. Probably the one from Castelnaudary is more refined.

Maria open her mouth slightly, searching for words that never came.

Germain gestured not to think about it. - It's an old French dispute.

A long silence fell onto the hall.

- Filippo is so intelligent, right? - Maria suddenly said.

- Very, - the man smiled at her. - Filippo surprised us all.

Clementina relaxed a bit.

- About that, I came to make my case, - he started again.
- You don't give up.
- Never.
- I agree with the professor, - intervened Maria. - Did you know that I convinced her with Oronzo?

Clementina's eyes widened. Germain had won her over.

- Anna and the children should be back shortly -. Clementina felt the need to buy some time. - Filippo will be happy to see you and I could introduce you to Francesco, whom I hope to send you in a few years.

- I'd really appreciate that, but I can't stay.

- I'm preparing *ciceri e tria* for lunch, - Maria insisted. - It's a type of pasta that I fry, then I put chickpeas in. But it's hard to describe, you have to taste it.

- Clementina -. The professor hesitated in using her first name, that was an impertinence. - Madame Salvi, - he corrected himself. - It's three boys, two of them in the grade ahead of Filippo's, and one from the last year. It would be a great responsibility, I understand perfectly well, but think about what an interesting exchange could take place. And if word spread, for you it would be, well...

- What would it be?

- It would be a good thing, also financially.

Clementina couldn't bring herself to speak, his proposal was way too senseless.

- I didn't want to offend you. *Je vous demand pardon.*

- I won't get emotional because you're saying it in French, - she answered, standing up.

He got up and picked up his hat.

- Oh, all right.

Germain and Maria both turned to look at her.

- But first I want to meet them.

- *Ma sta ccunti seriamente*¹⁸, Tina?

- Since it has been an indiscreet conversation on everyone's part, - she said addressing Maria, - I think we can be honest: yes, we do need money. And not for vanity, to embellish ourselves. As you will notice, professor, we don't have much to embellish. We need the money for the future of our children.

- It's a wise choice, madame. And a brave one.

¹⁸ (dialect) Are you serious, Tina?

- Not a word, - said Clementina, who had heard Anna and the children hustling outside the door. - I will talk to them later.

Pantalea appeared from the kitchen and yelled: - *Meloncelle* are for lunch or for dinner?

- Pantalea has had some hearing problems lately, - Maria explained.

- I'll contact you in the next few days -. The professor bowed his head toward Clementina. - To give you some time to get organized.

Maria gazed blankly at him as he left the hall. Behind him, Clementina followed shaking her head.

The licorice sticks were still on the kitchen table.

Only Francesco had attempted at grabbing one, but he had been immediately reproached by Filippo. His glare had been enough. Emira wouldn't have eaten it anyway. She didn't like licorice. It was odd that her mother didn't remember.

Clementina couldn't keep her leg still, a nervous tic made her skirt vibrate. She had summoned her children to talk to them about the school feat, about the decision to give lessons to some boys, in the house, all summer. She had bought some licorice.

She grabbed a stick. - If nobody's going to eat it... - she sucked on it. It was bitter, strong. - It's good, - she said.

Francesco ran his tongue over his lips and she gave him a stick. When he tried to grab it, Filippo stood up. - You're not a real teacher!

Clementina told herself that chocolate would have been a better idea. - This is why I need your help.

Emira frowned. - We're not teachers either, mom.

- Children...

- I am not a child! - Filippo grabbed the licorice that Clementina had handed to Francesco. After chewing on it, he spit it in his hand. - You shouldn't be working, - his face clouded over. - I can find a job, bring home some money.

Francesco stifled a laugh.

- What are you laughing at? I am the firstborn.

Clementina crossed her legs to stop them from trembling nervously. - You must only think about studying.

- I'm okay with it, mom -. Francesco stretched toward the door, impatient to go back to playing.

Emira started picking at the skin around her thumb. - You are good as a teacher with us, - she achingly looked at the licorice on the table.

- Because we are her sons and daughter, - Filippo replied.

- You're right, as a matter of fact I'm not sure I'll be capable.
- And will you have some strangers come here, in our house? - Filippo asked again.

Francesco lit up.

- They're boys just like you. Listen, if you don't agree we'll just forget about it, - she challenged them.

Filippo moved closer toward his mother. His curls covered his eyes. Clementina pushed them away exposing her son's forehead. - I need your help with Math. Can I count on it?

- What did the aunts say? - Emira intervened.

- They are fine with it.

Francesco gathered the four licorice sticks left on the table and handed them out, one each. - Let's make the licorice pact!

Filippo snorted toward his brother and sat down again. - Nonsense... It's just because you want to eat it.

- You're right! - Francesco turned towards Clementina. - Mom, you're making a mistake in asking us for permission. You're the boss.

Filippo placed his elbows on the table.

- But I'm an enlightened ruler! - she burst out laughing. Nobody followed her. She composed herself - So?

Francesco raised his licorice stick, Emira did the same. - It disgusts me, anyways... - she whispered so she wouldn't be heard by Clementina, who added her stick to her children's.

Filippo didn't move. But his upright posture, his pout, his puckered lips didn't match his temperament. Clementina took pity on him. She was sure that he was forcing himself and she knew why. It was lacerating to know that his son's inclinations and the role he had given himself after his father's death were incompatible. She nodded to him, a hint of a smile to encourage him. Filippo gave in.

They all put their sticks together.

Her leg was still trembling, but a bit less.

- You tell me the parts you are less sure about. I thought we could start with a review of History.

The three boys chuckled. Palmiro raised his hand first. - Should we call you teacher, professor or ma'am?

- Teacher is fine -. They had barely been in the studio for ten minutes, and she had already regretted accepting Germain's proposal.

- Teacher, - Palmiro nodded. - And you'll explain things better than the professors I already have?

- It's that they can't stand you anymore! - Egidio elbowed him and laughed, searching for the complicity of Paolo, to his left. Palmiro burst out laughing too. - '*Stu fessu*'¹⁹!

- All right, gentlemen. If we want to begin.

- Do we? I don't know if we want to begin, *mescia*²⁰, - Palmiro spoke again. - I actually would prefer to be at the *Grotta della Poesia*, the Cave of Poetry, diving head first and eating my grandmother's bread. What about you, Paolo?

- Me too. Not your grandmother's bread though, with all due respect.

Clementina sprung up and the three of them stopped sneering altogether. She was about to say something, but she closed her mouth and sat down again. She watched them sitting in front of her, on the good chairs she had taken from the living room. A sudden fury grew inside of her. She wanted to throw them out, yell at them that she would've preferred the sea too, that no one, let alone her, forced them to sit there and listen to her explanations on subjects she probably didn't know that well. She felt insecure, and this made her even more nervous.

- Come on, Palmiro, behave. Let the teacher speak, so they'll be happy in September and they won't flunk us, - Egidio winked at her.

That uncomfortable role didn't suit her at all. She missed Oronzo, the sweet boy, and insecure like her, who hung on her every word.

She took courage. Professor Germain had told her that the three of them had problems with History and Italian. She breathed in and started to talk about the French Revolution. They stayed silent, but she didn't have any expectations. At the end of the lesson, she could have sworn they hadn't listened for a single minute.

After walking them outside, she felt like crying. She ignored Anna and Maria's questions and shut herself in the studio. She needed to regain possession of her den and reflect in peace. She told herself that the next day, if they would ever come back, she would have them sit in the hall. It was only her commitment, her word she couldn't take back and her remaining dignity that prevented her from writing to Germain not to send her those three anymore, nor anyone else.

The following afternoon, if possible, was even worse.

The boys, who at that point were aware of the fact that they had her in the palm of their hand, asked nonsensical questions interrupting her over and over again. They pretended to be interested, but only to chat, to waste time, and to test her.

¹⁹ (dialect) What a fool!

²⁰ (dialect) teacher.

When they had left, Clementina rushed to the desk. If they had to be her cross, she would bear it with the person that had loaded it on her shoulders.

Lecce, July 15th, 1922

Professor Germain,

I am forced to write to you because what I was most afraid of finally happened: the students you sent me realized I am an imposter and they treat me accordingly. I can't say they are rude because they always stop before crossing the line, but they definitely have no intention of gaining anything from my lessons. To continue with them would be like stealing. My time and their money.

I think the best thing would be to write to their families and admit your mistake. I am not a teacher. I am a mother that improvised as such out of necessity, and has now been punished. Greed was my sin.

I'll be waiting to hear from you promptly.

Clementina Salvi

Germain knocked on the door of the house in Guariglia street the following Sunday.

Clementina looked at him in disbelief: - I wasn't expecting you.

- From the letter you sent me, it didn't seem like it. I wanted to speak to you in person, but if this is not a good time, I'll leave.

The two studied one another, then Clementina opened the door wider and invited him in. - Aren't you accustomed to informing others in France? Come on, Maria made lemonade with mint.

- I'd prefer to talk to you first.

- If you don't greet her she'll take offense. And on Sunday afternoons we all have a snack together, with the children.

Clementina led the way to the kitchen.

- The professor and I have to discuss a few things, - she said after everyone greeted him heartily. Especially Maria. - If you need us, we'll be in the studio.

- What about the lemonade? - he asked her in the corridor.

- It's best if we talk first.

Clementina closed the door to her studio.

Germain sat in front of her, he crossed his legs and rested his back on the chair. He was wearing lightweight pants and a fair shirt underneath the beige jacket. As always, she was dressed in black. She told herself he must have thought that she always wore the same dress. She didn't, she alternated three, completely black, but with different stitchings and decorations. Only a few keen observers would have been able to distinguish them.

- Is this where you give lessons?

- Professor, let's not make fools out of ourselves, I don't have the energy anymore. Nor the time. Have you come here to tell me that you wrote to them? To the families, I mean. They won't come tomorrow. Is that so?

Germain looked around, ignored the mold stain widening on the ceiling, and lingered on the bookcase at the back of his shoulders. - You have many volumes.

- Don't be cruel, don't keep me on my toes.

- Madame, - Germain changed the crossing of his legs. - I think you are sabotaging yourself.

Clementina barely flinched. That familiarity seemed excessive, and as a reflex she took refuge into Cesare's portrait.

- That's not what I'm doing at all, believe me.

- I sent you the incompetent, lazy ones. You can't possibly believe that the only ones who need you are gentle and a little stupid, simply put.

- Professor.

- Germain. Please call me Germain.

- Germain, then. A moment ago you accused me of being unprepared, a fool who can't recognize who stands in front of her. Don't you think you're going too far?

Germain joined his hands under his chin. - That's not what I said.

- No?

- I don't consider you unprepared. The three boys I sent you are not having a hard time because they don't understand, or because they don't have a study method, or concentration problems like Oronzo. They aren't succeeding because they have everything already. Studying will add nothing to their life except for a qualification. This is why they have no interest in learning. They just want to pass exams like that, with no effort. If it depended on me, I would flunk them all.

- And you had to send them to me of all people?

Germain leaned over, Clementina picked up the scent of tangerine and honey.

- To whom else, if not you?

They stared at each other in silence for a few seconds. Then she got up, went to the bookcase and pretended to leaf through a volume, he remained still on his chair. The man's calm agitated her, she started to sweat. From the closed door she could hear a faint chattering.

- Well, Germain. You've come here to tell me I'm sabotaging myself and that those three don't care about studying. You just made me want to get through the week ahead with even more vigor.

Germain burst out laughing. The same warm guttural laugh she had heard the previous month, when he had stopped by their house.

- You're lucky. It doesn't take much to amuse you, - she told him sitting back down. - What else? - she asked passing the nib from one hand to the other.

- Clementina.

She froze. She was sure she hadn't granted him permission to call her that.

- Madame, - he continued, - if you don't believe it yourself, how will all the others?

- And what about you? Why do you believe it?

She instantly regretted the question. For the liberty that both of them had taken. Him in judging her, her in letting herself be judged.

- I am not a young boy. This December I will be forty-five years old and I've been teaching for twenty. I get certain things immediately.

Instead of being reassured, his answer irritated her. - What are these things you get?

- You can relax. I am not judging you, I admire you, that's all. This is why I came in person here today. I firmly believe that you can succeed. And I'm telling you looking you in the eye. Since writing things down is easier, but you may believe them a bit less.

Clementina was struck by the last part of the sentence. The first months of their marriage, she wrote Cesare notes, postcards she left around the house. They were thoughts for him, observations she couldn't say out loud but that she couldn't hide from him. Sometimes they were nice things: she wrote him how she loved undoing his tie in the evening, when he got back from work, or how she had appreciated when he had reproached the baker when he had given her the wrong change. At the time, she didn't know how to handle money. Other times, she told him

what hurt her: when he forgot to say goodbye, in the morning, that evening when he had gone out with his colleagues and hadn't thought she would stay home and get bored. She wrote him she would have loved to travel more, to go to Paris and London too. That her imagination needed to be nurtured and she didn't like spending all her time at home. She thought back at that Clementina with fondness, at the tantrums, at the demands that Cesare forced her to talk about. A sentimental exercise that in the beginning had worn her out, but gradually had managed to win her over.

She stared at Germain. It was true, writing things down is easier.

In that moment Francesco opened the door: - Aunt Maria says that if you want a piece of cake it's now or never!

- It's not a real cake, - whispered Clementina. - It's a sweet concoction that Maria makes with eggs, honey and lemon peel.

- I can't stay, - Germain turned toward the door. - I'll be waiting for your answer, all right? - he went to the kitchen and said goodbye to everyone.

That scent of tangerine and honey again, as Germain left.

The following Monday, Clementina, sitting at the living room table, waited for the three boys. She scrutinized their faces, smiled, offered them lemon water and invited them to sit down. The three started with their usual rigmarole, chuckling, whispering and competing for the most stupid joke.

- Do you know what fate is?

- What happened to us this summer. Not a good fate, with all due respect -. Palmiro rolled the sleeves of his shirt up.

- Correct, Palmiro. Well done. Do you know what fate will await you if by September you won't have caught up?

- No, teacher. But we are sure that you will tell us. - Paolo smiled at her. The fuzz on his face was saying that winter would make him a man.

- Me, you say? Oh, no, not me for sure. Professor Germain will tell you, when you will have flunked.

The three of them remained speechless. Where was the insecure widow of the past few days?

- Are you blackmailing us now?

- Mr Scorsoni, Egidio. I would never dare. I just reminded you of what your fate could be if you won't be prepared by September. Guillotine, - and she lifted her hand up to her neck.

Egidio swallowed. - What are we, Louis XV?

- And who are you, Marie Antoinette? - asked Paolo.

- If I were Marie Antoinette, you would be Louis XVI. Do you know Marat?

- Who?

Clementina got up and walked slowly to the door. - Now follow me. The three didn't move.

- Come on.

Palmiro was the first one to stand up. - You don't want to close us in a storage closet, do you? - he chuckled coming close to her. Egidio and Paolo followed her too.

Clementina strode in silence along the corridor to the kitchen. Once inside, the three boys found Maria holding a rolling pin, and Pantalea next to her, staring at them in disgust.

Clementina handed a white apron to each of them. - Here. I apologize, they're old and worn-out, but my sister didn't want to give you new ones.

Maria showed them the rolling pin. - Who's mixing the flour? I need one with strong hands.

- Is this a joke? - said Paolo. - Teacher, are you enjoying yourself?

Egidio threw the apron on the table and Palmiro smelled it. - Mine stinks.

Clementina clapped her hands. - Come on, let's not waste any time, pasta doesn't prepare itself.

Maria moved close to the boys. - You need to tell me who is kneading, who's rolling the dough and who'll give the shape.

The three stepped the slightest bit back.

Egidio took the apron from Palmiro's hands and threw it on the table next to the one he had tossed a moment before. - It's not like we're girls who have to stay here and cook.

Maria moved closer to him. - Education *se no lla tei, no la poi cattare*²¹-. And she placed a bag of flour on the table.

The three wandered restlessly around the room. Egidio turned toward the door. - I'm going home, *mescia*.

- Goodbye, Mr Scorsoni. And good luck with the exam.

Egidio squeezed the handle tight. - Don't threaten me.

- The door is straight down to the right. Paolo and Palmiro, my sister here wants to know who's kneading and who's rolling.

Egidio didn't move.

²¹ (dialect) if you don't have it, you can't buy it.

- I'd prefer to roll, - whispered Paolo with his eyes down.
- If you don't like cooking, you still have the possibility of going back to the other room and listening to the story I was about to tell you.
- Palmiro took the apron from the table and handed it to Clementina.
- The story's fine with me. Whatever it is.
- Me too, teacher. I'm serious. I want to hear this story -. And Paolo handed in the apron too.
- Clementina smiled. - And you, Mr Scorsoni, still here?
- Egidio, who had stopped at the door, had cheeks flushed with anger.
- What a show you've put on, *mescia*.
- Egidio enough, don't waste our time -. Palmiro opened his arms.
- Egidio shook his head and scoffed, then he went to get the apron Clementina had assigned him and gave it back.
- Sorry, Maria, we're having a lesson. You and Pantalea will have to prepare the pasta today too.

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On Tuesday afternoon Gianni didn't show up for the lesson.

In the four years he had been studying with Clementina he had never missed a day, not even one absence. He had the perfect health of someone who grew up outside. Clementina didn't think much about it, she noted down his name in the register and started her lesson like every other day.

But Gianni didn't show up the following Wednesday and Thursday either. Clementina thought he had caught the flu, Emira had recently recovered from a nasty cough that had tortured her for many nights, and had then been passed to Francesco and Anna too. When Gianni was absent also on the following Monday, she started to worry: she searched for his home address to send a telegram and realized she didn't have it. The only thing she knew was that the boy lived in a farmhouse in the fields around Squinzano. She decided to ignore her growing sense of unease,

and still waited for Gianni to show up in class at the same desk, in front of her.

After ten days without any news, she brought herself to talk about it with Anna. - Should I be worried?

Her sister looked at her over her sewing glasses. - I think you already are -. She continued with her cross stitch.

- I could go to Squinzano. Just to make sure in person that everything is all right.

Anna took off her glasses and placed them on the night stand next to the table lamp. - Are you asking for my permission?

The following Saturday, at breakfast, Clementina announced to everyone not to wait for her for lunch.

- She's going to Squinzano to look for Gianni, - Emira said, feigning indifference.

Francesco burst out laughing and Pantalea stopped washing the cups.

- I said Squinzano, not Paris.

- Exactly! - Maria answered.

- Look, I need to know. It's true I care about Gianni, but I'd do it for each of my students.

- Gianni's your favorite, - replied Emira.

- And yours too, - Francesco bit into a piece of bread and jam. Emira stuck her tongue out at him.

Maria pulled her sister aside. - What do you think you're doing? At least ask professor Germain to go with you.

Francesco wiped his mouth. - I'll come with you!

- Nobody will come, - she replied. - In my life I've done bolder things than going to Squinzano by myself.

- May I come in?

Clementina knocked lightly on the door to her sisters' bedroom and found Maria sitting on the small wrought iron bed, pretending she was cleaning her nails. She was waiting for her. At forty five, her sister had lost all the agility that had distinguished her as a young woman. Her body was now deformed as if all the accumulated tension had melted and she had decided to let herself go.

Clementina sat on Anna's bed and smelled the scent of peonies.

- You changed your mind, I hope.

- Not at all. I'm about to leave, I just stopped by because if something were to happen to me, I wouldn't want you to be tormented by guilt because you were mean to me.

Maria sprung up. - You're being funny now, but have you got any idea of where you're going? In the middle of nowhere. If something happens to you, they'll find your body in two months. And also, *nzinddreca*²², - she added pointing at the grey sky outside.

They looked at each other, trying to resist, but then exploded with laughter barely concealed by their coughing.

- See you in the afternoon.

- Bring some bread with you! - Maria yelled after her.

The countryside surrounding her was unsettling, but only because it was wrapped in the clouds of March, she thought upon arrival. With the sun, it would've appeared more reassuring. She set off quickly towards the area that was indicated to her.

Half an hour before, after arriving in Squinzano, she had asked the shoemaker who had a shop in the main square where the Mestieri family lived, and with Clementina's great relief he had understood immediately. He spoke a very strict dialect. She had barely guessed two things: the direction she should take and how long the journey would last. She walked for a long time, until the street became muddy and the noise of insects ear-splitting. She was already thinking about Maria's words on her untimely death, when in the distance she saw a house surrounded by farmland.

She prayed it belonged to the Mestieri family.

An old woman was sitting outside the door, and with needle and thread was sewing together a chicken's testicles. She wasn't looking at her hands or the animal. She was staring straight ahead, at something faraway. As she reached the gate, Clementina noticed that the old woman was smelling the air in her direction. - *Ci arriatu*²³?

- I'm Gianni's teacher! - she answered yelling.

- I'm blind, not deaf, - the old woman said.

Clementina then asked her about Gianni or his father again, but she didn't answer. Her eyes, green like her nephew's, wandered without direction.

²² (dialect) it's going to rain.

²³ (dialect) Who's arrived?

The door to the house was broken, a damage of days, perhaps months, because a temporary hook was pinning it to the wall and could be opened both from the inside and the outside.

Clementina moved closer and knocked. Nobody answered. She then asked the old woman if someone was in, and she signed to her that they weren't.

- Is this the house of the Mestieri family?

The woman gestured toward the fields, or perhaps it was an invitation to leave.

Then sudden thundering startled her.

The wind turned, the old woman slowly stood up, she took the small straw chair she was sitting on and feeling her way, holding the chicken, she searched for the hook to open. Before Clementina could help her, she disappeared into the house. Very well, she thought, if the deluge comes Maria's prophecy will be fulfilled.

A hand touched her shoulder. She jumped, terrified.

- *Cce facite*²⁴ here?

Gianni's father glared at her, scratching his chin.

- Where's Gianni?

She suddenly realized that she was in their house, and she needed to watch her tone. She smiled more agreeably. - He hasn't showed up for lessons in more than a week. And he never misses them.

The man had taken off his work gloves and had thrown them on the table under the porch. They were dirty and worn-out, covered in soil and manure. Clementina smelled sweat and alcohol despite the cold, despite it was morning.

- *Face friddu*²⁵. Come, - he said opening the hallway. Then he yelled at the old woman something that Clementina couldn't understand. - My wife's mother. She's blind.

- But not deaf.

- What?

Clementina gestured not to think about it and followed him in silence.

The inside was even worse than the outside.

Houses reflect who lives inside them. Her childhood house had been dark, the one she had set up with Cesare alive. Back in Lecce, she had found her parents' house on the verge of rotting in mold with her sisters

²⁴ (dialect) What are you doing here?

²⁵ (dialect) It's cold.

inside, and she knew there was no home without a family. *Family is family* she kept on saying if someone came to ask her for help.

The old woman was in a corner in the dark, sitting next to a fireplace she was staring intently at, as if fascinated by the flames.

- Are you thirsty? - the man took a bucket from the corner of the room.

Clementina didn't move. - So, will you tell me why Gianni disappeared?

The man poured some water in the glass and drank slowly, savoring it. - My wife died on Monday. Gianni is not coming anymore, - he put the glass in the sink.

It was all there, in that big, cold and dirty room: a lit fireplace, a threadbare sofa, a wooden chair with an old woman who seemed part of the furniture, and a wrought iron table which reminded her of the one in the kitchen of her Roman house.

- My condolences. But Gianni has his final exam in June, he can't withdraw now.

- I need him here. In May we will be working on the connections, - he answered her pointing at the three lamps on the table, next to the door.

- Can I at least speak to him?

What the man had just told her was inconceivable to her.

- Why are you insisting, *mescia*? - he asked moving near the old woman, and whispering something to her ear. For an instant Clementina thought he wanted to take her shoes off, but instead he took two logs from under the chair and tossed them in the fireplace.

It started to rain outside. She cursed herself for not bringing an umbrella, for not evaluating the weather properly that morning, for not listening to her sister.

The man pointed at the window. The dirty glass made the rain appear even more intense. - It's better if you sit. This will last.

- I want to see Gianni, - she insisted. - Then I'll leave. Even in the rain.

The man shook his head. - I know women like you. You think you can save us all, us poor wretches. And you were even brave to come this far for him, but I will not hesitate to throw you out. Even in the rain.

- I am very sorry for your wife. But you don't know me at all.

The man laughed in her face. He showed his yellow teeth. - Have you seen the fields, coming over? All mine. I bought them and I support my

family with them. You see this old dirty house, but I stayed only for the land. I don't care about the house, I have to stay here, near my land.

Clementina sat down.

- Do you think I'm afraid of going back alone? Of *ammuttarmi*²⁶ my shoes and drenching my clothes? - she said taking the piece of bread and cheese out of her bag. - If I have to wait for Gianni to come down, I'll sit, - she bit into the loaf. She heard a noise coming from upstairs.

The old woman got up knocking the chair over: her watery downturned eyes were in flames like the fire behind her. It seemed to Clementina that she was staring at her.

The man scratched his neck and fixed his hair back. - Finish the bread, *mescia*, then leave.

Clementina was chewing nervously. The cheese was struggling to go down.

The old woman was still standing, the flames behind her burning even higher. The man got close to her to make her sit, but with a peevish snap she removed his arm from her hip and started to wave a hand toward Clementina. She put away the bread and got up. When she was close enough, the old woman indicated the stairs with a clear gesture, and nodded for her to go upstairs. Clementina looked at Gianni's father. He was fanning the fire and didn't turn around.

The upper floor appeared to belong to a different house. It was clean, the ceiling was dry and family portraits were hanging on the walls.

She felt unexpectedly at ease, she had the impression she had always frequented those rooms. When she found herself between two doors she started to open the left one, but then someone called her from the other.

Gianni was standing in the doorway, thinner and tanner than she remembered. His green eyes stood out mockingly on his face.

He smiled at her. It was just an instant, because he immediately put back on the mask of indifference.

Clementina stood in front of him. - I argued with Maria to come look for you.

- You made a mistake. I'm not coming back to lesson.

- Your father already told me.

Gianni looked down to hide his feelings.

- I'm sorry for your mother. Gianni, if you prefer the land, it is fine with me. But you have to tell me to my face.

The rain pounded violently on the windows.

²⁶ (dialect) getting mud on.

He pointed at the other door, the one she was about to open a moment before, and led the way.

They entered and were enveloped by the smell of sugared almonds.

- She died here.

Gianni pointed at the yellow-stained mattress.

Clementina rested a hand on his shoulder and he started to cry, a quiet moan that turned into a desperate gurgling. She tried to calm him down, the boy wouldn't stop, his shoulders shaking with sobs.

- He wouldn't call the priest. He said that it was useless, that God is evil. That if he was good he wouldn't have done that to her.

It seemed he was waiting for an explanation from her, as if his father's words could make sense when repeated out loud. - Is it true?

After years death still challenged her.

- She wanted the priest. She had told me a few evenings before. And I had even asked why. Do you get it, teacher? Yet I knew she was sick. But seeing her all these years in bed made it normal. My classmates' mothers walk, cook, they even laugh. Mine just lay in bed, - he held his wet face in his hands.

He told her that his mother had looked at him, terribly disappointed, it seemed she was saying: *what do you mean, why? You really don't know?*, and then she had just told him she wanted to have a chat with that parish priest who once had seemed nice to her.

- And he didn't call him, teacher.

He looked at her with bloodshot eyes.

- But then, when she was wheezing that morning, I told dad to run to the village to get him, - he sat on the mattress.

Clementina sat next to him. They were looking at the bare mold-stained walls. He had stopped crying, confessing that unkept promise had emptied him.

- God was there, - whispered Clementina. - He was there because you were here with her, because your father and her mother were here with her. You couldn't see him, but God found her, for sure.

His puffy green eyes seemed bigger, more alive than ever. - Would you pray for her, teacher?

- We will pray together, - she told him, and took out of the pocket of her coat the rosary that don Mariano had given Cesare years before, and from which she never parted.

- This will help you, - she gave it to him with a serious expression.

- And how? I don't know how to pray.

- Me neither. But when I lost my daughter I thought that in order to survive I had to search for the origin of that punishment. I wanted to know why it had to happen to me, since I beat my chest in church every Sunday and lived as a good Christian. Then I understood.

- What?

- That punishment doesn't exist. Nor a reason. Faith exists though, that is the only choice you can make. This is why I pray, because I decided to.

- How do you find this faith you are talking about?

- No one can tell you that.

The boy looked disappointed.

- But remember that faith, when you find it, will have to be honest. If it's not honest it's useless, and if it's useless it doesn't exist. The God who took your mother is the same who took my daughter, and we need to pray with strength and faith. 'Cause they're there, and he must never forget.

Clementina got up and kneeled, fingers interlocked and elbows on the bed. Gianni imitated her.

When they came downstairs, his father was smoking in front of the fireplace, while his grandmother was still sitting upright on her little chair.

- Dad, I'm finishing school, - Gianni announced firmly.

The man didn't turn around.

- I'll walk the teacher out, - the boy continued.

- And with what money are you planning on paying your *meschia*, without me?

The man threw the butt in the fire.

- Gianni can attend anyway, - said Clementina. - Whether you pay, as you should, or not.

He smiled. - *Mescia*, do you think I'll let people talk behind my back, and look like a *spruidutu*²⁷? - he smirked coming closer.

- I have to go, - she stepped back. - Show up on time on Monday, - she said to the boy. - Then you'll stay an hour longer, I'll have to explain to you what you have to catch up on. Actually, how about you stay for lunch.

Gianni nodded and Clementina said goodbye before leaving.

It was freezing outside, the road had turned into a heap of mud and puddles, but it had suddenly stopped raining. Clementina raised her eyes

²⁷ (dialect) fool.

to the sky, satisfied, and lifted the hem of her dress a bit, her boots sinking into the wet soil. As she was walking toward the village, she heard someone call her name - Teacher! The rosary! - Gianni ran up to her.

- I gave it to you. It's yours now. Perhaps it will help you find faith, who knows?

Gianni clung on to it. - I'm sorry, - he added looking at her muddy shoes.

- Your father will pay me, - she reassured him. - He promised.

- To you?

- To your mother. He said so the first time.

- I'm not sure he'll keep his word.

- Remind him then.

She started walking again. She heard him following her, to make sure she would reach the center of the village safe and sound.