

An excerpt from

*L'Isola Dove Volano Le Femmine*  
working title, *The Island Where Women Fly*

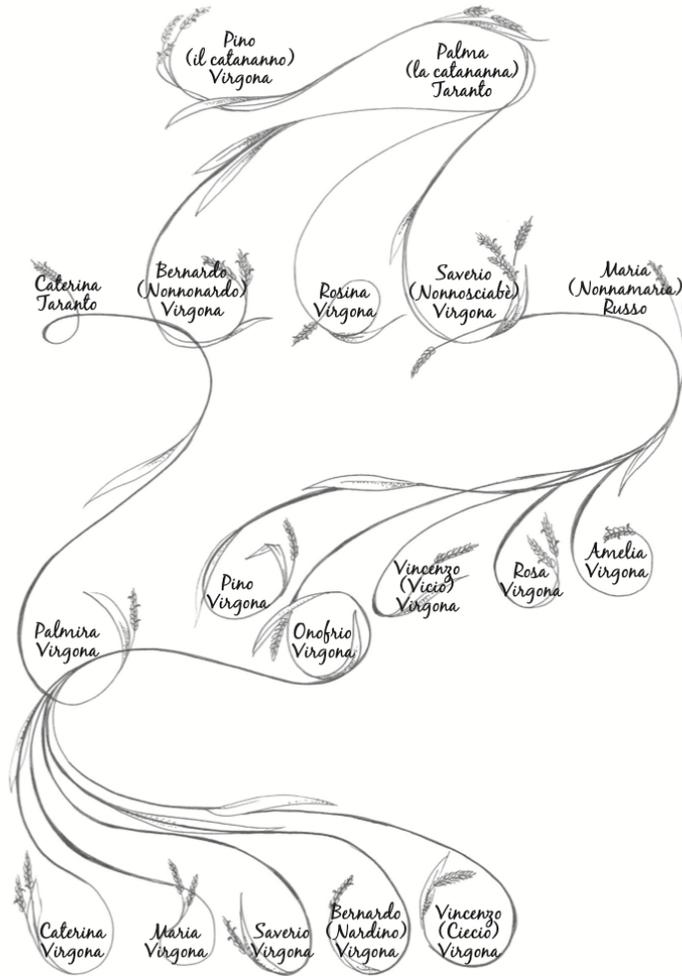
by Marta Lamalfa

Translated by Laura Masini and Linda Worrell

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# The Iatti Family

## La famiglia Iatti



1.  
that litany,  
she doesn't know how to recite it

The death knell tolls. At every stroke, a plea.

*And please tell Nonna Cata that  
we're all doing well, that your Nonno's  
getting by, despite everything, and  
sends his love. Tell Za' Rosina  
that her prickly pear tree is  
still alive and every day each  
of you eats one like she wanted.  
And now that you're not here, your  
siblings have more for themselves.  
Tell Zu' Vicio to rest easy, your father  
and Pino have stopped quarrelling,  
and if it's a boy, I'll give him his name.*

Palmira's head moves with the tolling of the bell. Back and forth, back and forth. Gently, slowly. And someone, from on high, seems to guide her. She feels as if she's cradling her daughter once more, rocking like this. And cradling herself too, all the better to disappear. Back and forth, softly.

She dredges up the words as though picking up a quiet conversation, suspended over the years by those who had bid farewell before her. A litany where words change places but not meaning, a prayer unique to each and yet always the same.

*And tell Compà Nittu that  
his boat's with Zu' Neno,  
Bartolo's boy, a good kid,  
who treats it just like his wife.*

Next to Palmira, Caterina, her other daughter, the one left alive. She is mesmerized by the cornflower embroidered on her twin sister's white dress, the one an ant is now walking across. It

is frightening, for the ant, to climb down from the embroidery. And so it stops, bewildered, its little legs in the air. Then it turns back, to find safety on the blue petals.

Maria lies before them, on a table draped with a stained white cloth, her face thin but determined. Her narrow eyes, her big ears, her beautiful mouth illuminated by the candles surrounding her. In her hands a palm leaf, and a few white daisies.

*Tell Zu' Vanni that the jenny has given birth  
to foals, and pretty good ones.*

Around the three of them, a hushed murmur from bowed heads.

Opposite, the door to the house, where a watchful crowd peers in.

Behind mother and sister, the other members of the family. Saverio, the brother born after the twin sisters, glares at Nardino, the youngest child, who plays on the floor with a spinning top and at times lets out a huff, or when he doesn't know what else to do with his grimy hands, smears dirt on his nose. Onofrio, their father, sits on the edge of the chair, his hands clasped in prayer before his mouth. Nardo, the Nonno, off to one side, licks the snot from his nose. The great-grandmother, Catananna Palma, has covered her face with her black dress, so her dark thoughts can run through her head unseen. Her husband, Catananno Pino, has fallen asleep, and at times his lame leg jerks forward.

“Tell Za' Enza ... tell Enza that ... the rest of us are fine, tell her that. And ...,” and here Palmira lowers her voice, draws close to Maria's ear, and in a whisper that throughout the room only she and Caterina can hear, “Tell Gino ... ”

Gino who? Caterina doesn't know any dead Ginos, only one live one, the son of Domenico delle Pecore, who Maria once said she'd met on the beach; he'd taken her hand, brought her behind San Bartolo's church and touched her lips.

“ ... that I still think of him and hold him in my heart.”

Her mamma no longer rocks herself as she says this. She squeezes Maria's hand—it feels so hard it could crumble like a crust of bread.

“Tell Toni that ...”

As the heads outside the door sway from side to side, a few at a time, the sunlight, which earlier stood still, flickers on Palmira's and Caterina's faces as though through wind-stirred leaves.

Both raise their eyes at this change in the light.

The air swirls with whispered words and smells of bitter breath. A cleft opens in the crowd and quickly widens: a young man is trying to enter the house.

“You wretched creature,” Palmira says in a clenched voice the instant she sees him, and meanwhile looks at her husband Onofrio.

Without a word, Zu' Pino jumps in front of the man and blocks his path. He shoves him through the wall of people, and they both disappear beyond the crowd.

Onofrio stays seated, ignoring Palmira's stares. He prefers a quiet life and is happy to let his brother handle this for him. Catananna Palma slaps his head.

From all the commotion, Caterina immediately understands that the young man who tried to enter is Ferdinando.

She knows little about him, only what Maria told her and what her parents were saying the night before. Her sister had mentioned someone she walked with up to Pianicello at times, who taught her no end of things, things Maria had never been able to put into words. Her parents, though, said that Ferdinando had killed Maria. But she'd watched with her own eyes as her sister slowly grew ill and died.

“I’ll rip you to pieces with my bare hands.” From beyond the door, Zu’ Pino’s voice cuts through the silence. Some people, their heads bowed, stare at their hands, while others forget about death and watch life, outside, coming to blows.

Za’ Melina will later say that Zu’ Pino followed the guy, kicking his backside good and proper, until they saw him rolling down the mule track, his shirt caked in dirt and blood. And Pino continued to hurl curses at him until his breath gave out. Some could be heard in the house, and the Catananna brought her hand to her mouth and scolded Onofrio, “This is what happens when you let other people do your job. You’ve got to bother the Lord, and with a death in the family, no less!” Then Zu’ Pino took his place again, now with ripped trousers.

They all turn their gaze back to Maria.

Palmira stares at each of them, one by one, as if wanting to make sure that Ferdinando is not hiding in the crowd. But her eyes get lost and she can’t recognize anyone.

So she lowers her head and tries to start again, “Tell ... Tell ...”

She can’t get the words out. She looks at Caterina, her eyes still vacant, and suddenly stands up, dropping the black dress she’d draped over her head like a cape.

“You go ahead, Caterì. Tell her about Bartolo and Zu’ Pino,” she says, squeezing her daughter’s shoulder so hard it almost hurts. Caterina watches her pick up the dress, walk away slowly, bang her hip on the door, and hide in the Catananni’s room.

What should she say about Bartolomeo and Zu’ Pino? What are the most important things? That litany, she doesn’t know how to recite it.

She senses all the heads beyond the door lifting to stare at her.

Should she perhaps tell her sister that the other day Bartolo taunted her because of her bandy legs, then tripped her, telling everyone that she’d fallen over because her legs are so crooked she can’t stand up? And about Zu’ Pino that, barely a week before Maria got sick, he’d

given her a jug of wine, just for Maria and her, but said not to tell their mamma because she still doesn't get that they've grown up? But she didn't share the wine with Maria; she kept it hidden in the dresser for a whole week. Maybe now she should tell Maria, maybe it'd be all right to take it from their room, that jug of wine, and let her taste it, to send her off into the world of grown-ups. Or maybe not.

Maybe she had been the one who killed her, by not sharing that secret. She'd wanted, just for once, to have something that was hers and hers alone. But by doing this, she'd pulled away from her sister. Is that why Maria had died? Because Caterina had thought of herself as separate? Maybe her sister was tied to the earth by a thread, the thread that tied them together, which she'd cut with her unspoken secret.

She has no idea what to say about Bartolo and Zu' Pino, especially since both of them, very much alive, are watching her from across the way to make sure she can do what's expected. She can't. There must be, she thinks, other Bartolos and other Zu' Pinos she should talk about.

To show that she's saying something—the eyes of live Zu' Pino fixed on her, while he waits with the others just outside the house for the body to be carried to the church—she moves closer until she's face-to-face with her twin sister lying there, and purses her lips very tightly, grinding out meaningless sounds.

So, this is how she would look, dead. Watching Maria had always given her the sense of what she looked like, since otherwise, she'd only occasionally see her crinkled reflection in the sea or her ghostly image mirrored in the windowpanes. But everyone always said she was the spitting image of her sister Maria, and this alone succeeded in giving her body a shape.

What will she do now that their two bodies have come undone? Now that her sister, from the stone she is, will turn mushy as a pig's gut, swelling like over-proofed bread spilling out of a bowl, and her skin will split open like the earth of Vulcano, giving off the very same stench.

While she, Caterina, will grow old and fall apart bit by bit, coming to resemble her father more than the memory of Maria, of herself. Her father, but a woman, her father, but smaller, her father, but with a narrower nose, the eyes more like slits, the face thinner. Too hard to picture.

Without Maria, will she be able to choose, among the thoughts in her head, those that are right and those that are wrong? It was Maria who used to choose for her.

Maria.

She disappears under a sheet. They take her sister from under her nose.

Caterina is not ready to see her slipping away, so suddenly. She thought she'd have more time.

Zu' Neno, Domenico, Zu' Silvio and Zu' Saro grab the tablecloth by the edges and, each taking a side, lift it up like a stretcher. But Zu' Silvio is shorter than the others, so the cloth droops and the body shifts a little. The other three stoop down, trying to balance the weight.

Then Catananna Palma rises slowly and kisses her fingers before laying her hand on the sheet. Palmira, who had returned so quietly that no one had noticed, caresses the lock of dark hair escaping the sheet, then brings her hand to her mouth and forgets it there.

The men walk out. The crowd parts and a ray of blinding light streams into the house.

Caterina gazes after them until her eyes hurt.

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The priest was always saying things that only God could understand.

*“Dies irae, dies illa, dies tribulationis et angustiae, dies calamitatis et miseriae, dies tenebrarum et caliginis, dies nebulae et turbinis, dies tubae et clangoris super civitates munitas et super angulos excelsos.”*

Even today, when Caterina would have liked to know what he was saying about her sister and where she'd go, to Hell or Purgatory or Heaven.

She hopes to Purgatory. Because if Hell is below our feet and Heaven is somewhere up in the sky, Purgatory has to be in between, someplace beyond the sea, that if you know how to row a boat, sooner or later you could reach.

Every Sunday, Caterina went to Mass because that's what everybody did. Like Thursdays and Saturdays were the days for bread.

Even if it's April now, it's hot, and the street climbing to the church, with all those steps that rise until they almost touch the sky, has dried all her tears.

When she was little, Caterina believed that the church of San Bartolo was the Heaven her catananna always talked about. And that people went to church on Sundays to spend a bit of time with the dead. Then, when Zu' Vicio had died, she'd looked for him in the crowd the following Sunday but hadn't found him. She'd asked her catananna if he was in Hell, and she'd chuckled, saying that to get to Heaven you'd have to walk the street to the church at least ten times. And Caterina had thought that was why people didn't want to die, because of all the effort it took to get up there, to Heaven. And—she had to remember this—that it was better to die on a cloudy day.

Caterina has no tears left, only sweat, and she wants to pull off that heavy black cloth that's drenching her head. But as soon as she moves it a bit, Palma pushes it back down over her eyes, so that now she can only see the floor of the church, the wooden pew and her feet chafed from the exertion.

Drops of sweat fall from her face and land on her dress. Palma mistakes them for tears. Old Catananna's tiny eyes, discolored by time, turn red with tenderness. She brings the handkerchief to her nose with her trembling right hand while she claws at the pew with her left, her thin arm like a branch ready to break. Caterina can only see Palma's legs give way as she flops onto the pew, looking like a beetle.

Saverio helps her stand up again. Her brother's head is also bathed in sweat and their catananna struggles to grasp his slippery hand.

Caterina lifts the black cloth from her face and meets her brother's eyes, which taper toward his nose, just like Nonnonardo's.

Saverio is a year younger, but Caterina always remembers him as bigger than she and Maria. When his voice got deeper, he immediately took on the role of the older brother and began to protect them, even when his armpits had yet to sprout hair.

Their catananna gets up and Saverio whispers in her good ear that it's time to go to the grave. She can't hear, but moves forward anyway, following the others.

Caterina is flattened by the crowd that slowly drags her out of the church, as if now her body too were about to disappear, thrown in with the others and covered with lime. If there was one thing she knew for sure—because she'd seen it with her own eyes—it was that bodies went to Hell all together, down into the earth. "As long as the soul ends up all right," Catananna Palma always said.

While she's still walking, Maria's body is quickly thrown into the common grave. Alive, she was not to be touched, but now she's forever mixed with the dead flesh of Peppe Tinagghia and Ghimmiruto, who Maria had never liked.

The priest pushes Maria further down, to make room for those who will come after her, and Caterina is crushed by the pain that her sister no longer feels.