

FIORE DI ROCCIA

[*Flower of the Rocks*]

by ILARIA TUTI

Extract translated by Katherine Gregor

Uncorrected Text

"Anin, sendè chei biadaz ai murin encje di fan."

"Let's go, otherwise those wretches are going to starve to death on top of everything else."

Maria Plozner Mentil (1884 – 15 February 1916)

PROLOGUE

May 1976

She dug the furrows of her hand into those of the soil, in a gesture of tenderness inherent in a return to origins, of a search for roots in the moist depths, twisting them around her fingers and pulling to her whatever was left in a part of the world that had carved a path from the valley all the way up to the peaks.

Carnia had quivered, Friuli had been ripped open and lay bleeding in the dusty silence. The Orcolat – the children of this land reduced to ruins had already rechristened him: the ogre who, legend had it, lived in these stone recesses, had reawakened and shaken humanity off his back. The earthquake had drawn a line on a seismogram that the television news kept broadcasting over and over. If you picked it up and pulled it between three imaginary fingers, this pattern of sharp cusps would have communicated a heart in a state emotional turmoil. A little more tension and it would have suggested the profile of a mountain.

The woman looked up at the summits and it was like resuming a never eradicated habit, like being once again outlined amid distant, long abandoned furrows.

She had not seen her home for decades. She had travelled across oceans only to return to where it had all begun, now that everything seemed erased. And yet her eyes still managed to follow the ancient walkways of the haymaking season, which wound steeply to the low-yielding pastures. The pal was up there, beyond the woods, with its crown of rocks and trenches. Never again just a wretched pasture, but a blessed shrine.

The rubble slid between her fingers together with the soil. She recognised the call of the valley in the wind.

And the recollection of what had been flowed in her veins once more.

1. THE CALL

June 1915, the war

When I was a child, I saw a pack of wolves in these mountains.

My father pointed at them between the snow-laden tree branches, beyond the rise that concealed us. A single file peregrinating on the opposite bank of the stream. I convinced myself I could sense their smell in the wind. I can still remember it: wet fur and wandering life, a warm pungency, the song of wild blood.

The rifle stayed over my father's shoulder and not loaded with death.

"You can't eat wolves," he said to me in a whisper that bore the marks of his booming voice. He had a wide chest and I loved feeling it jolt under my cheek whenever he burst out laughing.

With these words, he explained everything and equipped me with a law of life and an awareness I have never lost. He always knew man's place in this world.

The animals scratching the ice with weary claws looked nothing like those in fairy tales. They were skinny and hunched over. Golden eyes on muzzles made sharp by hunger, like ours.

The bitter cold was thrashing all God's creatures that winter.

The wolf at the head of his companions was limping and the female following him had exhausted udders that brushed against the ground. The two younger specimens were little older than pups and their bearing betrayed their anxiety: they knew they would not be able to take care of themselves. All the coats spoke of hardship and exhaustion, with large patches that revealed the curves of their ribs beneath the skin.

My fear turned to pity. It was a sickly pack, a dying pack.

Never did I see the wolves on this land again. Even now, as an adult, I wonder what became of them. And yet it is as though they are in front of my eyes right now. Their features

are human and are here in this church as the priest douses the stale air with incense. Almost all the pews are empty. The bowed heads belong to women and a few children. The invalids have stayed at home. There are no more able-bodied men in Timau. War has broken out.

A jolt of the portal makes us turn, just like animals on alert. An officer walks in, with a brisk step, his boots striking the holy floor. He goes up to the priest without giving him time to come down from the pulpit. War is a defiler and this son of hers lives up to her legacy. We watch his mouth, his thin lips, utter words that only the two of them can hear.

When Don Flor eventually addresses us, he looks upset.

"The battalions drawn up in the Carnia area are in trouble," he announces. "The logistics and engineering commands are asking for our help. They need strong backs to provide a link with the depots down in the valley."

The generals and strategists at Supreme Command have at last realised something farmers and woodcutters have always known: there are no carriageways leading up to the spurs, or tracks for taking up food supplies and ammunition by mule. The lines of defence are isolated on the peaks, thousands of young men are already reduced to exhaustion, and this is just the beginning. Last night I dreamt of them, steeped in blood. They were flowing away like pale flowers carried downstream by a crimson current.

The priest's voice quivered as it appealed for our help and I know why. He feels shame. He knows what he is asking of us. He knows what it means to climb those unforgiving slopes for hours, and doing it with grenades thundering over your head like the wrath of God.

Next to him, the officer is facing us but never looks us in the eye. He should. He would realise what he has before him. These tired she-wolves and hungry pups.

He would see the dying pack that we are.

2. A CIRCLE OF WOMEN

We gathered in the dark once the animals, the fields and the bedridden elderly had no more needs to be met. I thought about how we are used always to being defined through someone else's needs. Even now we have emerged from oblivion only because they need our legs, our arms and our backs, toughened by work.

In the silent barn, we are eyes searching for other eyes, in a circle of women of all ages. Some have a child clinging to their breast. Others are little older than girls, if you are still allowed to be one these days, or ever have been allowed to, in this harsh land that never grants anything for nothing. I look at my hands: not those of the ladies I read about in my father's books. Cracked fingernails, splinters that have formed callouses and a lattice of wounds clotted atop one another. In some, the soil has penetrated deeply and become flesh. There is more of me in the furrows of the fields than in the bloodline of my ancestors.

My companions are no different, their bodies forged by the toil we live with every day. Born with a debt of work on their shoulders, my mother used to say, a debt shaped like the conical wicker basket we use for rocking our children as well as carrying hay and potatoes.

The glow from the oil lamp turns us into quivering borders between light and shade, between desire and obligation. We are not used to asking ourselves what it is we really want, but tonight, for the first time, we will have to.

"They've only just allowed us to come back to our homes and now we have to go back out to risk our lives?"

Viola is voicing everybody's thoughts. She and I were born on the same Christmas night, in 1895, and feel like sisters, but she has always had more of a silver tongue than I.

"They've worked out that living in the last town before the border and speaking a German dialect doesn't mean you're on the side of the invaders," Caterina mutters. "It's never too late." She is the eldest among us and apparently the calmest. It is as though she

cannot be dented, like the hardest stone and a stone that has been motionless since she joined us, hunched in her dark, mourning clothes, her downy, white-streaked hair gathered in a low bun. In actual fact, under her shawl, her fingers, knotty like river wood, have never stopped knitting.

"Of course they're suspicious of us!" Viola replies. "Why else send our men to the Karst Plateau instead of the mountains they're familiar with?"

Caterina silences her without ever looking up from the sock taking shape between her knees. "You don't have a husband, Viola, or a fiancé either. Maybe that's why you're angry. Where are you going to find someone willing to take you now?"

The younger women laugh while the others allow themselves a smile as fleeting as a timid thrush, as though it is disgraceful to forget about death even for a second. Perhaps it is wrong or perhaps it is necessary.

Viola retreats, stung by a dart meant to be kind.

"There are still some men around," she says, so subdued she seems to want to cheer herself up. Her eyes flee the control of her will and search for me. I know who she is thinking of and so do the others: for months she has been consumed by Francesco's attentions towards me. Please God this unrequited interest doesn't push her away from me.

Quiet until now, Lucia comes to our rescue with the maternal instinct she has had ever since she was a little girl and took care of us, her juniors by a few years.

"Maybe you'll meet a handsome *Alpino* up there, on the peaks," she says.

We burst out laughing and I finally feel like I can breathe, but silence quickly returns to our mouths. I can almost taste it: it has a slimy texture and the salty taste of doubt: the more you eat of it the more you crave it, until your lips become dry and your throat parched. It has dried up every life impulse.

On this anxious night we surface from the darkness as though accustomed to it, except that we are not. We have large, bright eyes, sunken bellies and strong backs wrapped

in the traditional black shawls. The skirts we wear for everyday chores, hems darkened with soil, still carry the smell of the milking before vespers.

I have known each and every one of them forever but this is the first time I have seen them frightened. Cannons are barking in the mountains around Timau. It's the devil clearing his throat, Maria once said, fingering the rosary beads she never parts with.

I wonder how we can possibly decide our fate like this, surrounded by this mouldy hay that will not be replaced by fragrant hay in the summer, since none of us will go up to scythe it on the ridges.

Lucia holds her sleeping child tight in her arms, so strong and loving they could hug the entire world. Even though she is young, her quiet strength has always been a point of reference among us, and now more than ever. I notice the black rings under her eyes and am about to ask her if she has eaten anything more than a potato. She receives eighty *centesimi* a month for her husband who is fighting on the Karst Plateau, and thirty for each of her four children. Not enough.

"I'll go," Lucia suddenly steps ahead of me. "Agata, what do you want to do?"

For a moment, I cannot find the words. It is so hard to pick them, blended as they are with uncertainty and fear, mixed in a pact of obedience and care nobody has ever demanded out loud, but which dwells in your blood, from mother to daughter.

What do I *want* to do? No one has ever asked me that.

I look at these women, my friends.

Viola, vitality and enthusiasm.

Caterina, the quiet and at times harsh wisdom of age.

Maria, a little remote, the rosary beads in her fingers and always a prayer on her lips.

I know that my answer will trigger theirs like a chain reaction, and this frightens me: I am a decoy bird that might sing and trap them in a suicidal venture.

But then Lucia smiles at me, one of those smiles that make your soul meek.

We know these mountains better than anyone else, she is saying with her silence, we have gone up and down them so many times. We can protect ourselves, if need be.

I know the rest: if we women do not respond to this cry for help, nobody else will. There is nobody else.

"I'm coming with you," I hear myself say.

I see her nod, a gesture as brief as it is solemn, then plant a kiss on her little one's forehead.

"Let's go," she whispers. "Otherwise those wretches will starve to death on top of everything else."

3. THE DEPARTURE

It is not yet dawn when I milk the goat: one cup of milk – I won't take any more from her. Her kid has not left her side, its moist, black muzzle sniffing me relentlessly. As soon as I move away it reappropriates an udder, making sure everything is still where it should be. I see myself in it: I also know that happiness is sometimes simply noting that nothing has changed.

I could say the same about my life. The barn has not housed any other livestock since last winter and its emptiness is the obscenity of poverty. But I tell myself that the goat is here and it has given birth. After all, happiness is also a stubborn mental discipline.

I close the barn as the slightly biting chill of the Alpine night stings the skin under my collar and makes me shudder. The streets of the town are deserted. The lamp posts give a bleak glow in the purple-blue of time suspended between darkness and daylight. The power line stops just before our house. In the mist that cloaks the embrace of the forest, the Gampitz ridge forms a ghostly apparition just above Timau. Over the past few weeks, the ribbon of snow left over in the patches of perennial shade has grown narrower and disappeared.

A light appears on the hill, on the edge of Bosco Bandito. It's Caterina the widow's *stali*. In the mist, my imagination sketches her tidy dining room and her, sleepily putting the flint down, her long ashen hair, which none of us has ever seen loose, cascading over her shoulders. A few seconds later, as though summoned by the first, another light flickers a few roofs further on. Viola, too, has lit her lamp.

In the aftermath of this restless night, the women are waking up like friendly morning stars. We are a line of lights that travels from Timau down towards Cleulis and Paluzza. Many have responded to the appeal.

I breathe my land in deeply. A surreal silence is hovering over the Bût valley. The war seems to slumber like the forest but when I look up at the profile of the border, I can see the north aglow.

The peaks of the Pal Grande, the Pal Piccolo and the Freikofel are burning like braziers beneath pagan constellations. The mountain range is a temple where a giant dwells, who is hungry for men. It is there that, unarmed, we must go.

The house welcomes me with its warmth, the smell of burning of the blackened pot where water is boiling, the sweetness of the lemon balm hanging up to dry in bunches between the beams, over the tea towels on which rest the flower heads and leaves of arnica and Saint John's Wort, wild mint and linden. The floorboards creak under my *scarpez*, the only sound to keep me company. The preparations for the new day are a faded daguerrotype of the times when a family lived here. In a corner next to the hearth, the loom has been waiting for months for a dance of my fingers. God only knows how badly I need new petticoats and vests.

In my hands, the cup full of milk gives out a promise of butter and fat cheese that will not see its completion. With my shoulder, I push the door to the room behind the *Stube* half open. It faces east, to greet the early morning sun, but now there is only an oil lamp to illuminate the bed and the old man lying under the blankets like a bear worn out by too many winters and too many battles. The woollen mattress is the colour of burnished foliage and bears the fragrance of the St John's Wort oil I use to treat this man's motionless limbs. His hibernation has not been dissipated by the spring. It will go on for ever.

"Papà," I call out. "It's a new day."

I put the cup on the bedside table and sit on the chair next to him. I clasp his hands in mine: they are lying on top of the sheet just as they were when I wished him goodnight.

"They're cold," I say, rubbing them gently. They used to be strong and now they are like papier mâché. As a child, I would watch them for hours carving the young branches of

a hazelnut with a small knife, during the long evenings of storms or blizzards. They would peel off the bark, engrave, and graze until they produced thin strips of wicker, for weaving light, durable baskets. I sometimes also think of myself as a wicker basket: peeled by life to the bare essential, engraved by loss, grazed by need.

Through half-open lids, my father's clouded eyes are staring at a spot past me. His books. They plaster the entire wall. They have always been his most precious treasure and he has carefully arranged them by colour: from ocean blue to lapis lazuli, a wave of brilliant greens that gradate to yellow and gold and brown, then ignite in a cardinal red and the brightest plum. He could find no other way of arranging them: he is illiterate. These books belonged to my mother.

I wonder if he is still inside there, trapped in a voiceless mouth and a coffin body. I will never know but, in any case, my own lips will not be sparing with words of love and I will save for him only tender caresses.

I bring the cup close to him and feed him patiently. The action of his throat is little more than an involuntary reflex. Later, I will wash him the way I would a child. A thought skims through my mind: in life's winter, holy is the presence of those who take care of human dignity.

I look at the blueness in the gap between the shutters growing paler. It's time to go. It's time to tackle the mountain and climb.

"I'm frightened, Papà."

My confession dissolves in the silence like circles in the water.

When the first light of day bursts out from the natural bastions and laminates the waters of the Bût with gold, we reach Paluzza, our baskets as empty as our bellies, and our hearts in our throats. Lucia has led an oddly silent file. None of us feels much like talking, not even Viola. We find the town in turmoil, like on market day, and we walk across it amid the dust raised by our boots stomping hastily, while men in uniform emit stern calls. The goods being

exchanged here today speak of death and devastation: military carts parade along the access road carrying loads of weapons and ammunition. They are heading to the camp depot, as we are. Two *Alpini* cross the road in front of us, dragging six reluctant mules which, in the absence of cart tracks, are as useful as a toying bull with a gammy leg. Caterina seems to read my thoughts.

"We're the mules today," she whispers in my ear.

Viola searches for my hand and clasps it.

"Have you seen them? The *Alpini*... They look like knights. They're dressed like princes, and those hats..."

I've seen them. They are boys our age, twenty or perhaps even a little younger, the felt hats with the eagle feather and the tassel of their battalion pulled down over their surly faces. Some of them are wearing a forest-coloured cloak over their shoulders even though the sun is beginning to warm up the earth. I imagine they must be night patrols just back from a shift on the lookout in the cold humidity of the forest and the ravines. They are not fairy tale princes, it is mules they are leading by the reins and not white steeds, and yet they look so different from the men we are used to.

I am disorientated by the confusion. Never has so much racket echoed in these narrow valleys. Many strangers are strutting about like masters where before there were brothers and sisters from the same land. Barked orders and hands giving impatient shoves have replaced the slow transformation of nature. The world I knew has changed to the point where I feel a stranger in it. Its smell of metal and fear gives me a pang in my stomach.

"Come on, don't stop," Lucia spurs us on and we quickly cross the square. I see white coats and red crosses mingling against the background of grey uniforms: the small field hospital is over there.

There are other local women outside the military depot; they recognise us and raise their arms to beckon us. All in all there are twenty of us and they tell us that more are coming.

Lucia takes it upon herself to speak to the officers on behalf of us all, a task none of us would want. I see her talking to a soldier and pointing at us. The *Alpino* nods and walks towards us with her. His face emanates alarm as he assesses our appearance: scarves tied around our necks, the sleeves of our blouses rolled up, layers of petticoats, balls of wool sticking out of the pockets of our aprons. And then our footwear, the traditional *scarpe*, very light, embroidered black velvet.

We are about to climb up to a vertical front where a blood ritual is being performed, like during the pig slaughter before the winter, and we are doing it the way these mountains have taught us to.

The soldier introduces himself as a corporal and says that there are duties to be carried out prior to our departure. At a tavern table dragged into the middle of the square, each of us receives a strip of cloth with a number stamped on it: the identification bracelet we have to wear, which shows the unit to which we have been assigned. We are given a collection coupon in one hand and a booklet in the other.

"Your deliveries will be recorded. You'll be paid one lire fifty per trip."

We look at one another, taken aback by this unexpected generosity, but there is no time to rejoice.

The corporal studies us one by one.

"What are your school qualifications?" he asks.

"We obtained the school certificate at the age of eleven, sir," Lucia replies.

"I didn't go to school," Caterina says, "but I can do sums and write my name."

"Do sums..." the *Alpino* mutters, standing up. "Do you understand where you need to go, women?" At our silence, his tone grows more urgent. "Do you understand what war is and the risks involved?"

Lucia does not let herself be intimidated. Thank goodness for her, I think.

"We may be ignorant, Corporal, but our ears can hear nice and clearly. We understand."

Without further delay, we are led to the military depot, where they ask us to put our baskets down. Nobody stirs.

"You said you had perfect hearing," the corporal says. "Put your baskets down so they can be filled."

Lucia takes a step forward.

"You load the basket on your back," she explains gently. "Or when it's hanging. Otherwise, once it's full it's impossible to lift it. And you want to fill them as much as possible, don't you?"

The soldier purses his lips and nods. He makes us stand in a line, next to one another. Soldiers we cannot look in the face start placing the supplies in our baskets, while others tick them off our collection coupons. No word of comfort is uttered, no question asked about who we are. For the first time in the history of our people, the conical wicker baskets in which, for centuries, we have carried our infants, our bridal trousseaus, live-giving food and wood for warming body and soul, welcome the instruments of death: grenades, ammunition, weapons.

The burden grows heavier but we do not complain.

The burden grows heavier, but nobody asks us if it's too heavy.

Once they have finished, they attach two little red flags on my basket and Lucia's.

"What are those for?" Viola asks.

The corporal, who has been watching the loading procedure silently, suddenly loses his composure. I see him hesitate and his entire face flushes with embarrassment. An awkwardness from which neither I nor the others are rescuing him, as we keep staring at him, waiting for an answer. In the end, it comes, like a lash of the whip.

"They indicate a load of explosives," he explains hastily. "You two are carrying ballistite and gunpowder."

I thought he was standoffish by nature and role. I was wrong. His is the motionless escape of someone in turmoil over what he is forced to do. Now we know that they could use us as a fuse for the cannons of all the fronts.

I look at Viola and we understand each other.

"Give me your basket," she says to Lucia. "You're a mother."

Lucia hesitates but Caterina and I are already pulling the straps off her shoulders and, shortly afterwards, not without difficulty, the swap is done.

Hunched over, we take a few steps. We adjust the loads on our backs and find the right balance. It will be the same for hours on end.

We help one another put the bracelet on. Both our hands and resolution are unsteady. I cannot seem to tie the strip around Viola's wrist. Lucia comes to do it and gives my fingers a quick squeeze, as though to infuse me with courage.

"We're ready," she announces, looking at me calmly. I cannot work out if she is saying this to me or the soldier, who is waiting.

At a whistle from the corporal, we set off, but after the first step Maria stops us. "Wait!" She is holding the rosary beads in one hand and has grabbed Lucia's basket with the other.

We understand her intent. Ignoring calls to proceed, we collect ourselves. Locking eyes, taking deep breaths, we make the sign of the cross. There is no time to pray.