White Fog
By Nicoletta Gramentieri

1.
Wednesday, March 6
Ash Wednesday

I met her in the bell tower when I still had my voice. When I still believed the story of the drowned ones was just a dark legend, a tale meant to keep children away from the river.
I had just returned to live with my parents, in the village, and in the morning, my mother, placing Cecchino in my arms and caressing my head, had said:
"You're a good girl and you have to help us, your grandmother raised you well and it's a blessing that you're back home. Cecchino's cloths need washing. The beds need making. Then sweep the rooms well. For the little ones, prepare the polenta. They'll be home from school before the bell tolls. Leave the sausage alone, that's for dinner tonight."
"Afterwards, in the afternoon, can I go play with Celso?" I asked.
"We'll see."
I did everything she asked: washed, swept, cooked for the little ones, rocked Cecchino, but when she came back in the afternoon, she had a skein of wool in her hands that they had given her at the Rossi farm.
"Look what luck, with this you can knit toes for everyone's socks."
She picked up Cecchino, who was whimpering in the cradle.
"Start right away," she said, and I saw my plan to meet Celso vanish. But I didn't even protest—I got to work.
She wrapped Cecchino in a shawl and went out, holding him tightly against her.
I began working, but my anger grew with every stitch, every row. Marcella, my sister, was working for Anita. She could chat with her friends at the fountain. From the window overlooking the main street, she watched people pass by. At lunch, she ate better than we did. When she came home in the evening, she got to rest. The little ones were only asked to fetch water, and then they spent the whole day in the square or wandering through the village.
Vittorio, the oldest of us, lived in the mountains. During the war, he had been part of the resistance groups roaming the hills, and then the war ended and my brother and Vero said we now had "freedom." But they hadn't come down from the mountains, they hadn't returned to the village, and I never understood why.
Anyway, to me, it seemed like life in the mountains was far better than mine—and Marcella's, for sure. I hated doing chores, especially knitting and making sock toes. I wanted to leave, run away. Go to the city. A wealthy lady would take me into her home. I would become like a daughter to her.
I threw the knitting needles and wool to the floor and ran outside. That's how it all began. And maybe if I had met Celso, I wouldn't have climbed the bell tower. But I didn't meet him. A fine rain was falling, the streets were deserted.
I ran up the slope leading to the square. Out of breath, I stopped to look at the clock. Half past five. Soon my father would pass by, returning from the fields at dusk, and Marcella too.
I tried not to be seen by the group of men huddled around Alcide's red head. I headed up the slope of the Upper Borough, passing under the archway and slipped into the church.
It wasn't the village's main church, the one we went to on Sundays. This one was smaller, a bit hidden behind the clock tower. It was much more interesting than the big one. It was always dark and cold, and beneath the altar, behind a glass pane, on a red velvet pillow, there was a skull. It had belonged to a Saint Anthony and stared at you from the blackness of its empty sockets, baring its long, big teeth. It was always a pleasure to look at.
It was a kind of beautiful fear, made up of little shivers.
That evening I didn't feel like looking at Saint Anthony, nor did I feel like praying. I made a quick sign of the cross, whispered "forgive me, Lord," and slipped into the space behind the altar.
There was a low, narrow door. It hid the stairs that led up the clock tower. These were stairs

made of wooden pegs stuck into the tower's walls. I started climbing.
Despite my anger, I knew I wouldn't be able to cross the Big Bridge in the dark. I would sleep in the bell tower and leave at dawn, before the men went to work in the fields and before the women went to fetch water or wash clothes in the river. I would walk toward the city. I would begin my new life.
At the first landing, I stopped. I was out of breath and looked out one of the little windows. It was dark now, very dark.
The rain had stopped. The sky was cloudy, with no moon or stars. Some windows were lit by the dim glow of oil lamps; others showed an uncertain flicker—candles, probably.
The hills, encircling the entire village, were blacker than the sky, blacker than the dark itself. Their outlines were sharp, precise.
Far below, where I knew the river flowed, I saw a glow. It looked like smoke, but denser—whiteness rising from the water, a sight I'd come to know.
It had the consistency of ghosts and drifted toward the Big Bridge. It was the fog.
I resumed climbing, slower now. I counted the steps softly. I was about halfway up the tower when I saw a strip of light above. I stopped.
The silence was broken by a single sound—a metallic tic-tic, rhythmic, hurried.
Tic tic tic. I saw two muddy boots, soldier's boots, then a black skirt with a filthy hem, a blue apron, and on the apron, two wrinkled, plump hands clutching four knitting needles.
I jumped when I heard the voice.
"What are you doing here? What do you want from me?" she said. It was the voice of an old woman, shrill and a bit hoarse.
She leaned forward to see me better in the light of the lamp that lit her work.
"Ah, I know who you are—you're Albertina, Annetta and Ferruccio's daughter," the raspy voice croaked again.
I had been discovered before I'd even run away. I braced my arms and hoisted myself up until I could sit on the floor. I quickly thought of an excuse to justify my presence in the bell tower.
I could say, I don't know, that I had come up here to pray, to be closer to Our Lord. That would make me look good.
Or I could say my father had sent me to watch the sky and predict tomorrow's weather. No, not that—her voice sounded like it knew too many things. She would check with my father.
I looked up and shivered. I had recognized the voice even before my eyes settled on that ugly face. It was Fosca—the black Fosca, blacker than any black man, scarier than ghosts or Minghinì, because every day you could see her, grim and dark, with that menacing gaze, slinking along the village walls.
She was a hunched, heavy old woman—a sort of witch.
I had never seen anyone speak to her.
She would appear from behind corners when you least expected it. She would look at you with her dark eyes and make you run away.
"Careful, or I'll call Fosca"—that was the warning that made any child obey. Fosca's figure, creeping along the walls of the village, was woven together with fairy tales and conjured images of children trapped by spells, of cannibal witches, of piles of carefully picked-clean bones.
And now Fosca was right there, in front of me. I could clearly see her smirking as her hands kept moving the knitting needles, from which hung a long stocking of an uncertain color.
Tic tic tic tic. The rhythmic, quick sound enchanted me.
The big ball of coarse wool was the yellowish color of sheep, but the moment the yarn touched the needles, it changed. It became more like milk, or clouds, and took on an uncertain consistency, like a mirage or fog. Fosca's face looked a little like Saint Anthony's skull. Her skin clung to the bones around her cheekbones, but her cheeks sagged like two empty pouches; her eyes were small, pitch dark, with something like an even darker pin at the center.
But she didn't have the skull's nice teeth. Her mouth was a dark cavern where you could glimpse long and sparse stubs. Her head was wrapped in a tattered black scarf from which thin, yellowish strands of hair escaped. Around her lingered a rancid smell, like rotting fish.
None of us smelled particularly nice. It was too cold to wash often. Soap was still practically

impossible to find. The wool undershirts we wore under our clothes were washed once per season, more or less like our hair.
I was used to strong odors, but that rotting stench really turned my stomach—it made you think of decay, of rot, of the stench rising from the slaughterhouse on kill days.
I stood frozen on the brick floor, mouth open, gaze locked onto those too-small eyes.
I watched her, watched the ball of yarn, the stocking. I had never seen her from so close.
"Children stay home when it's dark," she said, locking her eyes into mine. Her hands kept knitting.
I wanted to turn and run. I couldn't. I noticed in the corner, among the shadows, a mattress and some ragged blankets. I thought Fosca must sleep there. I thought maybe she didn't have a home—and that scared me even more.
"Well? No greeting?"
"Good evening," I stammered.
"What are you doing out at this hour? Good children are at home eating dinner right now."
I lowered my head, but I could feel the stocking growing. From the faint outlines of her knitting came a sort of damp breath.
"But I know you're not a good girl. I saw you, you know, riding around the square on the priest's bicycle. I told your mother. I hope she beat the life out of you, you shameless thing, pedaling with your legs all out in the open."
I knew I wasn't a good girl—by now my mother reminded me daily that I was the shame of the family.
Now I knew who to thank for all the beatings I got over the bicycle. I hadn't been able to resist; I'd only been back in the village for a few days, and the bike was leaning against a plane tree in the square. I looked around, then hopped on.
It was almost the first time I'd ever ridden a bike—I pedaled with difficulty; it was a man's bike, and I could barely reach the pedals, but I could hear the wheels crunching over the stones, feel the wind on my face, and I loved it.
"What are you staring at? Good girls keep their eyes down."
She waved the stocking in front of my face.
"It's beautiful, but the wool is strange. I knit too, but I don't like it."
My voice came out like a held-back breath, but I felt like I had to say something.
"You're too curious, child. What are you looking at? What are you looking at? The stocking grows, I make it grow. I make so many. Hours and hours of work. See my hands? They hurt from working too much.
But I protect, I make, I call, I create. Fa-la-la-ne-bia. They are because I am. A thousand I've made, and a thousand more I'll make. A thousand nights, a thousand stockings.
If I didn't care for them, no one would. Poor children. Poor children."
"But who are all those stockings for?"
She laughed.
"For the sky, for the corners, for the whirlpools, so that you all may stay blind."
She reached her hands toward me, the stocking swayed and brushed my arm. It was like touching fire.
I threw myself down the ladder, slipped, crashed onto the first landing, stumbled in the dark, but didn't stop. I ran through the church, out the door, and kept running all the way to the fountain. The fog was thicker than ever.
I plunged my whole arm into the icy water. I even thought I heard a sizzle—but maybe it was just fear. The cold dulled the burning. I kept my arm underwater, then drank and started walking.

2
The Drowned

I always think this story began that afternoon as I was climbing the steps of the bell tower, but Vero tells me that stories have no real beginning and that you end up understanding nothing if

you don’t know what came before.
So now I have to go back to all that "before"—to the "me" from before, and to everything that came before me. I’m going to try, because I always trust what Vero says. Partly because he’s lame—and everyone knows the lame are a little like sorcerers, able to move between what’s right and what’s wrong—and partly because, at one point, he nearly died. He stood balanced between this world and the next, and that gave him a clarity of vision that allows him to see what’s tangled and complex, and that makes him very wise.
The “before” of me is my town and the story of the curse that took root in the river, in a murder, in the streets and the fog, and in the war that came before the last one. The second-to-last war. Many left our valley. Sons of farmers, landowners, paupers. They left and many died as people died in that war—rushing into assaults, in hand-to-hand combat, or from illnesses caused by hunger, cold, lack of care and medicine. They died and were mourned, their pictures displayed, and the war was cursed. It was a long war, and it happened that some survivors returned home on leave. There was little left of the brash young men who had gone off to fight. Those who returned into the arms of mothers, sisters, and fiancées were embittered, frightened men, and they inspired fear.
Their families barely recognized them; they no longer fit into a village that struggled to grasp the enormity of that dreadful war. During their leave, they spent their time together in groups, indifferent to the concerns of those around them, and they decided that none of them would go back to the front.
Word spread through the village and they were summoned by the mayor and a few town councillors, who intended to convince them not to desert.
It seems that one red-haired councillor spoke to them the way a father might speak to his sons.
“You can’t desert. Deserting is a disgrace. I ask you to go back and do your duty.”
Alberto spoke on behalf of the group—the son of the woman who would later become my godmother.
“Easy for you to say. You’re not the ones who have to go back there, wondering every day if it’ll be the last, starving and freezing. Why don’t *you* go get your guts spilled, rot in the mud?”
“If I were your age, I would.” Faced with Alberto’s defiance, the councillor raised his voice. “You do it for your country.”
Alberto laughed. “The country! What kind of country sends all its young people to die?”
The councillor shoved him. “Don’t you dare say another word, boy. You’re all cowards, spineless. Just think of the shame for your families. You’ll hide, and when the war is over, no one will give you a job, no one will want anything to do with you or your families. Do you want to be the shame of the village?”
The other young men crowded around Alberto. “I don’t give a damn about the village. Keep your village.”
The councillor couldn’t stop himself from giving another shove.
“Shut up, for God’s sake.”
Another stepped forward—his name was Decio. “You’ll pay for this. In fact, let’s start now,” and with that he threw a punch that hit the redhead in the stomach.
Doubling over, the councillor kept repeating, “Cowards!”
The mayor and the others stepped forward, but the young men were strong, angry, full of rage. Someone pulled out a knife and lunged.
“Take this, redhead.”
No one knows who it was—or maybe those who know don’t say. When they saw the blood, they backed away and ran down the steps of the town hall and into the streets.
The redhead died that night, and faced with a charge of murder, the boys made an extreme decision—one that defied their fathers’ wrath and their mothers’ pleas, freeing themselves from the pressure of the town and the fear of war. In the early hours of a stormy morning, as the river rushed by, swollen and dark, they all threw themselves from the Great Bridge. They left their caps on the road and let themselves be dragged to the bottom by their heavy packs.
None of the bodies were ever found. The current, they said, was brutal that night—who knows how far it carried them? Only scraps of clothing, caught in bushes, and boots left behind on the riverbed surfaced as the waters receded.

Every family in the village lost a relative in that tragedy. Alberto died with the others.
His mother, who became my godmother, nearly lost her mind. She hadn't set foot outside for over fifteen years, and even when she resumed her rare outings, she looked like a haunting black scarecrow drifting through the alleys. Like many other mothers who had suffered the same loss, she never shed her mourning clothes. She was always dressed in black, from shoes to hat.
What set her apart from the others, though, was a thick veil that almost completely hid her face.
"She acts like she's the only one suffering," the women would whisper as she passed. "I guess when you have money, grief is different."
Maybe she heard all those murmurs, but she kept walking—proud and aloof, with the long, commanding stride I imagined queens must have.
And like a queen, she built a monument to those deaths.
A small hill rose in her garden—no one knew how. For months, it was just a mound of earth that looked like it had fallen from the sky.
"Where did all that dirt come from?" people in the village asked.
The little hill was soon covered in grass and flowers.
"Those flowers are the boys who died in the river," they whispered.
Grief, despite all that blooming, lasted a long time for everyone. No one could shake the habit of speaking in hushed tones, in murmurs, walking with light, silent steps—as if the ghosts of the drowned still haunted the streets and fields, and everyone was constantly careful not to disturb or awaken them.
In the years that followed, the village became isolated. The pain of those deaths was joined by the shame evoked by the redhead, the shame of lacking courage and patriotism, of those twelve choosing to die in the river's waters instead of bravely on the battlefield. That was one reason the other people from the valley kept away from our town.
No one wanted anything to do with a cursed village and a bewitched river—as if the land, the places, and the people might infect anyone who came near.
Being shunned and avoided by the people from the next village down made the people in mine retreat further inward, cutting off almost all contact with the outside world. Legends multiplied. And when three laborers from the village above disappeared, many swore they'd seen them walking along the road down to ours.
The folks from the village above were few, but like everyone else, they hated us.
The worst, however, was yet to come.
It was said that with the outbreak of the new war, at night, the Ogre's Mouth began to spew out a thick, stringy fog that reached the river and slithered along the riverbed, sneaking into the villages, through the streets and alleys. On those nights, no one dared to leave the house. Doors and windows were bolted shut. Heads were buried under blankets. Eyes were squeezed shut to keep from seeing the ghosts of the drowned. Around that time, children began to die.
Living in constant fear, in whispers, surrounded by ghosts—was not pleasant.
For a long time, I was spared all of this. By chance, I was kept away from the dreary life of the village, from the fear, and from the fog.
I was born on a March night. Before me, my brother Vittorio and my sister Marcella had already arrived.
That night, they were ten and six years old.
Now I say I'm the third of six children, but in truth, I'm the fourth of seven, because that same night, shortly before me, another sister was born who lived only a few minutes. Her grave is still in the village cemetery, in a green space full of small headstones, alongside those of many children who, in that period, didn't survive.
"You were so tiny," my grandmother told me years later, "we put you in an egg basket."
"Did Mama put me in there?" I asked.
Grandma shook her head. "No, my darling, your mother had a very difficult birth and was terribly sad about the death of your twin."
"She wasn't happy to have me?"
"Life is complicated, Albertina," my grandmother sighed.
"When your mother looked at you, she couldn't help but think of the other baby, and she cried

and cried, and all those tears dried up her milk."
"Is that why I came to live with you?"
My grandmother would stroke my head. "Yes, the midwife sent for me. I put you in the basket and brought you with me."
I listened to that story, wide-eyed, and over the years I asked her to repeat it dozens and dozens of times. Every time, I asked the same questions.
"Did we go straight to your house on the hill?"
"No, we stopped at your Godmother's. I wasn't sure you'd survive, and you needed to be baptized. We called the priest, and the Godmother held you in her arms while he poured holy water over your little head."
"And you named me Albertina."
"Yes, she wanted to give you the name of her son who had died."
"And then you laughed, didn't you, Grandma? Because I grew big and strong and that name didn't fit me at all."
"Yes, there was a little goat with me that had just given birth, and I raised you on her milk. You sucked a lot, always crying from hunger. But no, I didn't laugh, because Albertina was a gentle name, and you were a gentle child."
And so I began living with Grandma on her windy hill, in her tiny house full of animals.
We went to the village once a week, on Friday mornings, market day. I remember in the early years Grandma would carry me down the path in her arms. Later, I'd run ahead of her, scratching my legs and face on the broom shrubs, stumbling on stones, slipping on ice or snow in winter. We brought vegetables and eggs to sell, and we always stopped by my Godmother's house. She'd stuff me with sweets and take care of my clothing.
Back then, I was a little afraid of her. She sat straight and composed, and even if she didn't wear a hat, a thin black veil draped down from her head, covering her face and shoulders. I remember that with every breath, that light gauze would move, distorting her already vague facial features. I'd look away and stay as close to Grandma as possible. Only much later, once I was visiting her house daily, did she start to appear to me without the veil.
But back then, I trembled in front of the black veil and sat for maybe half an hour on a stiff, uncomfortable chair in her living room, torn between wanting to leave that house as quickly as possible and wanting to stretch out as long as I could those moments when my hands darted from the donut plate or the barley candy box—or even better, from the bowl of custard—to my mouth, while Grandma and the Godmother talked. Their conversations were always the same.
The Godmother would pour Grandma a little glass of vin santo.
"Albertina is growing up well, but we must start thinking about her education. She can't grow up like a wild thing."
Grandma would wipe her lips and always repeat the same words:
"She's still little, there's time for school. What matters now is that she's happy, and she seems like a happy child to me."
And I was happy. Truly.
I had the animals, I helped Grandma in the garden. At night, we fell asleep cuddled up in her big bed. Before that, we'd sew or knit in front of the fire while she told me fantastic or terrifying stories that made the work feel light. My favorite was the one about the two sisters, one good and one bad, who met an old woman at the fountain who turned out to be a fairy. The good sister ended up with pearls, diamonds, and gems coming out of her mouth, the bad one with a donkey's tail on her forehead. I also liked the one about the dead man who threw his body parts down the chimney.
I grew up thinking that old women by the fountain could be fairies, that goodness is eventually rewarded—but in the meantime, it's a real nuisance—that the actions of the dead can affect the lives of the living, and that sometimes, the dead are more alive than the living.
Now I realize I should have paid more attention to fairy tales.
I too went to the spring. I had to descend the hill on the side hidden from the village and then climb back up a long stretch. I brought the goats and sheep with me and two big buckets to fill with water. Often, instead of the old woman who was actually a fairy, I'd meet someone from my family: Mama, coming back from the fields where she worked for the farmers, or my father,

returning from the little plot of land he cultivated. Mama would stroke my head. Papa would ask about my health and Grandma's.
Sometimes Mama had a big belly. I understood a new brother or sister was about to be born. I'd see her later going to work with the newborn hanging from her neck. When that happened, she'd stay with me longer because she had to nurse the baby.
Then, another war broke out.
Up there, on our hill, peace still reigned, but down in the village, once again, the young men were forced to leave. In the evenings there was a curfew, no one was allowed outside anymore, and from time to time, when there was the threat of bombings, people had to spend the night in the cellars. All of this we would hear about at the market on Fridays. From up above, we could see the village growing darker, and at night we watched the lights of the reconnaissance planes.
My brother left too. Then he came back, and together with others, he went up into the mountains.