

THREE FINGERS

By Massimo Canuti

First chapter

No one should ever deprive themselves of the many benefits of having a mother; yet, there are moments in a child's life when, even if those benefits exist, you just can't seem to spot them.

"What are you doing standing there? You kneel before the Virgin Mary!" Mom said in a voice that didn't promise anything good.

If I wasn't leaping with joy at the prospect of praying, it wasn't out of disrespect for the mother of Jesus—for whom I held the highest regard and consideration, quite the opposite—but because I was usually wearing shorts, and my poor knees had to deal with the floor's entirely bumpy and hole-ridden surface; it was even worse than when Teacher Beccacci made us kneel on dried peas for punishment, and that's really saying something.

Still, even that day I didn't stop myself from humoring her. On the contrary, I got into position, holding back an "Ouch!" of pure pain, clasped my hands, and started... Being quiet.

"You don't know it."

"Of course, I do," I shot back.

Mom wore her hair in a ponytail, which completely bared her forehead, her beautiful, thin-lipped face, her long, slender nose, and her transparent, bottle-green eyes.

When she got angry—and this was fast becoming one of those times—they turned dark, like the bottom of a bottomless well.

Depending on how the light came in from the window and bounced off the walls, I could see my face reflected in them, and then it felt like I had actually fallen into a well and was drowning in that muddy, pitch-thick water. It wasn't a nice feeling, I can assure you.

"Come on, Hail..."

"Hail..."

I was always hoping for a prompt (or: a hint) from her.

"Hail..."

"Hail..."

It was right on the tip of my tongue.

"Cesare!"

She slapped me hard, and my head swung like one of those punching bags boxers train with.

"Ouch." "Look."

I turned to Mom. The wrong one, though.

"Not me! Her!" she said, shoving my face in front of the image of the Madonna: a worn, crumpled print, hardly bigger than a holy card, which she had placed on a stool next to the sideboard. "Do you see her?"

"Yes," I replied, even though I knew it was a trick question: even a blind person would have noticed from that distance, let alone someone with perfect vision like me.

"Do you see how sad her eyes are, huh? Do you see her crying?"

I answered "yes" again. I knew those eyes all too well. As for the second question, honestly, I had some doubts. In my opinion, those wrinkled little streams along her cheeks weren't tears at all, but merely creases, evidence of the print's wear and tear. But who was I to contradict her?

"She suffered so much for her son, so she knows well what a mother feels when something bad happens to her child."

I don't know about you, but the phrase sounded a bit like a threat to me.

"If you're still alive, you owe it to her. That's why we have to thank her," she added.

I nodded. Although, personally, I would have thanked the German who'd taken me to the hospital first.

"Come on, let's recite it together: Hail Mary, full of grace..."

"...of grace..."

"...the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women..." "...among women..."

I followed her like one of those ducks walking in a neat, straight line. I didn't know why that prayer wouldn't stick in my head. Yet I had read it several times, I swear. At least twice. Maybe Mom was right. Maybe I really was a bad child, only capable of worrying her or causing her grief.

"Amen."

"Amen!"

"Now go play with your sister."

I stood up and rubbed my knees, after which I went into the kitchen, which also served as my sister's and my living room and bedroom.

I don't know what was worse. Sitting on my knees for hours reciting the Hail Mary, or playing with Vilma.