The Girl in the Garden, a novel by Marise Ferro

Sample translated by Jennifer Panek

My father and mother weren't cut out to have a family. They didn't like children. A child was an inconvenience, a creature they viewed as barely belonging to the human race. They were a pair of self-centered adults who'd reproduced by mistake and didn't want to admit or accept their error. As soon as I was out of the nursery, which had been staffed by a nursemaid, I was entrusted to Nonna Leo, my father's mother.

Nonna Leo—her name was Leontina Bra—was a stingy woman, extremely wealthy, and hard on both herself and others. She allowed herself no amusements or softnesses, no distractions or pleasures; her one weakness was for elegant clothing, an inclination that had more to do with upper-class habits than with vanity. Her skin and flesh still looked fresh at sixty; plump and spry at the same time, her carriage proudly erect, she was always immaculately turned out, with expensive rings on her fingers, a heavy gold necklace about her slightly withered neck, and a multitude of bracelets that clinked with her every gesture. This sound was inextricable from her person, almost like her voice, which was rich and youthful, with a pronounced trill on on the "r." In vigorous health, maintained through her refusal of all intemperate indulgences, she ruled with a pitiless hand, commanding submission and respect.

Her wealth, which had remained untouched by the war and came from properties and industries in Argentina, where she'd been married and had lived for years and where one of her brothers (who headed their company) still resided, had blinkered her. Never once had she doubted the rightness of her own actions, never once suspected that jealously guarded wealth might not be to the greater social good. The war had taught her nothing, as she had experienced neither its violence nor its violation, none of its horror or fear or destruction or death. Born and raised in an era when the so-called gentry had no inkling about the advance of democracy, she was pleased to be rich, to have a villa with a vast garden in La Mortola, and to have always enjoyed every material comfort. Aided by her trusted advisor, Alessandro Piccoli, an Italian lawyer who had his studio in Nice, she administered her own income and investments and doled out to my father, who lived in Milan with my mother, a monthly sum that must have been considerable, seeing that no complaints were ever heard, Nonna Leo's famous stinginess notwithstanding.

At the age of five I found myself cloistered in a villa at the far western end of the Italian Riviera, a prisoner under Nonna Leo's surveillance. Thanks to my parents' indifference, I was under her tutelage. Never was there a more retrograde upbringing, void of any concept not only of freedom but of respect for the individual. I was provided with everything a child could want, but I couldn't open my mouth or express my wishes without Nonna Leo telling me to be quiet: "Shush, you know nothing: you're too little."

Her tyranny was neither cruel nor belligerent; it was methodical. I was a child, and I was to let myself be guided by those who had experience in life; I was to obey. Nor did school offer any liberty, since Nonna Leo enrolled me in a French convent boarding school where the nuns adored her for her generous donations to their church. Not that she was pious: she believed in nothing and feared neither God nor the devil, but she put stock in being the most revered and respected woman on the stretch of coastline that ran between Ventimiglia and Grimaldi. In agreement with the nuns, she enforced a demanding schedule that had me at school from nine in the morning until six in the evening, with only the ordinary recreation periods for breaks.

My sole escape was the garden at Villa Bra. It was a fabulous garden, like something from a fairy-tale, stolen out of a landscape that was all majestic elegance, all splendid lines and brilliant colours, but entirely made of rock. Upon this rock, Nonna Leo had succeeded in creating a little earthly paradise. All of her flowers and plants, exotics included, lived in a terraced garden that descended from Via Aurelia down to the sea: a hill that rolled towards the waves, made up entirely of flowers, shrubs, trees and fruit, with a house that dwelt submerged in fragrance and the green of the bougainvillea. Frogs chorused in oval basins; a honeysuckle-covered gazebo threw mysterious shadows; fountains hid among the lichen beneath drooping branches of weeping willows. Season after season, all year long, it was a triumph of Ligurian flora, and above all of roses, which grew in carefully cultivated beds.

When I was sad and felt neglected by the adults, I would run to my favourite nook: a great basin of green water overhung by the branches of an enormous mimosa tree. I'd climb up the trunk to where two branches split off, and stretch myself out on them as if they were a hammock. The delicate weight of my body didn't disturb so much as a leaf. Watching the light reflecting off the water as the hum of flying insects animated the still air, I would contemplate the garden from above, happy to be acquainted with all the trees, the eucalyptus, the palm, the pine, the olive tree and the orange, the acacia, the jujube, the fig, the agave, the aloe; to recognize

all the flowers, to know every recess and secret corner, even the distant ones where tall grass grew mingled with juniper and broom. A mysterious peace would suffuse me and fill me with contentment: I could almost taste my own existence, the space my body occupied, all that my senses could see and smell and hear. Up from the sun-soaked garden drifted odours I could have listed off had I had sufficient vocabulary at the time: the perfume of the rose and the jasmine flower, the scented geranium and the honeysuckle, the lemon tree and the eucalyptus, the mandarin and the myrtle-leafed orange, and sharpest of all, the acacia with its tiny yellow flowers.

Nonna Leo would often come out to the tree, look up at me with her lively, fish-belly-silver eyes, and say "Down you come, then—we're walking down to the sea."

It was love, not obedience, which made me climb down. It was the one way I showed my affection for her. Nonna Leo had no intellectual curiosity, was utterly unmoved by all things beautiful made by human hand, and wouldn't so much as glance at a lovely face, but for some unknown reason, she had a deep, humble, almost animal love for nature, which could suddenly cloak her in mystery, making her seem like part of the garden itself. Nothing escaped her when it came to the innermost workings of trees or bushes or flowers, of the wind or the tides, of the sea-reflected light that glowed at certain hours with the purity of Eden. As she'd walk through the garden, pausing by each flower and shrub, by every branch—noting not just its fragrance, but any damage or disease—she seemed a different person, her body lighter, energized by the inner fire that was her love of everything belonging to the plant kingdom

Without her giving any of her usual orders, I would be compliantly at her side. Path by path, terrace by terrace, under flower-laden trellises, between jasmine hedges and geraniums, we would go down towards the sea. It was almost always around sunset. When we'd reach the final terrace, Nonna Leo would lean her arms against the marble balustrade and get me up on a step so I could lean mine there too. The warmth of the stone that had spent the day in the sun flowed beneath our arms, and felt, I think, the same to both of us.

It was the time of day when this small edge of the earth with its infinitely shifting light would grow completely still, exuding an otherworldly tranquility. The garden grew limpid, its greens shading to blue, pale sunbeams moving over the ground, shimmering atoms falling towards the waves. The flowers stood erect, distinct in their colours, full of palpable, almost carnal life. The spiny tongues of the cacti, the great swords of the agave, the stiff candelabras of

the aloe would lose their edge of monstrosity; the pines, the palms, the olive trees and the eucalyptus would stand in stillness against the warm mother-of-pearl sky. The huge black rocks that broke the waves beneath us seemed made of velvet and the water sighed softly as it was sucked back to the sea. The silence around us had a weariness to it, as if the day were happy to be extinguished by the evening. From the place in the west where the sun had disappeared, a light would flame up, red and radiant but as soft and lustrous as if it were infused with tears and shone from a world unknown. Sometimes the flame would release a ray of green, a blade of light as violent as a wound. And then it would die. The first white stars would tremble in the sky.

I would tremble too, and perhaps Nonna Leo, her lashes shadowing her forbidding profile, did as well. Feeling the same small shock of wonder, we'd stand in silence, side by side.

Those were the times when silently, motionlessly, I would implore the woman beside me for a gesture of love.