



**M**aria Concezione left the small hospital of her town on the seventh of December, the vigil of her saint's day. She had undergone a serious operation: her left breast had been completely cut away. Upon discharging her, the head physician had said with Olympian and crystalline cruelty, "You are fortunate you are no longer very young—twenty-eight, I believe—so the disease will take some time to come back. Ten years, maybe even twelve. In any case, take good care of yourself. Don't overwork. Don't seek out emotion. Peace and quiet, right? And let me see you every now and again."

She looked at him with great black eyes in the lean, tarnished face of a fallen angel. She would have liked to have made little horns with her fingers, or some other sign of exorcism; but deep down she didn't believe in those things, and for a long time now she had been resigned to her fate. It was quite enough for her to resolve to never return to the hospital again.

Now she was going home, all wrapped up and encased in a long black shawl that made her tall body seem more slender, and her Bedouin profile even darker. She brushed past the wall of the hospital garden, and then past the lower wall of a garden planted almost entirely with cabbages with great lunar flowers. She came out immediately onto a country road, rutted and stony, that led towards the nearby mountains. Everything seemed different from the way she had left it. She herself was different, empty, and, it seemed to her, with the smell of death on her clothes, a smell that would never leave her again.

And yet she was happy: to walk, to breathe, to be hungry, to love her mother, her house, even her cat. The joy of living.

For days, after a long drought, it had rained abundantly. The earth was black, so much so that in some places it seemed to be sprinkled with coffee grounds. But from the sides of the road, between the two inclines that gradually sloped down to the Valley of the Birchi and the Valley of the Capro, two small streams engorged by the torrents and brought back to life by the recent rains, the masses of almost silvery granite stood out even better, speckled with black sparks that seemed like reefs in the midst of long, wet, dark, algaelike vegetation. It all had something of the bottom of the sea about it, from the swell of the valley and the sudden wave of the landscape, as if the sea in some ancient time had arrived as far as the foot of the mountains and the elevation out of which the town arose. The very mountains above Concezione's house had the arid, rocky look of an indented, corroded coastline that had once been beaten by waves. Only higher up were they blackened by the ancient oak forests.

The house where she stopped was also unusual. It stood at a fork in the road that climbed up the slope of the mountain on one side, and on the other led down to the valley on the left. It was a small church, with a façade that in fact looked down into the valley, and was surrounded on the front and one side by a clearing marked by a little hedge enclosing a garden with fruit trees, a little wooden gate that opened, and a path leading to the eastern side of the church, which was used as a dwelling.

Only two little windows fortified with iron grilles opened from the wall of the old building, where the road turned under the clearing. One roof of black tile, encrusted with moss and its parasitic plants, covered both the church and the house. Two markers, two symbols looked down from one corner to the other, over the two valleys of the promontory; they looked down like brothers who, though far away and separated by a whole world, remember each other tenderly, being sons of the same mother. Rising above the façade, on top of a small arch from which hung a bell, was a cross; on the side of the garden and almost over the door to the house, was a chimney out of

which came a banner of smoke that gladdened Concezione's heart. She made the sign of the cross before opening the little gate, and cleaned her feet on the grass, almost as though she wanted to leave outside the dust and memory of the ugly places and sad days she had gone through. Her joy was heartfelt when her mother appeared at the little door of the house—a small figure, hard and all gray, as though part of the colors and the nature of the rocks around her; but just like the granite, she had a silvery clarity, an odd mixture of the joyous and the solemn.

She had not expected her daughter's return so soon and was not elated to see her. She knew she would come back, that the little Madonna of the church watched over the two of them and would not betray them. So her large mouth crowned by silver hairs barely smiled as she finished drying her hands on her gray apron. And Concezione, after a nod of greeting, walked through the kitchen to put away her shawl in a chest in the next room. The aroma of quinces came out of the chest full of clothes. A large bed, with a blanket of hand-woven wool, all embroidered with flowers and birds of red and blue, took up almost all of the room and served both of the women. The bed was so high that underneath it were stored baskets and tools, rolls of spun wool, a sack of potatoes and a smaller one of beans, but everything on the pavement of rough red tile was clean and in order. In a basket full of carded wool lay the beautiful black cat who looked as if he had put on a furry white nightcap to sleep better. He opened one green eye, looked at his mistress, and went back to sleep, participating in the Olympian tranquillity of the place. But returning to the kitchen, Concezione flushed with irritation to see that her mother had taken a dead suckling pig with a red rind out of the cupboard against the wall; its belly was cut open and stuffed with myrtle branches. Her mother looked at it with uncertainty and a bit of disquiet, and seemed to speak to it.

“Poor little beast probably only three days old. Well!”

She sighed, resigning herself to the destiny of the tiny victim. In the end, one should always be happy when Providence

sends gifts. Her still youthful voice went on, "Aroldo came last night. He brought this for you—for your celebration. He'll come back tonight. He wanted to go to the hospital, but I advised against it. He seemed very happy, just the same. So, what shall we do with this little beast?"

"Do whatever you want. He'll eat it," she said scornfully. "He didn't have to bring it."

"But Concezione!"

Her mother looked her full in the face, and only then did she realize that her daughter was completely changed. She seemed to have aged all at once, with withered skin surrounding her dark eyes, and hair pulled back against her temples and tied tight on her neck just like an old woman. And she thought that, yes, Aroldo was too young for her. He was still a boy, good and in love, yes, but not one to think of as a possible husband. Besides, he was of a different breed than theirs; even his language was so different that the old woman understood his words with difficulty. But from his blue eyes, from his luminous smile, and from his warm voice she understood his loyalty and gentleness, and she loved him like a child. Concezione had also never been hostile towards him, quite the contrary; but now the illness had changed her.

They spoke about this illness as little as possible, like a mysterious thing. Even its terrible name, that not even the doctors had pronounced clearly, remained deep in their hearts with a secret agreement to never reveal it, not even to themselves. So, Concezione didn't tell her mother what the head physician of the hospital had said to her. She only said, as her mother quickly handed her a cup of coffee, that she felt very weak and shouldn't wear herself out.

"Yes," she said as if following her mother's thoughts, "I am changed; I feel old, but tranquil. I'll take up my work again and we'll live happily."

Her work was easy: she sewed linens, especially men's clothing. This was how she knew Aroldo, who last summer had asked her to make six shirts for him.

But before sitting down between the window and the fire with her work basket next to her, she went into the church, passing through the small sacristy that opened onto the kitchen. The little room had a small, high window that opened towards the north. It framed the mountain like a melancholy painting without a background of sky, and the crude light of the bare rocks gave it a profound sense of glacial solitude. The church, entered through a short hall from the little sacristy, also seemed to be carved out of the earth, it was so cold and humid. The gleam of the small lamps next to the altar, and of the dusty lunette over the door increased its sadness. But with the window open, in the blue light from the horizon clearing over the distant valley, the poor sanctuary seemed less icy and desolate. Nothing adorned it. The roof was of planks, just like a cabin. A stone bench along the wall served for a seat. But the single altar covered with an embroidered cloth, the long and precious work of Concezione, was almost rich. Ten gilded glass candelabra with thick candles like a staircase, five on each side, gave wings to the small wooden statute of the Madonna of Solitude.

This little, almost proud Madonna seemed ready to defy the most arctic and boundless solitude, all dark and rigid in her blue niche spotted with damp that gave the impression of a marine grotto, the kind that appears through the clouds in the torn sky of a tempestuous evening. In fact, the sliver of moon supporting the feet of the brown statue was the only serene touch to sweeten the severity. Even the Child, whom her long, slack hands held a bit low as if to slip them within the wrinkled folds of her dress, was sulky, snub-nosed, bestial; but his fat little feet, rebellious and agitated, his toes sticking out, his big toes almost alive, gave even him a sense of tenderness, of almost joyous humanity. Concezione gazed at these little feet rather than at the Madonna, hard and absent, truly all alone above the moon.

Then she relit the little lamp, moved the vase of dusty and faded paper flowers, and finally kneeled down with a shiver of cold down her back.

Her soul also trembled with cold, with sadness, with fear—a sudden fear of life, of days awaiting her all alike, always alike, without either love or hope. And those holy little feet up there, in the reddish light like twilight before nightfall, gave her a deep longing for tears.

“I should not have children; I shouldn’t have any,” she thought, among the words of her prayer, “and it’s right, it’s right. Everything in your will is right, O Lord. I have sinned against love, I have sown pain and destroyed a man’s life; and now you sprinkle the salt of sterility on my life, O Lord. Thy will be done. And you, Virgin Mother, help me now to get through this desolate life of mine. Look down on me from the heights of your mercy.”



And it seemed that help was not lacking during the hours of that day, gray and still like the surrounding rocks. Seated in front of her work basket full of a roll of pink cotton for men’s shirts, she tried to make buttonholes on cuffs already basted before she went into the hospital. But she was weak, her left arm still numb; still, in comparison to the sad days she had just spent, she felt she had returned to a luminous palace, and that the view out of the window—the garden clearing, the bushes, the boulders of the embankment—was a spring garden. A joy of life overcame her in spite of herself. It was a humble rhythm: the purring of the cat curled up on the stones of the hearth, the aroma of the suckling pig her mother had put to roast in the oven where she occasionally made bread, and the silent coming and going of her mother, intent upon the household chores. The same immobile silence was outside, broken only by the occasional wheels of a cart or the passing of a horse on the country road.

But towards evening the solitude came alive: a man’s figure, disproportionate and jarring in the scheme of that poor, amazed scene, loomed large among the small things of the kitchen. It was Aroldo, the foreigner. He carried on his back a type of knapsack which he took slowly from his sturdy arms and set in

a corner, pushing away the suddenly curious and greedy cat with the palm of his hand.

“Go away, you rascal,” he said, petting him. “Isn’t the good smell in here enough for you?”

And he himself sniffed the air, like a guest come to a place of well-being and rest. But the black figure of Concezione, with that dark face and eyes laden with shadows, seemed to darken his own. The smile faded from his mouth, a beautiful mouth, with the shiny lips of an infant and teeth which still seemed like milk teeth.

The rest of him was also handsome, almost too highly colored: ruddy face, blond hair, blue eyes with dark eyebrows, high and arched like those of a woman, made more alive and sweet. His strong neck was red, red his strong hands, all strong, alive, full-blooded, in his almost gigantic body.

And yet, he seemed to pale and shrink, as if trying to hide inside the breadth of his rough-spun clothing for Concezione’s unexpected welcome. He saw the change clearly—she neither displayed it nor hid it; she seemed another person to him too. It was as if the hospital, instead of the operation the two women had described to him—that is, the simple extraction of a nasal polyp—had by witchcraft taken her blood, her flesh, her youth. Something inexplicable, beyond the breath of sorrow and illness, emanated from her, almost a sense of threat and danger, chilling the comforting, hospitable atmosphere of the house. He felt like he was once again the stranger, like that day when he came carrying the material for his shirts and Concezione had taken his measurements without looking him in the face: a stranger from a distant land, without a soul in the world. But with those measurements, Concezione had bound him, bewitched him; and those shirts she had sewn were to him a boy’s new clothes, party clothes, a thread of hope and joy.

“How are you doing?” he asked in a low, troubled voice. He seemed to be afraid of being overheard by someone who was more the master of the house than the owners themselves, someone who could throw him out like an intruder.

“Sit down. Fine. Everything’s fine,” said the mother. “Concezione is cured: you see her.”

“I see her,” he said, but uncertainly, not daring to address himself directly to the young woman. In fact, he took two steps back towards the door, waiting for her to decide to come towards him; he was ready to leave if she ordered it. Aware of this, she wore a smile between mockery and pity.

“So sit down,” she said, almost rudely, patting the back of a chair next to the hearth. “Where are you coming from?”

Red from emotion and joy, he gestured toward the door with his arm. He had come from far away, down there, from the place where this valley joins with another valley that little by little grows bigger, becomes almost a plain, and slopes down to the sea. He was building a provincial road down there, a road that came up from the coast towards the town of the two women. Aroldo, with other workers from across the sea, led by a manager who was also a foreigner, worked on the construction of this road, especially of the bridges.

“Then what’s new?” demanded the old woman, while Concezione made a to-do about setting the table, on which already lay a platter full of pieces of the suckling pig, giving off the good aroma of rosemary.

Seeing those preparations, Aroldo began again to brighten. These women had already invited him other times, and, with his appetite awakened by the long walk, he felt especially happy about their hospitality that evening.

“News? What news could I bring? We work like slaves, and the boss is always there yelling and pushing us around. Never happy. And on top of that, with all these rains, the ground is bad. There are small landslides and water running everywhere. But where there’s a will there’s a way. Anyway, the boss likes me, maybe because I’m the hardest worker. So . . .” He looked at Concezione’s back and did not continue. His face grew dark again.

But when they were at the table and the old woman poured out his drink, even though the wine was light pink like a soft drink, he took courage. Eating slowly, using his fork and knife



like a gentleman, he once again began to tell in his lightly cadenced voice stories of the road and the manager.

“He’s a character, though. He’s already been to America twice, building roads and bridges, and now he really has a plan in mind. You have to admit that he’s a great worker. He lives with us and spends the nights with us in the camp. He doesn’t even go back to town on Sunday, like we laborers are allowed to do. For one thing, he wants us to go to mass; in fact, I certainly wouldn’t tramp all that long way if not for mass . . .”

Concezione understood perfectly that he returned only for her, but she remained rigid and hard. She did not eat, she did not move from the table as her mother did every now and again. She was absent, though, and seemed not to hear the words of the guest. She only started, almost in spite of herself, when he continued,

“And now this is what’s happening: yes, but I’m only telling you because it shouldn’t be known, at least not for awhile. So, today the manager called me to one side and asked me if I want to go to America with him as soon as this road is finished, that is, in a year or so. It seems that this time he has really big plans. Not only does he want to open a road in an unexplored forest towards Patagonia, but even to build a city, and then a branch of the railroad. Like I say, the place is uninhabited now, but within two or three years it will certainly be magnificent, with completely new houses, very fertile land, vegetable and flower gardens, fountains. It will be a lot of work you understand, but there will also be a lot to gain: maybe riches, certainly a good future.”

The old woman forced herself to understand, but it all seemed a bit of a fairy tale, a bit of a joke, especially since, when he was in a good mood, Aroldo never hesitated to tell her tall tales. But he contented himself with playing jokes on the mother since the daughter was too quick and too distrustful to be taken in by him.

But this time he was serious and committed, and maybe his story was not a fantasy. So Concezione listened, without showing it, to his every word, with a mixture of curiosity and hope.

Here's how the Virgin of Solitude had somehow heard her prayer: if Aroldo were to go, she would be once again completely alone and free on the road that fate had laid out before her. Her mother's question even made her smile: "But who's going down there to make this new country? You and the manager?"

"And hundreds and hundreds of fellows, some from here, some natives. First of all we'll make a sort of colony, with little houses for us; then a true cooperative, with a just division of profits. The better you are, the more you work, the bigger part of the enterprise you'll have. And insurance to cover work, illness, misfortunes, life; and even full freedom to come back, with compensation for work and for the trip. The climate is good. There aren't any dangerous beasts. A lot of insects, yes, especially mosquitoes, but they disappear as soon as the land is drained."

"And the money?" Concezione scoffed, mocking him.

"I think the manager has it. He isn't a fool, and he doesn't talk just to talk. He's a bit odd, it's true, but he's ambitious and passionate about these things. Anyway, there's nothing to lose, at least not for someone like me."

He also struck a mocking pose, but against himself. He drank another glass of wine, pushed back the plate which the old woman had refilled, and looked up straight ahead, as if he saw a painting that interested him more than the other things around him. He went on, "Certainly I won't be the one to be afraid of the mosquitoes, not even of snakes, if there are any. When I was a boy I killed many snakes, even some poisonous ones. My mother and I lived in a worse cabin than those we'll go live in 'down there.' The poor woman worked in the rice fields until she died from hardships, but she still sent me to school and dreamed of a happy future for me. After she died I worked first as a knife sharpener. I had a boss then too, a blind man who had only his sharpening machine and who went around with me and controlled my work more than even the engineer will control it in that new city 'down there.' We went from one place to another; there was work especially in the

summer: scythes, scissors, axes, and knives for the women who make pasta at home and cut salami in thin pieces for youngsters. They slipped us a few pieces too, with a bit of polenta, on those threshing floors, bless them. People are good up there, but in the rice fields they are also poor; there was a lot of misery there. We slept wherever we ended up; it was then that I learned to catch snakes and to toughen my skin against mosquitoes. Once we happened to be in a town where a house had burned down. The owner wanted to rebuild it at once, while the weather was still good, and scraped together all the available workers in town. But almost all of them were busy because they were building a dike; and so I was offered work as a laborer. The owner of the burned house and my boss argued over me. I was tired of the vagabond life and the abuses of the knife sharpener, who often left me without food. Then a strange thing happened. The wife of the house had known my mother because she had also been in the rice fields as a girl. Not only that, but she told me she had known the man who, according to her, had deceived and then abandoned my mother. A gentleman, she said, one of those who inspected the work in the rice fields. I thought all the time about this unknown scoundrel, my father. My mother had never talked about him to me, not even on her deathbed, so I had thought I was an orphan. Now my fantasies were kindled, and it was this illusion that made me decide to abandon the knife sharpener and take up a career as a laborer. Those certainly were hard times. For all the research I could do, I wasn't able to find out anything about my father. When the house was done, I found something to do with the work on the dike. Then a worker took me with him to work on a railroad. He also paid me little, but I learned the trade, especially how to work on bridges and escarpments, and as they say, I managed. Now I am here, then maybe I'll go down there in America. And, then . . . anyway, I've already told you my story. There is no shame in being nobody's son; I live by my own work and I don't have any illusions."

It seemed he really wanted to explain about his mother's past and his vagabond life. He knew that the town of his hostesses

didn't have much esteem for the children of sin, especially if they were poor. But he did not wish to deceive anyone, and since Concezione had already shown him an attachment not lacking warmth, there was no reason why she should change her mind all at once.

After all, he thought that she also made her living from her meager work, in that strange refuge, half holy and half outlaw, inherited, in fact, from ancestors who, public opinion assured him, were little if at all scrupulous in terms of honesty. As he spoke, she seemed to get back some of her former cordiality. She smiled again, this time benevolently, when her mother asked with naive cunning whether there would also be women "down there" to help and console the pioneers.

"Not at first, I think. We'll go live in barracks, alone, like castaways. But as soon as the houses are ready, the manager will be the first to want women with us. They're necessary for many reasons."

A smile that wanted to be mischievous carved out the dimples of his cheeks, and the blue of his eyes became all golden. He looked at Concezione, and she repeated his words as if to humor him: "Yes, for many reasons."

Now he looked up again at that painting which only he saw.

"Certainly, it will be hard at first, but like I say, I'm used to it. I'm strong," he said, stretching out his arms with his fists closed. "I'll be at the head of the line and the boss knows it well. At any rate, we'll arrive there just at the beginning of the good weather, and so it won't be hard for us men to camp out like soldiers. In fact, it's a life that does you good. And then we'll be provided with everything, even with wine, coffee, medicine. The manager promises that there will even be a doctor, but on the other hand he will only hire men who are healthy and more than capable. Once the first houses are built, once the bad weather is over, then he'll think about bringing women."

"But, how will they do it? Alone?"

It was again the mother who inquired, even though by now she was also disenchanted with the story.

“Oh yes, why not? There are wives and sisters of emigrants who want nothing better than to join them. You go where God helps you to live, and no one says that you have to live in a strange land forever. If a woman wants to go down there she can be sent the money for the trip and she can be met at the dock, which isn’t far. Rather, the hard part will be the trip into the interior if the railroad hasn’t reached our colony yet.”

“Good luck!” said Concezione, recovering her amused tone. “I certainly won’t go!”

The words were said. It was a light cut, but like a furtive but sure blow, it neatly divided the destiny dreamed of by Aroldo: he was on one side with his fantastic city, and on the other side was Concezione in her cave. The painting disappeared from her wall. He blinked his dark lashes lightly over his darkened eyes. His mouth looked like the mouth of a child who refuses his medicine. He himself hardly believed his courage and his voice asking, “And if you were my wife?”

These words upset the mother as well. Her placid eyes ran from one young face to the other, and she didn’t even know herself what she wanted: was it an affirmative answer from Concezione or her definitive rejection of the young suitor’s dream?

Concezione, her head bowed, seemed to think before proclaiming her decision, and then she said calmly, “That’s just talk!”

Then there was still hope. Now the old woman, who knew with ancient wisdom how just one word could sometimes influence the destiny of others, thought she should not intervene with her advice. Instead, with the excuse of going to get something from the bedroom, she got up and left the two young people alone.

Slowly, Aroldo stretched out his hand and placed it on Concezione’s. She didn’t pull hers back, but stolidly hid the burning commotion that the contact gave her.

He said softly, “Remember one night, there in the garden, we kissed; and you promised to marry me as soon as my position would allow it. My position will certainly get better as

soon as I am down there—if I go that’s what I’ll go for. I’m not asking you to follow me, not until I also have kept my promise; but you should promise to wait for me. Two years, only two years of your time . . . ”

She smiled, that sad, tired, but still ironic smile that left her teeth uncovered all the way to her slightly discolored gums. She took back her hand, slipping it from his like a cat, and answered out loud, since she no longer had anything to hide, “In two years I will be old; in fact, I’m already old and sick. I’m no longer good for anything—and you are young, Aroldo; you need a strong, healthy woman to follow you and help you make your fortune wherever you are.”

“I need you, Concezione. I don’t know why, but from the moment I met you, I have felt that only you could make me happy, and that God had sent me to this place to meet you. I can’t live without you anymore. Even if I go to the ends of the earth, even if I become a millionaire, I will always think about you. But why should I go to the ends of the earth to seek my fortune if you don’t love me anymore? Everything would be useless without you. I prefer to stay here and be miserable; and if you throw me out I will return to your door like a beggar. You don’t send beggars away.”

He spoke clearly and well, with his even, cadenced voice that came from a sincere heart. It seemed like a song: resigned, but with an inexorable passion that creates light for itself, one of those songs of hopeless love that Concezione had heard and learned from her earliest adolescence. Indeed, those songs were the accompaniment, almost the cause, of her first restlessness, of her curiosity and sensual turmoil. It was not the first time that Aroldo had spoken to her like this: his first declarations of love had sounded the same, and she had let herself be conquered as if by a music that recalls bygone things and makes them come alive again. A reflowering of sensations, impulses, but also of illusions, had pulled her close to him. Next to his youth that seemed poor but was actually very rich, his manly warmth, the controlled but profound exuberance of his vitality, she felt like those herbs and those mean wildflowers that, in the presence of herbs and flowers richer than they are, take on, if

nothing else, the appearance of others. And then, besides the physical desire, the natural rush of her flesh towards his, she was attracted by the very difference of breed, of age, of character, of language. It seemed like this should distance them, but instead it pushed them more towards each other.

In the hut where, for a few lire, Aroldo rented a hole in the wall to stay on his days off, they had told him that Concezione was descended from a line of violent and passionate people, and that she herself had suffered a tragic passion during her early girlhood. Knowing that he frequented her house, they did not go into details. But he was fixed in his ideas: he wanted Concezione, at all costs he wanted her. The very atmosphere that surrounded her, between the romantic and the ambiguous, seemed to awaken a type of fever in his blood, tormenting him with a sting that wounded his heart, and, even more, his senses. He wanted Concezione: day and night he longed for her. One look from her eye to his was enough to give him almost a desire for possession, a delirium that exalted him and rendered him mute.

But now it was all finished. She didn't look at him anymore; she had become another person. He really did have the impression that the hospital had changed her, turning her into an empty, old, ghostly Concezione.

"I know," he said, thinking over the stories they had told him about her, "you never really loved me; and if I go far away you'll forget me easily; you'll even find another man."

"There's no danger of that, Aroldo!" she said, frowning, since she knew what he was getting at. "I will always stay here with my mother and the little Madonna. And we will die here, God willing. Oh yes, God wills it, since we have faith in him; and nobody can ever hurt me again."

As if comforted, he continued, "Then so be it. But tell me, what if I am able to come back in two years, maybe three, and take you both away, both you and your mother? What do you say, Giustina?"

The old woman had come back in with a tray and cups; she placed them on the table and poured the coffee. She was

tranquil, and in the light of the oil lamp, her smooth face seemed younger than Concezione's. She set a cup down before the young man and said, "Dear son, your words are pretty, but they are like a puff of wind that starts the branches rustling and then stops."

Irritated, but respectful, he replied, "Let's see now, what have you understood?"

"I understand, I understand. You want to uproot the boulder above our garden and make it roll to the bottom of the valley. But is that ever possible?"

"Oh, if we are going to speak in parables, it's useless to continue. Look, this is the way things stand: I have been offered the possibility of making a decent fortune. I am offering to share this good luck with Concezione and you. If you don't want to follow me, at least Concezione could wait for me for two years."

"But why do you repeat these things to her?" asked Concezione with irritation, "I have already answered. I am not a child, and I don't like useless talk!"

Aroldo blushed to his neck and did not dare insist; but a furtive glance from the mother seemed to say to him, "Let some time go by; you'll see that things will change."

Then there was a knock on the door, and she went to open it with neither surprise nor curiosity. A man appeared whose size took up all the space of the small opening. He was old, but he had a giant head surrounded by a thick beard down to his throat, a mixture of black, white, and reddish. His face was like a satyr's mask, with a large nose and the savage, golden eyes of a courageous wild boar. He wore a short cape of rough cloth, with a large hood folded back on his shoulders. He seemed to have continued growing even as an old man, since his bare wrists and boxer's hands stuck out of his sleeves. He pushed his cloth cap back a bit on his bald head and then pulled it down again on his forehead over his hairy eyebrows: that was his greeting.

Aroldo moved over, as if to give him room at the table; but once the little door was closed, the old man sat almost on top of it, on a stool too small for him. He put a hand to his



hairy ear to better hear old Giustina's words of introduction.

"This is our friend, Felice Giordano; and this is our friend Aroldo."

The old man, who already knew something about the stranger, said at once in his extraordinarily sonorous, yet aggressive, voice, "He doesn't have a last name? Friends anyway," he added hastily; and with his cane he scratched the back of the cat that had immediately come to him.

This was something that made Aroldo childishly jealous, and made him care for the ruddy visitor even less, since the animal never willingly let Aroldo pet him. He said his whole name in a loud voice: "Aroldo Aroldi." But the other seemed to no longer pay any attention to him, but now concentrated all of his attention on the young hostess who, for her part, fixed him with an ironic challenge, inviting him to come closer.

"Come on, come over here with us. Drink a glass of water if you don't want anything else."

He raised his right hand with the index finger bent so that the shadow on the wall was the head of a bird of prey. He made a menacing gesture, but Concezione had no fear of him; rather, she started to laugh, and her white teeth, in her still hard face, seemed a bit cruel to Aroldo.

The mother explained, "Our Compare\* Felice doesn't like coffee. Nor pork," she added, touching the plate of leftovers from the roast. To reinforce her statement, the old man turned towards the wall and spit, as his long top lip curled with comic but sincere disgust.

"Coffee is for women. The meat of pigs is for those who steal them."

"This one, at least, is not stolen," replied Concezione, to defend the now mortified gift giver.

"I don't know anything about that; I only say that pork causes bad dreams, and even the Jews don't eat it. And I am a Christian."

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\* *Compare*: untranslatable term of respect for a companion or accomplice with almost familial intimacy. Feminine: *Comare*.

“That is to say, he has two hundred pigs. Every year he sells more than one hundred nice fat ones, fed on the acorns from his woods on the mountain; you can see them from our garden if you look. And he sells them to Christians, but with the usury of a Jew.”

Now even the old woman teased him, but he did not give up his magisterial dignity.

“Of course I sell them to Christians. There are no enemies of Christ here, even though my clients are in a way.”

“In what way?”

“They’re all thieves and crooks, and if they can steal a pig from my pen they don’t think twice about it.”

“It’s the same everywhere,” Aroldo dared to intervene. But the old man, having looked him up and down, especially in the face and in the eye, decided it was not necessary to honor him with an answer. His attention was ever more fixed on Concezione, in whom he noticed a profound change. But her face of tarnished silver, her eyes, once dark and shiny like onyx, now faded and veiled with sadness, her whole emptied person, awakened in him a sense of ridicule instead of pity.

But only after he had pondered the effect that his words would create, he asked coldly, “What have you done, Maria Concezione? You are all dried out like a tree that has lost its leaves.”

“Autumn comes for everyone. For you it’s already winter,” she answered. Then she assumed a serious air, and Aroldo understood that she spoke more for him than for the old man. “I have been at the hospital because I had a serious illness in my nose. They took a lot of blood from me, I suffered a lot, and I am still not well.”

“But your voice is clear,” observed the visitor, not without malice. “A friend of mine, who had a worm in his nose, waited for it to come out by itself; but he was left without his voice. And you were wrong to have gone to those crooked doctors. If you had stayed home and sat in the sun, the illness would have gone away by itself.”

“Maybe you’re right; but I couldn’t breathe anymore. I couldn’t work anymore.”

“Work! As though your father, the blessed Antonio Giuseppe, didn’t leave you enough to live on? Ten thousand scudi he left you, besides the house and the church. And you haven’t buried them under the altar, no, but like a good girl you have invested them at interest in the bank. And you did the right thing.”

Concezione blushed, because Aroldo didn’t know she had this capital, just like most of the people in the town didn’t know about it.

“It’s not at all true,” she lied. “I only have a little money, and I have now spent it for the operation and the rest.”

Without moving, without even moving a finger, his hands still, one on top of the other, on the cane he had placed across his lap, he replied, “What do you mean, it’s not true at all? You’re telling that to me? You have a brazen face, my flower. Your father, the blessed Antonio Giuseppe, my Compare of baptism, since he was the godfather to my four grandchildren, had land, woods, and livestock. When he became sick he told me that he needed to sell everything and place the money at interest, since those poor women didn’t have anyone to look after the stuff,\* and taxes and thieves would take it all away. This means that when the girl comes of age and finds a good husband, she can repurchase the land and livestock. And so it was done. You were ten years old, Maria Concezione, and I’m sure you remember everything perfectly well.”

“I don’t remember anything,” she said discourteously.

Unperturbed, as though Aroldo’s presence were a shadow, he continued, “But I said, ‘Compare Antonio Giuseppe, two of my grandsons, your godsons, Pietro and Paolo, will be almost grown up when your daughter is old enough to marry.’ And he understood, and was happy. But you, Maria Concezione, have never wanted to hear this. You haven’t listened to your father’s wishes because you seem like a goody-goody but you have a heart of stone, and an even harder head, may a lightning bolt crack it.”

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\**La roba*. See the discussion of “stuff” in the afterword.

“Compare Felice!” protested the old woman, while Concezione laughed again, gazing into her coffee cup.

“Send your grandsons to a nursemaid if you don’t know what to do with them,” she said shrugging her shoulders.

“Ah, you want to send them to a nursemaid. I know why, just like I know very well why you laugh at me and everyone else,” shot back the old man. Then he was quiet for a moment, and Aroldo was almost afraid of the silence, broken only by the slightly nervous tapping of Concezione’s spoon in her empty cup. He listened calmly, asking himself if he shouldn’t be going; but he had the impression that the old man was talking to him, to let him know the life, character, and means of Concezione, and possibly to dissuade him from his amorous plans.

And, in fact, Giordano went on, “I’ll tell you why. You look like the Virgin’s little sister, but your looks deceive, dear daughter, they deceive. In this you resemble your father’s ancestors. I say your father’s, because your mother’s were all made of good stuff; we have proof of that in this little woman, who truly is mother and sister of Most Holy Mary.”

“Amen,” said Giustina, who, however, didn’t seem very flattered. “I would have thought at least that your evil tongue wouldn’t have anything to say about my husband.”

“Your husband, the blessed Antonio Giuseppe, was my Compare of baptism, and he wouldn’t have been if he hadn’t been more than honest. He was a banner, your husband, a flag in a procession. But his father, and the father of his father, may all their souls be saved if they aren’t already, let’s say, in Purgatory, everyone knows what they were like. Beautiful to look at, beautiful as statues, but, but . . .”

This time it was Concezione who protested proudly, “Talk—go ahead and talk. There’s no reason why a man like you, who doesn’t respect the living, should respect the dead.”

“I haven’t come to argue,” he continued calmly, and the words continued to flow from his satyr’s mouth, sonorous and even, like the water from a fountain. “I came to say hello, since I haven’t seen you for a long time. But if you really want me

to, Maria Concezione, I will remind you that the father of your grandfather was reputed to be part of, indeed, to be the leader of, an expedition of brigands against a rich priest who, may his soul rest in peace, was half a brigand himself, and who had become rich with church money. Among other things, they say that under threat of excommunication or refusal to celebrate marriages, he took the first night with the bride for himself, and did other evil deeds. This unworthy servant of God had built a villa for himself in one of his vineyards, and he was often there making strong wine and spirits with his own hands, and then inviting his buddies to enjoy it all in happy company. It was after one of these little parties, when the friends had left, that a group of masked men attacked the priest's house. Since he refused to tell them where the money was hidden, these good old boys tied him up and set his bare bottom on a tripod over a fire. He had the scar the rest of his life."

"Fairy tales!" said Concezione. "And they tell this business of the tripod in lots of other stories like that."

"Very well, but this is what happened. After the story with the priest, and other smaller capers, your great-grandfather, who had been a poor goatherd, bought land, cows, houses. He died rich, and your grandfather, who followed his father's example more cautiously, it's true, but successfully, became even richer. But the priest's excommunication weighed on your family. The brothers of your grandfather all died bad deaths, and he, after an infection they say came from a wound, lost his right arm, the one with which he had done the evil deeds. Then the devil became a hermit: he built this church and these little rooms for himself and his descendants to live in, and he had masses said every Sunday and the other feast days for the good of his soul. Is this also a fairy tale, Maria Giustina?"

The woman did not reply, but her face was sad, solemn; and Concezione didn't protest any more either. After all, she thought, it's better that Aroldo know these things, he'll resign himself more easily. And she and her mother knew very well that everybody in the village and its surroundings repeated these stories that old Giordano had just told.

He went on, "Compare Antonio Giuseppe, that good soul, obeyed his father. He did good deeds, but he also provided that after his death his widow and daughter would live peacefully, without any cares. He did well; who doesn't approve of him? I am the first to do so; wherever I go I honor his memory. But you, Maria Concezione, why do you want to deny your father's goodness? Why do you pretend to be poor, forced to work, when he left you set like a lady? Are you afraid they'll steal your stuff? Oh, sure, be careful, lest some swindler start hanging around, or some brigand does to you what your ancestor did to the priest."

Aroldo laughed, but with clenched teeth, a laugh that stuck in his throat but made his eyes sparkle. He would have liked to respond to the old man, to defend himself, since he felt attacked by him, but he felt sorry for Concezione, and to avoid any further humiliation to her, he decided to go. But he would return, oh yes, he would return. The words of the rough pigherd did not change his heart. If Concezione was rich, all the better for her. He loved her poor; he also loved her like she now was, sick, dried out, and even like the old man painted her: dishonest and maybe wicked and cruel. Rejected, he would go, especially since he couldn't defend her. He didn't even have the right to defend himself from the wild man's insinuations without provoking him further. But he would return, like returning to a fountain, like returning to church.

"It's late," he said, getting up. "I bid you farewell."

He didn't look at Concezione, but he instinctively straightened himself up and stretched, to seem taller, straighter, more linear to her. Then he found his sack and pulled his visored cap firmly on his head; it made his face look as youthful as a boy's. He raised his hand in parting, and set off. Maria Giustina accompanied him out of the door. The night was humid but warm. The mountains, shiny black, smoked like enormous charcoal pits, and around the moon galloped great transparent yellowish clouds. The garden, all wet like after a rain, also reflected that light.

Aroldo stopped, uncertain: it seemed he wanted to say something. Then he shook his shoulders to adjust his sack, and went off with long steps. The old woman followed the tall figure until he disappeared behind the gate, and sighed. She had the impression that the young man was fleeing, justly offended, and she wanted to express her indignation to the evil old man. But he anticipated her with clear satisfaction.

“When I leave,” he said, “you certainly won’t accompany me like you did that beanpole. But what did he want from you? He has the eyes of a cat and the smile of a swindler. Yes, I was talking about him when I said those things—I know he hangs around your house and that he is nobody’s son.”

“We are all children of God, Felis Giordano, and our house is frequented only by honest men.”

“Yes, I know. The old friends of Antonio Giuseppe come here, and your lady friends, the devotees of your Madonna, and that little priest, my thrice-holy grandson, and the doctor and the phlebotomist, when they go for a walk. Even people from the road stop here, and you accept them all equally. And then there’s this beanpole—he knows what he’s after.”

Concezione was tired and irritated. She looked at him with eyes reanimated with the light of pride and, to her mother’s surprise and pleasure, she said, “That young man is my fiancé.”

The old man picked up his cane and beat on the floor.

“Good. I told you so, Maria Concezione. He wants to play the trick on you they played on the priest, to squeeze your money from you.”

“Let’s stop it,” said the mother, and because she was a little bit afraid of the Compare, she tried to be conciliatory. “Don’t you realize, Felis, that the girl is teasing you? The young man is good and honest. He comes here because Concezione sews his shirts, like she does for other clients, natives and strangers. But there isn’t anything else, nor can there be. Tell me, rather, where you have been all this time. And now I’ll give you something to drink, too. It’s good wine; I bought it to strengthen Concezione, but she doesn’t want it. You drink it, to her health.”

She brought him a glass of wine, and he seemed persuaded.

Concezione also calmed down. After all, what did it matter if Aroldo had gone away, maybe never to return? Now everything was finished, with him and with the rest of the world. "You are alone with your destiny, Maria Concezione. Your hand has only to brush your breast to remember that your fate is settled. Even the old man's words can only seem empty, like the sound of the wind in the valley." And so she smiled again, but with a vague and resigned smile, when the old man, finishing his drink, announced the purpose of his visit. Now that Aroldo was gone, from fear that he may have stayed outside to listen, the old man lowered his voice and took on a more natural tone.

"Most of all, it's about this: Marcello the blacksmith wants to sell the land that Antonio Giuseppe sold him before his death. Marcello needs money because his grandsons are studying to be doctors, and also because he wants to add on to his house. Well then, that's his business. Our business is the fact that he wants to sell the land at an excellent price; and, since the deed of purchase from Antonio Giuseppe says that in case of resale, he or his heirs have the right of refusal, I have come to ask you what your intentions are."

Mother and daughter looked at each other, but Concezione seemed to have neither the strength nor the will to reply.

"Our situation hasn't changed since the death of my husband. We are still women alone, Felis, and we don't intend to take on any headaches."

"But your situation could change, even soon. You thought I was joking to propose one of my grandsons for your daughter. But they are not boys anymore, not like this perfect woman here says. They are over twenty-three years old, and they are strong and good at everything. Pietro now works on his own: he has fifty cows, and he manages them like fifty treasures. Paolo is with me; he works day and night without tiring. They are both good, without vices, healthy and brave. And I want Maria Concezione for one of them."



“I want! We need to see if she wants!” said the mother, not knowing whether to be cheered or not.

“One or the other. Choose.”

“Right. Like choosing the ripest fruit. But do you know you’re rushing things, my brother? We don’t even know the two boys very well.”

“I repeat: they are two giants, handsome and robust. We are all good folk. You know our life down to the roots; we even have a priest in the family. What family is more honorable and hard working? Even my daughter, the mother of the two lads, works like a slave. She’s always baking bread, washing clothes, cooking, sewing, and taking care of the house. Serafino, our priest, wants her to get a maid to help out, but she doesn’t want any strange women in the house. Only Maria Concezione could please her.”

A bit ironic, but also flattered, the mother turned again to Concezione.

“Well then, what do you say? It’s up to you to reply.”

“As far as the land is concerned, you’ve given the right answer; we don’t need to discuss it any more. Tell Marcello the blacksmith who is looking for another buyer that we won’t raise any opposition. As for the rest, it’s all a joke; and I don’t want to joke, especially now.”

“You are pale, daughter,” said the mother. “Go to bed; you’ve been worn out enough today, and this was not the doctor’s advice. Go: I’ll keep our old Felis company.”

But he didn’t want to go away with a fistful of wind.

“Maria Concezione, think it over. You don’t even know my boys. Very well, tomorrow is Sunday; I’ll make them go to mass in your church, then afterwards I’ll bring them over here.”

“Go ahead, bring them, like two little dogs,” she said, getting up, “I’ll be glad to meet them. But then leave me alone.”

“Two little dogs? They are two lions; two blooming oaks; and you would be well advised to respect them.”

“I respect everyone, but I want to be left in peace. Good night.”