

The Barber

Veruska De Vita

For Gaetano and Lorenza

And then dawn: the petals close
a little crumpled. Something soft
and secret is brooding in an urn,
some new happiness I can't understand yet.

- Giovanni Pascoli
Night Blooming Jasmine

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Giuseppe Puglia

On the day of Giuseppe's birth La Vecchia arrived at exactly midday. It was the 15th of September 1921 and she had predicted his birth to the minute. She was the kind of woman who had always looked old. Her silver hair was scraped into a chignon - people said that when she unwound it her hair reached the small of her back. She walked with economy, choosing her steps with prudence, careful not to crush a snail. She never married, but there were rumours that she bore a child once, stillborn. The people of Santa Ninfa knew that rumours were often extensions of the truth and La Vecchia's knowledge of childbirth had an instinctive quality that could only be understood through experience. She had a knack for knowing the exact time, to the minute, that a child would push its head into the world. Giuseppe Puglia was born at twenty minutes past twelve, on a sunny day in Santa Ninfa, a town in the west of Sicily.

La Vecchia wore black, not in mourning but for hygiene, as the fluids expelled in birth were easily spotted against a dark colour. Her uniform was always clean, starched and pressed, unless there happened to be two or three births in succession, as sometimes happened when the moon was full and gravity yanked at new life. On these days she would throw a wide apron over her uniform as she ran to the next house. She was fit and strong. Her calves were lean and her arms toned from supporting the labouring weight of mothers to be. New mothers often asked her how she kept the shape of her body. "Eat little and often and exercise a little every day," she would reply.

As an infant, Giuseppe played in the company of old men. He was passed from grandfather to great grandfather – from one set of weathered hands to another. He called them both by one name: Nonno. The old men squabbled over who should cradle him. And when the older Nonno could no longer carry the boy's weight, Giuseppe climbed onto the knee of young Nonno, who would lift him up and neigh like a horse. When Giuseppe's great grandfather passed away, on a chair in the kitchen, dressed in his breeches, shirt and hat, it was the other old man who, almost single-handedly, would take care of him until he was sixteen.

It was not that his mother, Nina, didn't love him. She was in her forties when she gave birth to him and although she was a large woman with piercing eyes and charm that fell from her lips with grace, her health lacked the robust nature of her character and as such she was drawn more to her bed than to the childish whimsy of her son.

Years later, when she would present herself to Eva's parents to ask for their daughter's hand in marriage on behalf of her son, she would put her hands to her heart and say "you give me your rose but I give you my only child".

Giuseppe loved Nonno more than his own father. He regarded his father as the one-armed man who visited with gifts and lifted Nina's face into a smile. When Papa returned from his trips, it was as though Mamma had a light inside of her. She walked with a lightness unburdened by the weight trapped on her body.

Nonno showed Giuseppe how to play games with sand and stones and how to trap birds with the leaf of a cactus. "Look here," Nonno would say taking a knife from his bag.

The blade was wedged into the handle with a piece of wood and held in place with a layer of wound string. "You cut the leaf, careful not to touch the thorns, and then you cut a half circle halfway between the edge and the middle of the leaf," Nonno explained as he cut.

The yellow cactus juice would spill over his hands but he didn't seem to mind, wiping it off on his trousers. He would walk around his plot of country land as though searching for the perfect spot and then stop in the shade of the apricot trees where, with a spoon, he would dig a shallow hole as wide as a man's hand. Inside he would put a caterpillar - soft and already dead - as bait for the birds. He would place the prickly pear leaf over the hole, lifting the flap and holding it up with a twig. Then he would take Giuseppe by the hand and the two of them would walk back to the house and step into the footprints they had already laid. Giuseppe liked the symmetry - the footprints going forwards and backwards at the same time.

The two of them, one barely six standing on a chair and the other in his sixties, would watch from the window. They would watch as a small bird hopped into the trap and the succulent leaf fell to close it in.

Giuseppe's father, Antonio, was a merchant and seafarer who supplied shoes and clothes to the Austrian General in Palermo. The uniforms were for the men who were posted in Sicily during World War One and never left. Sometimes he presented the general with a bottle of whisky, a rarity from Scotland. "Warms the tongue and numbs the soul," the General would say with an accent that clipped his Italian so that it stumbled over Antonio's ears before it liquefied into meaning.

Antonio owned land in the valley outside Santa Ninfa and in the nearby town of Gibellina. He had four hundred olive trees that yielded fruit for a thousand litres of oil. He had boats in the harbour and sailed them to Naples loaded with olives and olive oil, after the September harvest. He had one hundred and fifty rows of vines, the grapes of which he took to Marsala to sell to makers of sweet wine - Ingham Whitaker & Co, owned by an Englishman but run by Sicilians, and Cantine Florio, which was down the same road.

When the plants settled into the rhythm of winter, Antonio worked at the mill. He had first seen Nina while carting bales of durum wheat. From the seat of his horse-drawn cart, he saw her on a balcony. In her hand a bunch of lavender. She rubbed the flowers between her fingers to release their fragrance. Nina wasn't young, perhaps in her late thirties, and through subtle questioning while chatting to the mill owner Antonio discovered that she was a spinster. This was not common for a woman like her. Her role was not one of taking care of a brother or ailing parents, she was not ill or demented and her humour revealed the sharp remarks of a good education. Her family had the wealth and upbringing of the middle class. They took part in the carriage parades of noblemen and frequented their well-decorated homes. Nina's settled demeanour made up for the unruliness of her younger brother, Amilcare, who had run off to America with a peasant girl. In Santa Ninfa they would have been outcasts, even if they had moved to the next town they would carry their mixed class adjectives with them, so they moved to new land. In New York, they lived as they wanted, taking advantage of the family wealth.

Amilcare wasn't built for hard work but had a knack for trading stocks. Amongst the nouveau riche of New York, where culture and geographical roots were held in less regard than money, his good looks and charm added to his popularity. Business came easy to him.

Nina would have followed the same road had she not been female. She too was in love with a peasant and in quiet moments, when the murmur of leaves caught on the wind, she would think of him and consider what her fate would have been had she married him. While the town was in post-lunch slumber, she stepped onto her balcony and let the sun warm her face. The view stretched over the valley, with its olives and vines, and the blue merging of sky and sea.

It was on this sleepless afternoon, standing on the balcony, that she noticed Antonio. He was strong and well proportioned. He caught the scent of lavender and looked up. He smiled at her as she turned her eyes to a geranium flower and pretended to admire its colour. He waved at her. And so it went every afternoon after that. He waved and she waved back, justifying it as an act of courtesy.

She watched him from her window, ensuring that her face was in shadows, as he carried bundles of wheat into the mill. She could see the flow of muscles under his skin, the tension in his neck. After months of stolen glances, good morning waves and acknowledging smiles, Nina clutched a few lavender flowers for courage and made her way to the mill. The men stared. For a decade she had been watching the world from her balcony and it was time to step into the world.

Antonio Puglia had one arm. As a teenager an infection had turned gangrenous and most of his arm had to be removed. He had been occupied by thoughts of Loredana Jolie, a topless model who was printed on posters all over Italy and France. All he could think of was the image on the poster, which had been folded so many times that it was falling apart. As he pruned an almond tree, he cut his finger on the blade which was scoured with rust. He didn't think that the wound was big enough to be stitched up by the doctor.

He picked at his wound. The red throbbing rose towards his wrist. He thought it was a punishment for too much masturbation. One of the boys at school, the one whose mother kept his fringe off his eyes with a clip, had told him that too much playing would cause his hand to fall off. Fear gripped him, his kidneys hurt and the burn turned his stomach when he passed urine. He tried to bury it. He lay on the ground with his underwear pulled down around his knees as sand rubbed between the folds of skin. He was ashamed.

The infection trailed to the rest of his hand; his knuckles swelled and he could no longer bend his fingers. He was careful to hide this from his father and grandfather, but his grandfather noticed.

"Take that hand out your pocket," he said cornering the boy. He gasped when he saw Antonio's swollen fingers. He grabbed Antonio's other hand and took him to Doctor Ferrante.

The Doctor lived upstairs from his surgery. His home was modest with only the necessary furnishings. His wife lived in the shadows of the house. She was an outline and Antonio had the desire to fill her in with colour. She distracted him. Doctor Ferrante opened up his surgery, pegged his stethoscope to his neck and indicated to Antonio to sit on the bed. With his good arm, he held onto his grandfather who helped him onto the bed. In the stillness of the surgery, he tried to hush his breathing. The Doctor checked his hand, prodded his abdomen and felt his neck and chin. Then he led grandfather outside and closed the door.

Antonio watched through the lace curtains. He thought of Loredana Jolie then swatted the thought away with a flap of his healthy hand. He watched as the doctor spoke and his grandfather bent his head.

He didn't remember much after that. He awoke to the muffled barking of dogs. He couldn't move his arm. He looked down and saw that it was missing. He felt a hand stroke his forehead. "You're alive," said grandfather, his voice chopped up by a spoon rattling in a tin.

"My arm," Antonio said.

The rattling stopped. "My arm, where is it?" he asked.

"I buried it," said grandfather.

"Come let's go home, your father is waiting for you," he continued.

Antonio felt tears. They warmed his skin. He looked at his grandfather; his face had grown lines.

Antonino looked at his grandfather, his face seemed more lined. The doctor, who had been standing nearby, excused himself and left with a swish of his coat. The old man took the boy in his arms and held him for a long time. He wanted to take Antonio home where he could feed him and put him to bed. The boy had been in the surgery for five days. He helped him off the bed, let him lean against him and slowly they walked home where they would wait for Antonio's father to come back from Palermo.

Nina and Antonio were married soon after her visit to the mill. She walked down the aisle pregnant and seven months later she gave birth to a son. "*E natu un settinu*," people would say, pretending the child had been born prematurely. They named him Giuseppe, going against the tradition of naming the first born son after the husband's father.

They lived in a two storey house overlooking Piazza Liberta. Nina moved through it in a haze of lavender. Every morning she picked a stem, rubbed it and smeared the essence across her décolletage.

Eagle Boy

Giuseppe sat up in bed and watched the flicker of the candle. The next day he was meeting his friends at the entrance of Santa Ninfa, at the remnant of an ancient wall which the townsfolk called *la Medusa*. He had told Nonno about his plan. An eagle had laid her eggs on a ledge on Mount Finistrelle just above the graves. He and his friends, Rana and Marcello, had watched the eagle. Giuseppe had noticed her beak and sharp talons that could easily rip his eyes out. He wondered what it would be like to have glass eyes that could not see.

Nonno had told him about the graves. He had called them palaeolithic. He had taken Giuseppe there when he was four. He had knelt down to the height of the boy and extended his arm up to point to the holes in the rock face. There were fifteen of them in a row near the top of the ridge. Nonno told him that they were inhabited by vagrants and hermits, depending on the season. Monks who had travelled from Turkey would climb into a grave, bringing with them water and a bit of food. They would stay there for many days far away from other humans. "So that they can hear God," Nonno had explained.

The graves were old and people had long since taken the bones for good luck. Now an eagle waited for her eggs to hatch.

"Nonno, tomorrow I'm going to get that egg," said Giuseppe. Nonno kissed him on the head, goodnight.

"Be careful, that bird can tear you apart," said Nonno.

"Si Nonno, I know," said Giuseppe.

"*Buona notte*. Sleep. You'll need all your strength tomorrow," said the old man as he licked his fingers and put out the candle.

That night, Giuseppe slept fitfully as he dreamt of birds that morphed into cats with beaks and talons. Before the sun was up he fell through the membrane of sleep. The sound of Nonno's footsteps reached him across the floorboards.

Giuseppe got out of bed and walked towards Nonno, who was standing at the bedroom door. Nonno pushed a hand through Giuseppe's blond hair. "You grew in your sleep. You're taller today, a young Garibaldi."

They went downstairs where Nonno poured wine into a saucepan, stoked the coals in the stove and turned the lever to direct heat to the stove plate. Ever since Giuseppe was four years old, he and Nonno had mulled wine and bread for breakfast. His mother didn't approve but Nonno would make light of the situation: "Don't worry, it's good for the boy. I'll give him ash afterwards to clean his teeth."

At the table, Giuseppe dunked stale bread into his wine and pressed it down with his spoon. He had watched Nonno do it a thousand times. They ate noisily, without speaking. After breakfast, Giuseppe got up from the table, walked up the stairs, washed and got dressed. He had started packing his rucksack three nights before. He had been watching the eagle for weeks, comparing her to the canaries he reared at home. When he described her to Nonno - the colours of her feathers, the

shape of her head - and as he stretched his arms to give an indication of wingspan, Nonno told him that she was a Bonelli eagle. "She lays two eggs – one will hatch and survive, the other won't," he had explained.

Giuseppe had outlined his plan and Nonno gave him a box stuffed with unbleached wool. "You'll keep the egg in here, it'll generate heat," he had said.

Giuseppe had hugged him. Nonno smelt of wool and onions - the smell of safety. He had packed the box in his rucksack together with a pocketknife, a flask of almond milk and a few slices of prosciutto squashed between two pieces of hard bread.

* * *

He flung his rucksack over his shoulder, grabbed a piece of bread which he had left next to his bowl now empty of mulled wine, stuffed it into his pocket and walked to *la medusa* to meet Rana and Marcello. The remnant of wall was named after what was carved into it - the profile of a woman with hair coiled above her like snakes. Nonno told him that a talented Phoenician had carved it over two thousand years ago.

Giuseppe arrived first. Fear made him hungry so he took the bread from his pocket and tore a piece off. He patted his rucksack, feeling the corner of the box and next to it the knife. Rana would bring the rope, Marcello the blanket. For a moment he wished he was at school, at his desk listening to Signore Punta talking about Galileo Galilei. He pictured him, spit flying from lips as he lectured them about planets and suns. Rana slapped Giuseppe on the back of the neck. "Hey shitface, you ever look in the mirror and notice that your face looks like the back of an ass?"

Giuseppe slapped him back. "Come on *picciotti*," said Marcello, his bourgeois features refined compared to Rana's heavy chin and round nose.

They walked as Rana pushed Giuseppe by the shoulder to tip him off balance. Soon they were in the countryside with Santa Ninfa behind them. The autumn sun was warm and the day clean with morning. At the foot of the ridge, where for days Giuseppe had been watching the eagle and her eggs, the three friends sat down. They bent their necks right back to see the nest, above the graves, protected by the roots of a tree.

At the highest point of the ridge was a bell, which was tolled by an altar boy to mark a death in Santa Ninfa or in one of the surrounding towns. Not the death of the old, but a tragic death, of a child or a young person. During winter children played games there. There was a story that the ghost of a washerwoman could be invoked when her name was said three times. She would appear at midnight and the only way for her to disappear was for someone to ring the bell. The previous winter, Andrea *lu zoppu* - a cautious boy with a limp - had climbed up with the others. They pushed him towards the bell, his cardigan catching on the wooden frame. He thought it was the washerwoman's nails and as fear seared through him, he tolled the bell and then ran as fast as his limp would allow. The sound left a permanent ringing in his left ear.

"So you're doing the climbing," said Rana as he held a finger to one nostril and blew hard. Mucous sprayed onto an oleander bush.

“Si, I need you to stand ground and keep watch,” said Giuseppe as he shaded his eyes and looked up.

“And if you fall?” asked Marcello.

Giuseppe took the blanket and spread it on the ground. “That’s what this is for. Perfect fit,” he said as he lay on it.

“If things go bad, you call Nonno. Understand?” asked Giuseppe.

“Peppe, you sure about this?” Marcello placed a hand on Giuseppe’s shoulder.

Giuseppe looked down at his friend. Nonno was right, he had grown in his sleep. “Of course he’s sure,” said Rana as something crunched under his shoe.

Giuseppe bent down to inspect the crushed snail. The slug’s head was moving, eyes erect. He could see its insides. He picked a piece of shell off the snail’s back, underneath was a lattice of blue and yellow veins. He held the piece to Rana’s face, so close that he could feel the breath from his nostrils. “Why did you do that?”

“To see if it’ll live. Stupid creature... carrying its house on its back.” Rana pushed down on the snail with the front of his shoe.

“Stop that!” said Giuseppe as he shoved Rana to the ground.

Rana kicked with both legs, hitting Giuseppe in the shins. Giuseppe fell on top of him, grabbed his wrists and held his arms above his head. He ground his knees into Rana’s thighs. “Hey! Hey!” said Marcello as he separated the two.

Giuseppe got up and pulled Rana with him. He dusted his sleeves and pants. His mother had told him not to get his pants dirty, they were the only pair he had. He clutched a clump of hair on the top of his head then released it. He enjoyed the sensation of his hair falling back into place. He avoided Rana’s glare. “Give me the rope,” he said to Marcello.

Giuseppe secured his rucksack on his back then slipped the rope over his head and across his chest. He smacked his hands together and rubbed. He looked at both his friends and nodded. He stretched his arms up and felt the rock face, then pushed his fingers into gaps. Red sand came loose and fell onto him. He secured one foot on a ledge and began to pull himself up. “Always start with the right foot,” he said, remembering Nonno’s words.

As hands gripped long grass and fingers hooked into seams and cracks, Giuseppe climbed up the rock face. Close to the nest, he grabbed a root and lifted himself up to the nest. It was a lot bigger than it looked from down below and it smelt of grass warmed by the sun. Inside a chick huddled against a tumble of grass and feathers, mouth open, making no sound. It looked like it was sleeping – its eyelids a thin sheath over bulbous eyes. Its long neck bristled with feathers. Next to it was an unhatched egg. Giuseppe looked up and around to check the sky for its mother.

Satisfied that the air around him was clear, he made his way into the grave closest to the nest. It was the first time he had been in one of the ancient tombs. He sat down with legs straight in front of

him. The rock was cool. The tombs faced north and the sun travelled a southern path along the day. As his eyes adjusted to the shade, he noticed small ferns sprouting from the floor and walls.

It was quiet in the tomb, the sounds from the world had not entered the space and yet it was layered and thick, the sound of the sea from a shell. Giuseppe took the last piece of bread out of his pocket and ate it. He alternated his gaze between sky and nest. He contemplated the pattern of the weave, the way each stem and twig was wound in and around the one adjacent to it.

Something passed in front of the sun and cast a wide shadow. He looked up but the sun was in his eyes. Blinking hard he looked down; his friends were playing a game in the sand. In the distance he saw the rooftops of Santa Ninfa. The shadow fell again as the eagle circled above him.

He held his body still, feeling a twitch in the foot that had fallen asleep. The eagle flew past him, thrusting warm air onto his face, in her claws a limp mouse. She extended her legs and curved her wings to land on her nest. A low panic started rising in his gut. Slowly he moved further back into the tomb. He could hear her tearing at the meat, like stitches being pulled from leather. He looked out and watched as she pushed food from her beak into her chick's beak. The baby was clumsy and greedy.

He felt the panic rise again. He shook his legs to ease the pins and needles and then got onto his knees. The eagle had flown away from the nest and it was time for him to climb up again. With his rucksack on his back, he secured the rope on his shoulder and climbed to just above the nest. He unwound the rope and tied it to a tree trunk with a noose knot, tugging on it to make sure it was secure. The other end he tied around his waist. As he moved it chafed his skin. He knew it would leave a mark. Eager to get to the nest before the eagle returned, he moved down the rope, guiding himself with his toes. When his waist reached the level of the nest he stopped. The hatchling was bald and veiny like an old man.

He placed his hands on the unhatched egg, smooth and warm like baked sand. He took the box from his rucksack and opened it. The wool he rearranged so that it padded the sides, that way the egg would be safe. He slid his hand under the egg and felt its life. Carefully he placed it in the box. Without making a sound he closed it, secured the latch and put it in his rucksack. The eagle cried.

Giuseppe looked up. The sun caught his eyes and he squinted, unable to see the bird. Her smell was sharp and wild. On his neck, the warm gusts of air from her wings. Marbles, that's what they would give him for eyes. He squeezed his eyelids tight. His arms shook from fatigue. He swallowed, his throat dry with panic. He felt her weight on him. Claws in his shoulders. An arrow through his head. He let go and fell. Rope tightened around his ribs, pulling skin. His hands were on his head. His body swung and bashed against the rock face. The branch with the noose knot groaned. Loose sand and rocks fell to the ground. Pants rubbed against stone. "Mamma is going to kill me," he thought.

Fingers on wet hair. A hole. He pushed a finger into it, deep to the first knuckle. A warm wound. Adrenalin numbed the pain. The eagle swooped again and Giuseppe covered his head with his hands. He remembered Signor Punta's lesson on gravity and the magnetic pull of the earth and looked down. Rana and Marcello were waving their arms. "Peppe! Peppe! I'm going to get Nonno. Hang on," said Rana with his hands around his mouth.

Giuseppe felt his forehead grow warm. Something wet trickled down his cheek. He thought of the egg in his rucksack, the wings of the foetus wet and folded in the egg. He slid a little. The rope tugged at his shoulder blades. He forgot how to breathe. It was the same when he found out Papa was dead. "They found him lying on a sack of boots," Giuseppe had overheard Nonno tell Mamma.

"The doctor checked him but he was already gone. I'll go fetch him," Nonno had said.

It happened in Palermo after he met with the Austrian General. The man owed him money.

Giuseppe heard footsteps against sand, people running. He scrambled to find a foothold. "Peppe! Peppe!" he heard Nonno's voice.

"Let go. We'll catch you," said Nonno.

Giuseppe looked down. Four men held open the blanket. He could make out Nonno, Rana and Marcello, but didn't recognise the other one.

"I can't, the rope is stuck under my rucksack," said Giuseppe.

"Cut it! Cut it!" said Nonno.

Giuseppe took the knife from his rucksack and cut. The fibres snapped. Giuseppe closed his eyes and fell. He landed in the blanket as though falling into a cloud. His weight pulled the men in, towards each other, their breathing heavy.

"Peppe! Peppe!" Nonno had his hand on his face. Giuseppe saw that it was covered in blood.

"The egg," said Giuseppe.

Nonno lifted him and pulled the rucksack off his back. He opened the box a crack. "The egg is intact," he said.

He lifted the boy and, with the others, walked back to Santa Ninfa.

Ciccio Mistretta

A boy lay against the central cog of the windmill. His legs and free arm dangled in the air streamed white with a mixture of sun and flour. His mother had heard his screams and was now looking at him. She noticed his socks around his ankles. She wanted to pull them up. The thought led to another one, one that surrounded the arm stuck in the cog. His hand, wrist and part of his forearm had been swallowed by the cog. Her next thought: it's still attached to his body. And the next: how comical it would be if her son was playing a joke on them? She could hear the blood coursing in her ears and as one thought hinged to the other she knew he wasn't playing. The flour stuck to his tears.

Word slipped over the streets like oil and the people of Santa Ninfa gathered outside the mill. The strongest of the men went inside to help. Minutes passed. All of them together couldn't shift the cogs. They sent one of the women to call the surgeon. "Tell him to bring his tools," a man said.

The doctor arrived flustered. He had been attending to a girl thinned by typhoid fever. "The boy is in shock," he said as he moved efficiently.

The air went sour with chloroform. Without formality, the doctor cut the boy's arm off. The cog thrust into motion, eating the mangle of flesh and bone. Blood dripped to the floor.

That night an electric storm tinged the sky. The clouds were barren. No rain. Ciccio Mistretta slept in his bed with his mother next to him, his stump bandaged. It was 1915 and he was twelve years old. His father slept at the kitchen table, the crease in his sleeve branding a mark on his cheek.

The people of Santa Ninfa never forgot what happened that day. People from surrounding towns came to see Ciccio's family out of pity. "For such a thing to happen to a son...," they would say.

"His whole arm had to be removed, all the way to his shoulder". The phrase was repeated like a mantra.

The years that would tip him into adulthood were spent relearning simple things like tying shoe laces, writing, using a knife and scissors and getting dressed. On his eighteenth birthday, celebrated with candlelight, clapping and a slice of sponge cake topped with almonds and peaches, his parents nudged him onto a path that would make him attractive to the ladies. "You're at an age where you need to start looking after yourself. Start looking for a wife, have a family," said his mother, who knew that a man alone would suffer in old age.

On Via Sant' Anna, one of the main streets that led off the piazza and the *bel vedere*, they opened a haberdashery. The surrounding *palazzi* were inhabited with the *medio borghesi*, people like themselves. They wanted their son to marry in his ilk and if they couldn't lead him to the young ladies, they would bring them to him. His mother ensured that the haberdashery kept ladies' shoes, gloves and hats - like Jean Harlow and Greta Garbo wore in the movies. "Out of the five thousand people in this town, you'll find *'nna bedda fimmina*, otherwise we'll take you to Palermo," Ciccio's mother would say, hoping that a prayer to Sant' Antonio would keep her son away from Sicily's capital.

In the months between June and September, the Mistrettas took Ciccio and their two daughters, Ciccia and Petrina, to their summer house called Aquanova. It had a well and rich earth which yielded basil, tomatoes, figs, prickly pears, granadilla and two varieties of peaches – white peaches and flat peaches. The Mistrettas never wanted for food. They had survived the Great War and would survive the Second World War, even when other islanders suffered.

Ciccio had a prosthetic arm made with a detachable hand. Both were fashioned of wood – stiff, polished and quite presentable. He kept it in place with a thick elastic band. His wooden hand he kept tucked in his pocket. It was only after he presented a left hand for shaking that anyone would suspect anything. With his good hand he measured and cut fabric, counted money and packed shelves.

Once a week a lady would come to clean the haberdashery. She was neat and pretty. She spoke little and wove her body through the tables and boxes as though she were absent. His mother had found her for him, but he couldn't find her. When she stretched to dust the cornices, on tiptoes, her body long, he watched her, trying to love her, but the alchemy would not wake.

It was a spring day in 1923 that Gabriella Surdo walked into the shop and, while touching the heel of a shoe she was admiring, looked over at Ciccio as he pondered the display in the window. It was then that she decided that Ciccio would be her husband. Her mother had always told her that it was a woman who chose her mate.

They were married soon after and until the day she died she wore high heeled shoes. Lying on her bed, when the sickness of old age had crumpled her insides, she asked for her patent black stilettoes. She smelt the leather and held them to her chest to pass peacefully. Gabriella never told her age and it was only when her children received her death certificate that they learned that she was a year older than their father, a fact he never knew.

Ciccio and Gabriella spent their lives looking after their four children and throwing parties, both of which they enjoyed in abundance. February was carnival time and their home became an open house. "We can't have strangers walking in and out the house like this," he would say to Gabriella.

When she ignored him, smacking the cushion of a chair to muffle his words, he would ask: "Do you have a money tree I don't know about?"

"No, I have a husband with a shop," she would reply. During carnival they spoke to each other through insults.

On a late February morning in 1936 she prepared the house for a masked ball. The streets of Santa Ninfa were wet, the cobbles gleamed. The streets rose up from the piazza where a vapid sky gave way to the blue streak of the Mediterranean Sea. The air was pink, tinged by a sun that had been scrubbed new.

Gabriella moved the furniture into the bedrooms. She screeched across the tiles, leaving tracks. "Never mind, I'll clean it later," she thought to herself.

She wiped her hands on her apron. The soft parts of her palms were sore from the weight of the chairs. She moved to the kitchen where she mixed dough, kilos of it. She wrapped it in cotton towels

and put two kilos of dough into a bag. This she carried to the bakery where she had booked the oven for the afternoon. She had an oven at home but it was small, good enough for three loaves of bread or two pizzas.

“Signor Messina, a good day to you,” she said as she entered the bakery, which smelt like heaven kneaded into bread.

“Signora Mistretta, God bless you. Go round the back, the oven is ready,” said the baker, indicating with his floured hands.

She put the bag on the counter, untied the string and let the opening hang loose. She lifted out the balls of dough and placed them one next to the other. Folding the bag so that it fitted in her hand, she walked back home to fetch the other balls of dough.

She was sweating when she carried the last of the dough to the baker. Lining the baking trays on a table she got to work. She pinched a clump of dough from the main ball and rolled it in her palms to shape them into *muscardini*. She placed the raw biscuits onto baking trays in neat rows. When the baking trays were full she slid them into the oven. Her arms ached. She rubbed her fingers over the muscles of her forearms. “But who makes me do this?” she asked herself, knowing the answer.

“Signor Messina, will you watch my biscuits?” she asked.

“Signora, for a biscuit like you, anything,” replied the baker.

Gabriella walked back home. On the sides of the road, leaves mulched, rotting with the wetness of the air, turning into mud. It was muggy; she rolled up the sleeves of her cardigan to let the coolness lift the hairs on her arms. The violinist was waiting for her in front of the shop.

“*Buon giorno Signora,*” he said.

“*Salve Enrico, come in,*” she said as she unlocked the front door and led him up the stairs. She felt his eyes on her behind.

She took off her cardigan and flapped the front of her blouse to let the heat escape. “*Un caffè?*” she asked.

“*Si grazie,*” he said.

“So for tonight, where will you set up?” asked Gabriella as she lit the wick underneath the stoveplate.

She took a small saucepan of water and added two heaped spoons of ground coffee. As the water heated through she stirred.

“Over there, where the couch is supposed to be,” he said.

Gabriella’s face flushed right up to the hairline. Had she not swept yet? The outline of the couch was clear, as were the tracks she’d made when she pushed it. She stirred sugar into the coffee and set two cups and saucers on a tray, poured the coffee into the cups and placed the tray in front of the violinist. “Good, and what time will you get here?”

“Around eleven o’clock, so we can set up in time for midnight,” he said.

“One thing. We don’t have a mandolin player. Peppe, who usually plays mandolin and guitar, has other things to do. But don’t worry, we’ll play more waltzes,” he continued.

Gabriella knew Peppe. He was a lanky boy with fair eyes and blond hair. Nina’s son. “*Va bene*. You mother needs olive oil?” She asked.

“*No grazie*, my *compare* Nello has just pressed a batch for us,” Enrico replied.

“Would your mother like some biscuits?”

“*Si Signora*,” said Enrico.

Enrico drank his coffee in one go. “Ah,” he said.

“Wear masks. I’m not letting anyone in without a mask,” she said.

“*Si Signora*,” he said as he tilted his head to look at the posters in the corridor.

Posters of Giuseppe Verdi’s *Aida* playing at Teatro alla Scala in Milan, Giacomo Puccini’s *La Boheme* playing at Palermo’s Teatro Massimo, Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly* at Teatro la Fenice in Venice, Verdi’s *Barbiere di Sevilla* at Teatro San Carlo in Naples, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* playing at Teatro Regio di Parma and Ruggero Leoncavallo’s *Pagliacci* at the Arena di Verona.

A cotton rug ran along the floor, covering the tiles. It was made by the women of Sciacca. In high summer when the hot dry wind swept in from Africa, their bodies and minds would be taken over by a fever. They would miss sleep for days and nights to weave carpets using fabric offcuts they had saved. By the end of the fever they had woven runners, mats and carpets - their fingertips blistered and their cuticles ragged. Serenity would envelop them, endowing them with an esoteric coolness.

“Me and my girls, we like opera, we know the music by heart. One day I’ll take them to the opera in Palermo,” said Gabriella.

“One day I’ll go to Palermo and play in the orchestra,” said Enrico as his hair fell in front of his eyes.

“The girls will be home soon. Stay,” she said.

“*No grazie Signora*. I must go help my father, the doorframe needs repairing and at his age, with his eyesight...” He clapped his hands together and held them up as if in prayer.

“*Bene*, we’ll see each other later,” she said.

The biscuits came out of the oven hard, sweet and hollow. While they were still raw she had pinched their tops so that they pointed upwards, “like a lock of baby’s hair,” she smiled to herself. She had made an extra five trays as she was expecting more people than usual that night. A smile lifted her face as she pictured them in their arlerchino masks, playing up to character. She had wanted to don a mask herself but felt self-conscious and old. This came as a surprise to her. “But what am I, old?” she wondered, placing a hand on her hair which had become coarse as time leached it of colour.

She wore it in a bun - a ball of wool at the back of her head. A few times a day she would take out a small mirror from her handbag and slide red lipstick over her lips. Her nails she painted the colour of antique rose as was the fashion in the 1920s. She wore it into the next two decades. It was her favourite colour. "Life without bread will do, life without lipstick will not," her mother would say.

Her husband's handicap never bothered her, for he was complete. They never spoke about his wooden arm or the accident. She knew what had happened, so what was there to talk about? Their house in Santa Ninfa was in the road of Sant' Anna, near the church of the same name. They lived upstairs on the first floor of a neo-classical building; the haberdashery shop was on street level. Ciccio didn't own the property but rented it from a baron who preferred to live in Catania, a city on the opposite side of the island. Santa Ninfa, referred to by the locals as a mountain town, was built around a town square, with a main road off three sides. The fourth side overlooked a valley where rows of olive trees followed the contours of the landscape. Every evening, even in winter when breath puffed like candyfloss, the townspeople would go for a stroll to the piazza and back.

Gabriella and her daughters Eva, Valentina and Pina enjoyed standing on the balcony of her bedroom. When the day was dry and the air clear, the Mediterranean Sea would reveal itself as a thin blue line. It was on the balcony that Eva once asked her mother how she would know who she would marry. "In your mind ask the question, then walk amongst the crowd in the piazza, someone will speak the answer," Gabriella had replied.

Adding the final touches to her house, Gabriella draped lengths of pink and orange lace across the windows and above the door. On the stairs she hung bunting and lanterns in thin paper which her husband had imported from China. She touched the thin paper which would transform the simple candlelight at its base. She imagined the festivities. At around ten o'clock the first of the mascherati would arrive. She would open the door for anyone except those not in masks. They would dance until their feet were numb and eat muscardini dipped in wine. Groups of people, some newly formed, would leave in trickles. The older frolickers would stay behind and help Gabriella tidy up and clean, lifting their masks off their faces to reveal themselves. The next morning Gabriella would help her husband and then walk to Aquanova, their house in the valley some four kilometres away, and fall asleep under a peach tree.

It was at Gabriella's party that Giuseppe, the only son of Antonino and Nina Puglia, first laid eyes on Eva, Gabriella's first born.

On the first night of carnival, while her mother draped yellow and pink lace across the walls, tied bunting to the balustrade and hung paper lanterns from the ceiling, Eva walked arm in arm *in piazza* with her sister Valentina. She did not want to hear her father cursing the saints and her mother cursing the woman who had made tall sons - height was the only attribute her mother envied. The saints her mother never picked on, she was fond of Sant' Antonio and Santa Teresa who helped her find the things she had misplaced. On her bedside table she had their images in frames and lit candles for them on their saint day. The picture of Santa Ninfa, the virgin martyr from Palermo, she kept in the top drawer and only took her out on the tenth of November to celebrate the day of her sainthood.

In the piazza Valentina spoke, trying out a thread of gossip she had picked up from one of her classmates. Barely ten years old, she embellished stories and invented outcomes. Eva was not

listening, her thoughts were on what her mother had said: "In your mind ask the question, then walk amongst the crowd in the piazza, someone will speak the answer."

Aware of her breathing as she squinted to watch the cloud of vapour form under her nose, she asked her question. Their aunts, Ciccina and Petrina, who were walking towards them, stopped to greet a group of friends. Ciccina and Petrina never married. They owned the pharmacy on the corner of Via Garibaldi and Via del Purgatorio, overlooking the piazza. They were both in coats that brushed their legs mid-calf. That evening they weren't wearing hats. Eva knew that it was to show off their hairstyles. Their hair had been coiffed into sleek bobs, turned under at the nape and slightly out at the ears. Her aunts enjoyed trying the most fashionable styles. They would lock the front door of the house, above the pharmacy, and in silk gowns with a dragon embroidered down the back, they would begin the process of setting their hair. Eva and her sisters were allowed to watch. They would pull a brush through each other's course hair to wind it around curlers. Pina was born with light hair and Eva remembered her aunts convincing her mother to put peroxide in her hair.

Eva and Valentina exchanged greetings with Ciccina and Petrina and joined the group. The answer to Eva's question was uttered by one of the ladies. Ciccina turned to Eva and pointed a shoe in her direction - it was a black lace up with a thin heel, "Do you like them? And my dress? It's a new colour by Elsa Schiaparelli, hyacinth blue."

Eva touched the wool crepe. "It's beautiful Zia."

Petrina wore a black dress under her coat with square toed shoes with a wedge heel. Eva admired their taste for high fashion.

The sun had set and a pink hue polished the last atoms of light. The street lamps flickered on and people clapped like they did every night when the lights came on. There was something magical about electricity. It lit up the air in false moonlight.

Carnival

For the first night of carnival Giuseppe dressed in a suit his father had bought but had never worn. He added black kohl to his thin moustache to make himself look older than his fifteen years. Marcello had brought him a mask from Venice - papier-mâché, smooth, enamelled in white and decorated with red silk ribbons. It had an air of Don Juan about it. That night he wasn't going to pick up his mandolin, as he had arranged with Enrico, but dance with all the ladies from the youngest to the oldest. His friend Ranieri was coming with him (everyone called him Rana because he looked like a frog). Rana could not dance - he was clumsy in movement and clambered about like an untrained marching band. Giuseppe decided to dress him up as a woman so that when they danced together he could lead. He saw the humour in it and so did Rana. They borrowed a brassiere, a corset and a red dress to match the ribbons on Giuseppe's mask. They stuffed the brassiere with rags, covered his face with foundation, patted on powder, applied lipstick and rouge and, with the help of Rana's sister, glued on false eyelashes. Rana's intention was to flutter them like butterflies but they looked more like caterpillars.

Already in character he pointed his toe and slipped it into a black stocking, pulling it delicately up his thigh to secure it on the garter belt. He did the same with the other leg, flapping his eyelids and pursing his lips, and put on his sister's high-heeled shoes. They were the same shoe size, a 39, but Rana's feet were wider and he had to push the baby toe over the other toe as he squeezed into the shoe. With his thick chest and short neck he still looked masculine, but in the light of carnival he could get away with being a stocky woman. The corset lay open on the bed untied and unused.

They went from house to house drunk with laughter as Rana played the part of the delicate woman. It was past midnight when they arrived at the Mistretta household. Ciccio opened the door and looked at the pair. "*Trasiti, trasiti. Where's my wife? She'll love your outfit,*" he said as he eyed Rana from leg to eyebrow.

In the centre of the lounge was an open space where people waltzed to Enrico's tune. Gabriella was lighting lanterns. Giuseppe noticed that she had a full house - strangers from a travelling theatre group mixing with the locals.

Eva watched from behind a lace curtain. She sat in the storeroom. She was 11 years old, her black hair tied in pigtails, red ribbons around each. They were satin and stood out against her dark hair. With one foot tucked beneath her thigh, she sat on a barrel. Underneath the lid were green olives in the middle of the pickling process. She was swinging her leg as she watched the dancers. Giuseppe spun his friend and treated him like a lady in an exaggerated manner. He dipped him, swung him around, sometimes quickly, so that they looked like characters from the movies. Amongst the swirling footwork he caught a glimpse of Eva in profile. Through the lace curtain he could make out the shape of her brow, her nose, her lips and her chin. She was beautiful, still a child, but her features hinted at the woman she would become. On top of the barrel, surrounded by chairs stacked upon tables, she sat detached from the festivities. It was then that he fell in love with her.

On Monday morning Peppe woke up at his usual time seven o' clock. He rattled a box of matches, slid it open, struck a match and held it to the wick of the lantern on his bedside table. The flame

shone bright and then settled into a white glow. His room felt different. Dust particles glittered and for the first time he noticed the wood of his cupboard - the grain that ran through it, the tones of yellow and copper, the doors curved like a full stomach. He thought of Eva and traced her profile with his finger. There was something he had forgotten. "The canaries," he said out loud.

He went into Nonno's room careful not to disturb the creaks in the floor. He lifted the gown off the hook and wrapped it around himself, tying the belt in a double knot. He walked outside. The air slapped his skin. He rolled his tongue over his dry lips and felt cracks forming. The canaries slept outside in the courtyard, in cages. He had covered them with woollen blankets, afraid that they might die of cold.

He uncovered the cages. As soon as the light caught them the birds became animated - the sun lit them into life. He listened for the twang of wood against chicken wire as they hopped from one twig to another. When his father died, Nonno had bought two canaries from Gaspere, the church cleaner. He gave them to Giuseppe hoping to distract him from grief. Birds became a fascination, the eagle on Mount Finistrelle an obsession. The eagle's egg had hatched two days after he took it from the nest. It was four months old and slept in the same box it had lived in as an egg. Giuseppe fed it mice, dead ones, and pieces of raw chicken. More than once he had caught the eagle eyeing the little birds and he knew that in order to steer it away from its natural instinct, he had to deprive it of the pleasure of being hungry. When his eyes were too tired to watch the birds, he would lie on the concrete and listen to their movements. Sometimes his fingers would find the scar at the top of his head, where the eagle had pecked him.

He rattled the box of matches, pulled one out and slid it in the opening of the closed box so that it emitted a squeaking sound. The birds liked it. He inspected each bird and let his eyes feast on the light falling off their feathers. He looked at the canary he had named *u parrinu* – the priest, for the round black patch on its head. The head was perfect, beak unchipped, wings smooth, legs and claws healthy. Around one ankle was an identification bracelet, more decorative than practical. With the same patience, he inspected the other birds.

His father had died of a broken heart, his mother told him. "Trust lies in the heart and when that tie is broken, the heart remains burdened with sadness and slowly it breaks," she had said.

His father had signed surety for a number of friends, against his land and his boats. Archiraf, the Austrian General, had failed to pay him for months, stating that funds had not yet arrived from his motherland. The money that his father had accumulated now lay in the hands of others.

He opened the cage and unhooked the water and food bowls. The newspaper covered in droppings and seeds he crumpled and threw as far as he could. It bounced off the wall and fell to the ground. Headlines hid stories in the folds. In the kitchen he washed the bowls and wiped them dry. He listened for Nonno still tucked within the silence of sleep.

He replenished the bowls and, with a newspaper under his arm, carried them outside. After taking care of the birds he went inside to wash himself.

With Brylcream on fingers, he looked at himself in the mirror. He slicked his hair back and raked it with a comb. In his bedroom he made the bed then laid out his clothes – a fresh vest and shirt, pants that were slightly too short, clean socks and a scarf. Nonno's gown he placed on the hook. He stopped to look at the old man still asleep, his side lifted with the movement of breathing. Downstairs in the kitchen he tied his books together, put on coat and hat and walked to school.

He arrived early to tend the school gardens. His teacher was already there, looking into the branches of the apricot tree. Giuseppe took off his hat. "*Buon Giorno Signor Punta*".

"And what are your plans today, Mastro Puglia?" the teacher asked.

Smoke cigarettes, get laid, laze around. Instead he said, "I have some radicchio seeds I'd like to sow."

"And will they grow?" asked Signor Punta.

Not today Punta, Giuseppe thought. *Does my dick grow?* "Yes it's a winter plant and the moon is right, it's about to wane".

It was three years that he had been working on the gardens of the Boys Lyceum. He added seasonal flowers to the beds, pruned the trees and rotated the crop in the vegetable patch. In summer it was a variety of tomatoes that shared space with artichokes and brinjals; in winter it was rocket and spinach.

"Have you done your essay?" asked Signor Punta.

Is your wife a mattress? "Si signore," answered Giuseppe.

He was proud of his essay. He wondered if Signor Punta would recognise himself when he read it. It described a man who took a young boy by the ear and taught him good behaviour. The boy had no father and no interest in nature, work or school. He lacked the routine of hygiene. The desire for food eluded him. Inside he was rotting. The man promised to teach the boy how to graft an apricot shoot onto a peach tree, if the boy took pride in himself and his schoolwork. The boy kept his promise and now waited for the man to show him nature's alchemy. The essay ended with something that Signor Punta had said: "Whatever you do, do it with great intent and the world will give you right of way".

The day that Signor Punta had taken him by the ear, he had beaten him with a stick. Giuseppe had watched the bruises change from black to green to yellow. He had never misbehaved in class since. He did his assignments and gave careful attention to spelling and grammar. His assignments were in proper Italian, like Mussolini wanted, not in the Sicilian dialect that *Il Duce* waved aside as peasant speak.

School started at nine o' clock so he had time to find out what Marcello had been up to on Sunday. Marcello was part of the bourgeois crowd but preferred the company of the working class. Hanging onto his mother's skirt he had begged her to send him to the Boys Lyceum in town, not to a private school in Milan. "Ciao Marce'," Giuseppe put his arm around his friend.

"Peppe, I heard you danced with a very pretty girl on Saturday. Heard she was a bit on the big side," said Marcello.

“Ha! Rana was spectacular. I twirled him around like a real girl!” said Giuseppe.

“Look who’s here,” Marcello pointed.

“Rana, Ranie’! Did you get some zighi zighi this weekend, eh?” Giuseppe shouted.

“The clever one! What do you think? Had my hand all the way up her skirt. Rubbed her crack,” Rana said as he walked towards them.

“Your own crack maybe,” Giuseppe said.

Rana slapped the back of Giuseppe’s head. “How about you, get any pussy?”

“Well...” said Giuseppe.

“I’ve seen loads of pussy,” said Rana breathless.

Giuseppe held Rana’s chin. “Marce’ look - the face of a liar”.

“You calling me a faggot?” Rana asked.

“I heard him say Liar, there’s a difference,” said Marcello.

The school bell rang and silence fell on them with the truth. They were all virgins.

In class Giuseppe sat up front. Signor Punta had moved him there, so that he could catch the whiff of misbehaviour brewing. Rana and Marcello sat further back next to each other, a narrow aisle separating their desks. Marcello was a good student. He had been reading since the age of four, pulling out books from his parent’s library.

He lived in the tallest palazzo in town. It had flour floors and every ceiling was frescoed with scenes from the Old Testament. Velvet curtains hid windows. It smelt of rich people. Marcello’s bedroom was vast, three times the size of the classroom. Marcello’s mother called it his “sleeping quarters” and spoke to Giuseppe in the polite tense reserved for strangers. Her breath smelt of mint and vomit and her thin presence loomed over him. The servants, crisp in uniform, seemed to avoid her, preferring to move in the shadows.

Giuseppe pulled his essay from between the pages of his textbook – his way of keeping the page clean and the corners straight. Signore Punta hated dog-eared corners. The teacher lifted it from his desk and began to read it out aloud, then stopped to look at Giuseppe. He smiled without parting his lips and nodded.

At midday school closed for three hours. Before going home they snuck to the back of the school to smoke cigarettes. Their money was scant so they each took a turn to bring rolled cigarettes to school. Giuseppe kept tobacco on him all the time, he hid the packet in his shoe where Signore Punta would not find it. He had been smoking since he was twelve. On the day of his father’s funeral he stole a cigarette from the handbag of his mother’s friend, ran beyond the town’s walls and let

himself fall at the roots of an old olive tree. He lit the cigarette, brought it to his lips and inhaled. The smoke scoured his throat and lungs. He coughed but he had persisted.

Giuseppe rolled the tobacco in rizla, licked the end and sealed it. "Nice and tight," he said.

"Just how I like my pussy," said Rana who took the cigarette from Giuseppe.

He sucked the smoke into his cheeks without inhaling. His eyes started to water from the stinging in his nose. He held it for a while and then exhaled hard. Brown smoke rose over his face.

"So how was it being a girl?" Marcello asked Rana.

"It was Peppe's idea," said Rana.

"He can't dance like a man, so I made him a girl," said Giuseppe as he rolled back onto the grass. He liked to watch the clouds move across the sky.

"Give me that cigarette faggot," said Giuseppe as he took the cigarette delicately between forefinger and thumb.

Rana grunted. "I'm no faggot".

"Just a liar," said Marcello.

Rana got up and kicked Marcello in the thigh. "Hey! Behave yourself," Marcello ordered.

"Come on, let's go," Giuseppe said. He straightened his shirt and wiped his shoes with the end of his scarf.

"The first in class. Always kissy kissy for teacher." Rana kissed the back of his hand, eyes straight at Marcello.

"Basta! You never know when to stop, do you?" Giuseppe worried that one day it would not be a game any more.

He went home to eat lunch with his mother and grandfather. "*Ciao figghiu miu,*" said Mamma as she kissed him on the head.

She said nothing of the tobacco smell fixed to his clothes. He knew that she'd had a proposition from the small man, one he hoped she would not accept. He had heard her and Nonno discussing money. The little she had managed to salvage was running out and Nonno did not have the means to feed and clothe both of them.

They sat at the table and ate in silence. Mamma had made pasta by hand, with durum wheat and eggs. The fish vendor had come past in the morning with sardines caught before sunrise. She had invited him in and negotiated an excellent price. With the ten lire for the half kilo of fish she gave him a jar of olives, black as beetles. For the spaghetti she made a sauce of sardines, grated almonds and parsley. Giuseppe remembered Mama's words to Nonno: "We can all move in with him. He'll look after us."

At the table nobody spoke. His mother lost her appetite half way, pushing the plate away from her. Nonno, as he sucked a string of pasta into his mouth, gave her a quizzing look. "And now. Are you not feeling well?"

"The sardines, they're repeating on me," she said.

"So soon?" asked Nonno.

"Well, I had some earlier. I got hungry so I had a little," she responded.

Giuseppe kept eating. He did not want to think about anything. After forks were placed down the middle of plates, he got up and cleared the table. He helped Mamma clean up then went upstairs to his bedroom, where he flopped onto his bed and took a nap.

Upstairs there were three bedrooms, one for each of them. Downstairs was a kitchen, a pantry where the hindquarters of pigs hung to cure and a living area. Outside in the yard there were three chickens and Giuseppe's birds. A bicycle with the front wheel missing leaned against a wall – marrow tendrils still curled around its parts. Potted geraniums lined the wall on either side of the kitchen door; even in winter they grew and flowered, leeching minerals from the volcanic soil. The fig trees that his grandfather had planted were fully grown. Nonno had dug long holes near them and bent them at their base, pushing them all the way to the ground to bury them. In spring he would brush off the soil and help them rise back up, stems and leaves still green. If he stood on tiptoes, from between their leaves, Peppe could see the Mediterranean. On a clear day it was especially bright with the sun glinting on the waves. The sun and the salt from the spray created a haze which he found mesmerizing.

At quarter to three he walked back to school for another three hours of lessons. It was Monday and on Monday afternoons Signor Punta taught classical studies. This included mythology, literature, culture and history. Today was Homer and Giuseppe liked the words the poet used to describe the sunrise.

At six o'clock Signore Punta rang the bell to signal the end of school. Giuseppe, Rana and Marcello got up like the rest of the students and said, "*Grazie e buona sera Signor Punta*".

They walked to where the town ended and the countryside began. They lay in the long grass, shared a cigarette and made plans to kiss all the girls.

It was still carnival and that night there was dancing in the piazza. Giuseppe played guitar and the mandolin. He was self-taught and practiced most days. He felt sorry for the children in Palermo and Catania who were forced to go for lessons to learn scales. He played real music. He tuned his instruments by ear, a talent which had gained him respect amongst the musicians.

While there was no lack of handsome boys around, the girls lined up to dance with him when he took a break from playing. He danced with all of them, except for Eva. She was too young. He was too besotted with her. He was too shy in front of her.

The sky was clear and the stars of spring were slowly rotating into view. Rain hadn't wet the earth in a month. In the piazza tiny lights on a string were hung between lampposts, mimicking the stars. The air was heavy with the scent of jasmine which had bloomed early that year, the flowers having puffed out their scent at dusk. Winter clung, but spring has started pushing its fists through the ground.

Giuseppe's fingers were sore. Even though the tips were calloused from years of playing, that night he had played *Funiculi Funicula* – a little quicker than his usual tunes. At an hour past midnight people started to make their way home. He followed Eva with his eyes. When he could no longer see her or hear her girly chatter, he packed his things, shared a few jokes with the other band members and went home. Tired, he fell asleep in his underpants.

Capri Barber Shop

The next morning, on his way to school, Giuseppe stopped at Turiddu's Barber Shop. He stood outside and inhaled the scent of shaving cream and aftershave – notes of citrus and mint pricked his nostrils. The shop front was glass, even the door. Beyond it were men in chairs, pushed against the wall, waiting their turn. One of them, a foreigner, had thick sideburns that grew down to his jawline. Turiddu called him with a gesture. The foreigner stood up and rubbed one hand over stubble. He wore a suit made to fit - jacket over crisp white shirt and waistcoat – the kind with a paisley design on the back. The long coat the colour of charred wood and hat to match hooked on the coatrack could only belong to him, Giuseppe thought to himself. The barber shop was named Capri because Turiddu had always dreamed of going there; also it reminded him of the word for goat, *capra*, and a goat-style beard was his favourite.

Turiddu Mistretta, christened Salvatore Mistretta, placed a steaming towel over the foreigner's face in a way that hid his identity. He patted the towel, coaxing the pores to open.

Giuseppe noticed that the red and white striped pole that indicated that the shop was open leaned skew in its red and white box. The plywood was broken. Through the gap, Giuseppe saw an old rag and specks of dust caught in a ray of sun. He touched the pole and went inside. The seated men looked at him and for a moment silence was bestowed on the shop. Then they turned to look at each other and continued their banter. Turiddu lifted the towel off the man's face and placed it on the counter in front of the barber chair. "Peppino Puglia, ready for a shave?"

Giuseppe waited for Turiddu's eyes to fall on him, then spoke. "Signor Turiddu. *Buon giorno*. Can I speak with you?"

Turiddu opened his arms, creating a space for Giuseppe to speak. "In private Signore," responded Giuseppe.

"A moment Giova'," he said to the man in the chair. With a hand on Giuseppe's back, he walked him outside. A gust of wind ruffled their hair.

He looked at the barber and said: "Signo', I want to learn your art. *Vogghiu fari il barbiere.*"

Turiddu led him back inside where the air was now stuffed with the essence of bergamot and pine. "Scupa," Turiddu said as he handed him a broom.

Giuseppe swept with steady strokes, aware of the hair, dust and towel fibres on the floor. He swept them into a pile near the counter, which stood an arm's length away from the back wall. On it was a cash register, a bottle of whiskey, magazines and betting sheets. The task was menial but he swept thoroughly, digging the bristles into each corner to remove the dirt. He needed Turiddu to like him and hire him so that he could help his mother. He needed to take position as man of the house. "Come back at lunch time and we'll talk," Turiddu said, taking the broom from Giuseppe.

At lunch time Giuseppe went past Turiddu's before heading home. "Can you work after school? I stay open until eight. Every day except Mondays because I'm closed. And on Sunday I go to church as you know. Saturday you work from nine until one. I'll pay you weekly. *Va bene?*" said Turiddu.

"I can start tomorrow Signo'," said Giuseppe.

He was happy. He felt joy in his heart. He smiled as he walked home. He felt taller and swung his shoulders to the motion of his stride. He imagined himself in the barber shop - a gentleman with a job, greeting customers with *buon giorno* and a handshake.

“Mamma! Mamma! I’ve got work. At Turiddu’s. He’ll give me my wages every week. You don’t have to worry,” Giuseppe said as he burst through the door.

His mother was sitting at the table with Signora Adriana, a woman he had always known as his mother’s friend. Mamma was godmother to her children. Mamma had her guitar and was strumming the strings lightly as she recounted a joke. Giuseppe kissed his mother on the cheek then her friend. “Mamma. I start work today at the barber shop,” Giuseppe said, sitting down in front of a tray of sugar coated biscuits.

Mamma dusted the front of her blouse, crumbs fell to the floor. “*Figghiu miu*. You’re a young version of your father. You have his build. You are my only child. I should be looking after you,” she said as she ran a finger along the pattern on the plate – a rose and leaf design.

Without looking at him, she placed two biscuits on her plate, dead in the centre. “Mamma, you’ll make yourself sick,” said Giuseppe.

“One biscuit or two, sugar is sugar. Tomorrow I’ll probably be in bed all day but then I’ll be fine. The curse of delight,” said Mamma laughing.

Nonno was outside pulling the dry tendrils from the spokes of the bicycle wheel. The dead plant snapped in protest and the thin coils left a mark where plant and metal had merged. Nonno’s cardigan had holes at the seams and revealed a flannel shirt. His thin body felt the cold. People told Giuseppe that he looked like Nonno, but his light eyes were from his mother’s breeding. When the women left the kitchen, Nonno came inside to prepare lunch for the two of them. The slices of prosciutto, bread, olives, capers, sundried tomatoes and sardines they ate in silence.

After lunch, the old man fell into sleep on an armchair. Upstairs, Giuseppe put on a fresh shirt and, humming an aria from Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*, made his way back to school. Signore Punta was going to teach them how to measure volume.

After school Giuseppe did not smoke cigarettes with Rana and Marcello, but walked to Capri, just off the piazza, in Via Garibaldi. He walked beyond the door into the bergamot scent where Turiddu held up a white apron for him. He wound the strings around him twice, tying it in the front. Giuseppe smoothed his hands over it, fingers catching on the pockets - one large one and three small ones for scissors and combs. The canvas was crisp and made a clapping sound as he walked. “You don’t want little hairs getting into your fly. It’ll make you itch like a madman,” said Turiddu, an index finger under an eye.

Giuseppe blushed and looked down at the green floor. He spotted clumps of hair, brown and straight, that the broom had not caught between its bristles. With the small brush he lifted them onto the palette. He thought of the girl behind the lace curtain, remembered the first time his eyes caught her profile.

He felt important being part of the barber shop. There was dignity in the work, unlike washing pigs before they were butchered or picking up horse faeces from the cobbled roads. This was gentleman's work that revolved around grooming and conversations. When the shop was empty of clients Giuseppe mopped and wiped down the counters. The razors, scissors, combs, tweezers and pliers Turiddu cleaned himself and placed in a glass box which he fumigated with peroxide. "For hygiene," he explained as he placed a peroxide-drenched ball of cotton wool into the box.

The barber chairs were imported from Chicago. When Turiddu went into his back room to count his money, Giuseppe climbed onto a chair and ran his hands over the wood and leather of the armrests, circling his fingers on the brass studs. He remembered sitting on the plank of wood across the armrests as a boy, he had felt like a king. Since his father's death it was Nonno who cut his hair.

The next day was the same. School. Home. School. Capri. There was a moment in the evening when the shop was still. Turiddu went into his back room. "A game of solitaire," he mumbled as he cracked his finger.

Giuseppe climbed onto a chair. He bounced, pretending to be a heavy man, and caused the springs to squeak. "A cut and a shave," he said in a northern accent.

He spun the footrest over and rested his feet on the metal side which had the lettering *Chicago 1819*. He turned it back to the padded leather side, which permitted clients to take off their shoes and enjoy the company of their friends, in socks. He pushed the chromed lever to recline the chair. He opened his mouth, closed his eyes, as if waiting for a tooth to be pulled.

Along opposite walls were mirrors. He looked at himself. He let his eyes unfocus until he could see his face and the back of his head at the same time, repeated ad infinitum. He liked the sensation. It made him feel as big as the sky and as small as an ant. He tried to count the number of reflections, but stopped at ten when the reflections became too small.

It was on his first Saturday of work, when school was half day, that the bell above the door gave a tinkle and a cool wisp of air sent an eddy of cuttings across the floor. "*Ciao Zio*," said Eva as she bounded into the shop.

A shock of ants crawled under Giuseppe's skin then disappeared. They left a trail across his mouth. Outside the sky was bright with afternoon. He looked at her, wide-eyed, grappling for words. Eva jumped onto her uncle and hugged him. "*Bellezza*, what a surprise," said Turiddu.

Eva climbed down and went to greet Giuseppe, "*Ciao Peppe*".

"*Ciao Signorina Eva*," he said, his voice funny like it was stuck in his mouth.

He looked down as though concentrating hard on the pile of cuttings on the floor. What was it about her that turned his intestines into a writhing snake? "Give me a piggy back," she said, putting her books down on the counter.

The clock on the wall ticked the passing of seconds. Giuseppe walked to her and indicated for her to climb onto the barber's chair. She jumped onto his back. She coiled her arms around his neck, her legs round his hips and crossed her ankles. She was light and bony like a young bird. Her body was

warm. Giuseppe adjusted her weight so that he held her securely. "Horse, take me outside," she commanded.

He galloped outside. He neighed and shook his head. "To the left," said Eva, pointing.

"Faster! Faster!" she said.

He ran with all his strength, until his heart beat so fast he felt his head flying, until his breath was no longer his and the air whistled through his mouth and nostrils and into his lungs.

Every day he waited for her to arrive and on the days she did, the moment he saw her coming up the road, he would run outside, take her books and walk next to her to the barbershop. She would climb onto his back and he would run, neigh and jump. She would laugh and he would bask in her lightness. Unlike him, she was unmarked by the blackness of grief.

As the days unfolded Giuseppe discovered the behaviour of men's hair – the variety of textures and how they responded differently to scissors and comb. The differences in colour and how two tufts of freshly cut hair from a distance could appear similar in colour but varied in undertone and sheen. He learnt to predict the condition of the scalp before he even touched the hair. Turiddu explained to Giuseppe that before he learnt to cut, he had to understand his subject. Giuseppe washed hair. He learnt the ways in which clients preferred their water – glacial, tepid and some steaming hot. He lathered and rinsed. He observed the quantity of hair left over in the basin. He liked the tap that could be pulled out of its faucet by a metre, a distance that allowed him to clean the suds off a client's hairline without spilling water over his face. The head was plastic with a lever that switched from a hard spray, emitted in one thick stream from the centre, to a soft spray squirted from holes.

He discovered that men's hair smelt different to that of a woman. A woman's hair smelt of her. He knew this when Eva, on his back, had pressed her face against his head, pigtail falling over his cheek. He also found that the cuttings that he swept from the floor had an odour unlike hair that was alive and still part of a man's scalp. "All hair is dead," Turiddu had explained, but Giuseppe thought differently.

Hair took the form of the man and swayed with the way he walked, turned his head or shook it. He understood why, in the bible, Samson lost his strength when Delilah cut his locks. Men who were balding seemed to lose lustre, they looked older than their years, the skin on their bald spot paler, turning beetroot red in the sun. Bald spots were like noses, they had their own personality complete with moles, wrinkles and lumps.

After months had passed and spring lengthened the days, Turiddu let Giuseppe into the back room. It was narrow and oddly shaped – a trapezium. Pages from calendars covered the walls, their corners fixed to the wall with scotch tape. One was a photograph of Trapani – the pier going out to sea and a sky slashed with clouds. The rest were of women barely covered. Giuseppe looked at a woman with a bob. A string of pearls fell down her back, her head was turned, chin on shoulder, her arm slightly raised to show the curve of a breast. Her teeth were straight and evenly spaced.

There were two three-legged stools and a low table - a plank of wood on bricks - covered with a tablecloth. "My wife made it." Turiddu pointed a finger to his chest.

Hair and whiskey, that's what the room smelt of. He would remember that smell for the rest of his life.

Typhoid Fever

Eva couldn't eat. She pulled the sheet away from the mattress to feel its coolness and tapped her fingers to the rhythm of a poem she recited in her head. Valentina had read a poem to her. "Read it again," she had said to her over and over until the poem had wound itself into her mind like a memory.

It was three weeks that her fever burned, ebbing and heating with the cycle of days. She sipped water from a coffee cup as she listened to Valentina tell Pina about school. They were getting dressed and Eva watched their motions as if they were dancing. In their uniforms they formed a beautiful symmetry. Pina sat on a chair in front of the full length mirror with her knees touching and her shoulders back as Valentina tied white ribbons in her hair. Through the mirror Eva watched her sister recount her story of being the teacher's favourite, even though her schoolwork was irregular and she spent most of the morning's lesson with her arms folded on the desk, resting her head.

Eva listened as her sisters stomped down the stairs, ready for school. She heard them say goodbye to her parents and leave through the front door, the squeak of the handle familiar and distant. She sat up, placed hot soles on cool wood and took two steps to Valentina's bed. Laid out was a dress. It was special, like a birthday dress. "My funeral will be like a birthday party," she thought to herself.

She imagined her classmates, teacher, uncles and aunts attending the ceremony. Peppe would also be there, standing with Zio Turiddu. Her mother would invite them to the house, after church, where there would be cake on the tables - not too sweet that it would bring joy, and not too bland that it would be unpalatable. On platters there would be her favourite biscuits and her sisters would serve coffee without sugar as a reminder of the bitterness of life. Mamma had told her she would not feel anything and that they would be sure she wasn't still alive before they put her in the box and buried her.

Eva put on the dress and, barefoot, stood in front of the mirror. She had one patch of hair left, there behind her right ear. If she turned her head and kept her eye on the mirror she could see it. Then she stared at the bony girl until she recognised herself. She felt pretty in her funeral dress.

Holding the rail she took the steps one at a time, until she was in the kitchen, the coolness of the stone floor seeping up her legs.

"Eva!" Gabriella grabbed her in case she fell. "What are you doing?"

"I want to wear my dress, Mamma," said Eva.

"You're up," said Gabriella, eyeing the girl.

"I'm hungry, Mamma," said Eva.

"*Dio ti binirrica!*" Gabriella kissed the crucifix at the end of her chain.

She hugged Eva gently and felt bones through dress and skin. She also sensed a strength that had not been there in weeks. Typhoid fever had gripped her first-born and the doctor had said it was fatal. Gabriella sliced cheese. She broke bread, smeared it with olive oil and flavoured it with salt.

She warmed milk in a saucepan and mixed in two teaspoons of cocoa powder and sugar. She arranged muscardini on a plate and put them on the table in front of Eva who had seated herself.

Eva ate with her hands. She broke off bits of cheese, savoured its smell and chewed carefully. Her appetite opened. With her teeth she tore a piece of bread and chewed faster. The kitchen was unfamiliar, pots and knives gleamed - they were shinier than she remembered them. Her mother sat across from her, fingers entwined hiding her mouth. When Eva finished, Gabriella went to her, wiped her mouth with her apron. Eva buried her face in thick fabric laced with soap and cooking oil. Mamma kissed her on the head. The sound of the kiss hurt Eva's ears.

The turn of the door handle startled them. "Ciccio! Look. Eva is well." Gabriella turned to her husband who had just come back from walking his daughters to school, as he did every morning.

"*Bedda mia!*" Ciccio held Eva's face and put his lips to her forehead.

"San Teresa has helped us," Gabriella looked at the framed picture of the saint, under the window, candles growing shorter under long flames.

"Cancel the funeral plans and make her a tunic like San Teresa's," said Ciccio.

"Slowly, let her get strong. Let her eat and rest. I'll cancel with Padre Spano. The tunic we can make another day," said Gabriella.

That night Eva slept in her funeral dress. She ignored the comments from Valentina and traced the flowers in red and orange with her finger. There were frills at the end of the sleeves that fell over her knuckles. The collar was ruffled and there was a bow where her collarbones met. A thick ribbon joined the top to the skirt. It was red velvet and Eva rubbed the pile to and fro, to change the depth of colour.

The following afternoon, Eva, still in her funeral dress, went with her mother to the haberdashery. "You've been buttoned up in your room for too long. Fresh air will be good for you," said Gabriella.

The world outside the bedroom Eva shared with her sisters was noisy. She squinted against the sunlight. Her shoes were speckled with dust from the street. She bent down to clean them with the hem of her dress. As she got up her head spun, her foot kept missing the ground and she held onto mamma's dress. "*Stai attenta bedda.* You're still recovering," said Gabriella.

In the haberdashery, Papa was unfurling a roll of fabric for Signora Clemente. With his good arm he smoothed it out and pointed out the swirl of the pattern. Eva hid behind her mother; the woman made her uneasy with her blue eyeshadow and red lipstick that clung to her features like blotches of colour. At the carnival party she had bent down to look at Eva, her breath putrid. "Is my make-up still good?" she had asked her.

"Signora Clemente, *buon giorno,*" said Gabriella.

"Signora Mistretta and *cara* Eva, are you well?" Eva withdrew as the woman touched her bald head.

"She's well. Recovering from typhoid. We think she caught it from the well at Aquanova," said Gabriella.

“Well, little girls shouldn’t be playing where they’re not supposed to,” said Signora Clemente as she looked at Eva.

“I let my girls play where they want,” said Gabriella as she held Eva against her.

Eva’s eyes were level with Signora Clemente’s waist. A roll of fat bulged below her belt and wobbled as she spoke. Her dress was beige taffetta with tiny blue dots that matched her eye shadow. Her belt was red and too tight. Her hem was skew and showed the lace of her petticoat.

“Little girls should be kept at home to play with their dolls, not run around barefoot like gypsies,” said Signora Clemente.

Gabriella ignored her (there was no arguing with madness) and turned to greet her husband. She kissed him, then asked, “Ciccio, where is the blue linen?”

“It’s finished. We won’t get the next order until summer,” said Ciccio.

“But Saint Theresa wears blue linen, how are we going to show thanks?” asked Gabriella.

Eva pictured the statue of Saint Theresa in church. Her eyes looked upwards as though she were bored. Eva wondered if she looked down at them when their heads were bowed in prayer.

Ciccio pulled out a roll of brown hemp, the one he sold to the mill for making sacks. He had other blues in silk, taffetta, satin and velvet, but none had the humility of raw linen. It would have been offensive to Saint Theresa for his daughter to be draped in luxury. Gabriella rubbed the hemp between her fingers – she imagined the coarseness against her child’s back. “Mamma *per favore*. I don’t want to wear a sack. I want to wear this dress,” said Eva as she pulled out her dress like a fan.

“Eva, it’s too pretty,” said Gabriella.

Eva didn’t understand the fault in being pretty. Gabriella pulled out two metres. “Ciccio cut here,” she said marking the point with her finger.

Ciccio put his hand over his wife’s and stroked the smooth rose polish of her nails. They worked in unison – he cut as she held the fabric. Together they folded it into a square, which she pushed into her handbag.

Hand in hand, mother and daughter walked to the Chiesa del Purgatoria, where one day Eva would be married, and crossed the main road to Signora Parigi’s house. Eva sat on a chair - the walk was uphill and her legs were shaking. She felt like she was lifting. The seamstress stirred sugar into a glass of water and handed it to her. The sugar particles swirled and Eva drank to the bottom.

The seamstress sewed a tunic and found a piece of rope in her cupboard. Inside were shelves packed with folded fabrics, offcuts, trims, patterns on paper as thin as petals, zips and magazines. The rope was satin and was intended to hold back a curtain. For Eva, it would act as a belt. “It’s shiny, but it’ll do,” said the seamstress.

“Take off your dress Eva,” said Gabriella.

Eva slid off the chair, stood up and carefully, took off her funeral dress.

The seamstress gasped at her skeletal frame. Eva hunched and crossed her arms in front of her to hide her body. "Lift your arms," said Mamma as she held the tunic over her head, bunched so she could pull it over Eva's body with ease. Around her waist she fastened the rope, with a double knot.

From talk in the barbershop, Giuseppe had heard of Eva's illness. One day, after school, instead of going home for lunch, he walked up Via dei Turchi, past the town walls and into the countryside. In his rucksack, with his books and pencils, was a bowl. He followed the dirt road – two lines carved by wagon wheels - until it ended. He walked through the long grass and sat down next to a cluster of oleander bushes heavy with flowers. He looked down between the grass stems and watched ants crawl over stones. He took stones, ants and flowers and arranged them in the bowl. With his hands he dug a shallow hole and pushed the bowl into it. He walked further, into a field of almond trees and cut a few stems. With them he decorated the ground around the bowl. In his pocket was a postcard of Saint Teresa. He had gone to confession, so that cleansed of his sins he could buy a postcard. Kneeling in the confessional, he had told Padre Spano that he had been smoking and had dreamt of being naked in front of girls. He had told him he hated the man courting his mother and that he wished him and his children dead. He had told him that his friend Rana worried him. He was aggressive.

After he had notched the beads of his rosary twice and bent at the front altar under the statue of Jesus, he went to Mary and prayed. Mamma had told him that Jesus only listened if you prayed to Mary. He placed the postcard on top of the oleanders and, kneeling once again, prayed for Eva's health.

Eva wore the tunic for forty days and nights as a gesture of thanks to Saint Theresa. On the morning of the forty first day, Eva removed her tunic. She sat on her bed in her panties and allowed the humid air to touch her skin. The rash on her back and elbows stung. Some parts she had scratched raw. The fabric rubbed off the crusts of blood, but summer would heal. It was mid-June and the sun shed light until seven. In the mirror she recognised a boy version of herself. Her hair had grown back in a bristle but by autumn, curls would gather around her face and she would be a girl again. Food no longer repulsed her and she craved its flavours. From the cupboard she pulled out her funeral dress. It no longer fitted her.

Her sisters roused from sleep and the three of them dressed for school. "Mamma, don't wait for me after school. I'm going to the barber shop," said Eva as she ran a hand over her short hair.

Mamma gave her a white handkerchief to cover her head. Eva looked at her reflection in the pot - a child nun looked back at her. At school her teacher hugged her and took her to the front of the class where she explained her absence to the other pupils. Her classmates applauded. Eva recited the poem about the wolves, tapping her toe in rhythm. More applause. After school, she passed the carob tree, picked a pod from the ground and brought it to her nose. She separated the pod and with her teeth scraped the flesh off the inside. She missed Giuseppe like she had missed the taste of carob. The flavour was particular - melancholic and evergreen.

She could not understand it but he reminded her of the man dancing with the big lady at the carnival party. He carried the same lightness about him.

The Corset Maker

Nonno was not an only child. He had a brother, named Garofalo, who worked deftly with his hands, transforming bodies with stitching, bone and fine lace. The First World War brought the cold and with it a clamminess to Garofalo's hands. The Sicilian sun which wiped the brow of the earth and tinged the flesh of tomatoes could not warm his palms nor lift the dampness. Before the war ended his wife, Gelsomina, named after the warm scent of night jasmine, had been caught in the grips of typhoid fever, fading away until she was nothing and leaving him with a five year old daughter to wash, dress and guide into womanhood. It was the dressing part he was most comfortable with. He dressed her with a tailor's eye, fitting her clothes to suit her proportions, which would change as she phased into puberty. It wasn't so much that he dressed her, he upholstered her, finding her shape and fitting the fabric to her anatomy. Her clothes had invisible seams and were fluid with her movements. For most of her childhood she felt like she had nothing on, seams did not pull on her shoulders and zips never scratched her back.

Theirs was a quiet relationship where tasks were carried out in a form of symbiosis. They would go about their daily chores like monks - in whispers. Their steps would trace the same paths so that concentric circles formed on the wooden floors. Garofalo taught Mina how to light the stove and bring water to the boil quickly by adding more wood. He taught her how to clean the floors with flakes of soap and water, wash his shirts and socks by rubbing them against a washing board and how to run an iron along a seam. By the time she was thirteen, she knew how to remove wine stains from tablecloths and starch collars better than women twice her age.

Her hours were brim full of chores and any room for self-awareness was filled with the creation of a seamless order, a cycle that took her from clean to dirty to clean in the course of a day. She watched other children from the window as she washed the pots and plates. She watched them throwing hoops into the air and catching them. She followed their legs as they spread and crisscrossed to land in squares drawn on the asphalt. She heard the high pitch of their laughter as it pierced through the glass. It didn't occur to her that she could go outside and play like them, be with them. Her place was in the house.

In 1926, when Mina was twelve, Garofalo decided to leave the island and make a future in the New World. Many Sicilians had moved to Canada, America and Argentina. They all sounded big, expansive and unexplored, and had the kind of names he'd give to his daughters should he have any more children. He chose America - New York City - because it was an island, but close enough to the mainland that he could move about freely. He filled his future with images of himself on horseback roaming America, Mina married to a gentleman.

Garofalo knew that he would always be native to Sicily, but New York was the place of milk and honey where diamonds multiplied in your hands, a humble shoemaker could own a line of shoe shops and a tailor could start a clothing factory with rows of machines and seamstresses busy at the pedals. The idea of New York that swirled around his head made the city magical, so he bought two first class tickets - if he was going to have a prosperous future he couldn't jinx it with second class tickets - and told his daughter to pack all their belongings. A Sicilian community was establishing itself in New York, in the suburb of Queens, with Italians from other parts of Italy. He'd heard that they were better dressed than the other New Yorkers, wearing suits that were tailored and dresses

in the finest fabrics. “The Polish, the Dutch, the Irish, they have pocketfuls of money but they don’t know how to dress. They come to us so we can dress them,” he overheard an emigrant say.

Garofalo had looked at his hands, still affected by clamminess, and said to himself, “You have an eye for proportion. You can find your way with a needle and thread.”

He created corsets that could make the roundest of women look like nubile nymphs, moulding their bodies into hourglass silhouettes with ribbon and whalebone. In Sicily he had made a name for himself in corsetry, he even had a few men, politicians who attended too many dinners, invite him to the north of Italy to ask his advice on how to achieve a slimmer figure. The bosses of organised crime syndicates helped to keep him in business commissioning lace-trimmed corsets for their wives and mistresses and plain ones for themselves.

In New York he opened a shop in Queens; it came with living quarters above and a basement below where he stored fabrics and mannequins. There was also an industrial sewing machine and contraptions for stretching leather. News of his talent for shrinking waistlines spread. Immigrants had become gluttonous as food was easy to get and eating out at restaurants was fashionable. His shop, which had started out simple with three chairs and a table and a few fashion posters, soon got the look of a parlour – wallpaper covered the walls, plush armchairs replaced the old ones and a maid in uniform served tea, espresso with cream and little cakes. The basement was turned into a dressing room, where Garofalo could fit his customers in a measure of privacy. He would see customers by appointment only and soon he employed two seamstresses so that he could keep up with the demand.

He had a light touch and took measurements swiftly, never letting his thoughts wander. He’d help the ladies choose fabric that would allow their dress to fit smoothly over the corset. His satin corsets, worn as lingerie as opposed to underwear, were popular and, because of the intimate nature of his business, he soon became the confidant to many high class ladies who grew tired of not getting their husband’s attention and had taken on younger lovers. One of the ladies had even confessed to keeping two women: “If my husband can keep one mistress, I’ll keep two”.

His satin corsets, which he trimmed with anglaise imported from Poland, got him a contract with a men’s club. Every month he’d make new corsets for the showgirls. The designs grew flamboyant and the colours more daring as the seasons turned.

The years passed and his corsetry business grew. Garofalo and Mina were living a comfortable life. She no longer did house chores and spent hours having tea with the ladies and walking her basset hounds through Central Park.

Their comfortable routine was shaken when another corset maker, Don Filippo, opened a shop on the same street. A vicious rivalry started between the two men. Don Filippo was a small man with a round belly. He was short but the size of his girth made him an imposing figure. He took business away from Garofalo, who developed an ulcer – the contents of his stomach would turn to acid every time he laid eyes on Don Filippo or his shop. Garofalo’s obsession became nocturnal.

Mina, worried that her father had become a restless sleeper, became a light sleeper herself and in the morning both of them would have shadows under their eyes. It was in those moments, before she opened her mouth to speak, that she missed her island.

It was a Saturday night, the first night of a diminishing moon; Garofalo made himself a cup of tea, black tea which he preferred to espresso (which gave him the feeling of having left something undone). He enjoyed the ritual of placing the tea leaves in a sieve and watching the water change colour. He added honey. His neighbour kept bees on his land in New Jersey – the bees gathered pollen from fruit trees, which added a tart tinge to the flavour. “Mina?” he called.

Mina was out and the house seemed large. Garofalo stood and collected the sense that he occupied a different space to his daughter. She was out in the vastness of America. He went to bed counting his losses.

In the middle of the night he woke up and still in his night-gown marched to Don Filippo’s shop. He ranted at the window. “*Bastardo! vai via da qui!*” he shouted.

He didn’t bang his fists on the windows and instead bit hard on his knuckles, his face turning red. He pulled his hair and rubbed his eyes, the ulcer in his stomach burning. That night he dreamt about Don Filippo. He got up and walked around the apartment like a sleepwalker, sweating. He chased an imaginary Don Filippo, a rolled up newspaper in his hand. He caught him between the pages, which he folded tightly and with a pair of scissors he cut the paper into tiny pieces. Garofalo had gone mad.

He took his madness back to Sicily. Mina, concerned for her father’s ulcer and obsession, arranged for them to take a holiday. The volcanic soil would do him good, as would daily swims in the Mediterranean. They would spend a month in Santa Ninfa and a month in Mazzara del Vallo in a seaside villa she’d rented.

In Santa Ninfa, Garofalo slept in the same room as his brother. Mina slept on a mattress on the floor in Signora Puglia’s room. While Signora Puglia packed clean linen into her armoire, she said to her father-in-law, “The girl is different. She’s grown up, a lady, but her eyes are different. Like they’ve opened up. Not like she used to be, always closed up in that house.”

“It’s my brother I’m worried about. He looks miserable. Decrepit,” said Nonno.

“Without a wife, his daughter always about town, it’s natural,” said Signora Puglia.

“This America! Everyone, America! What is so special about this America?” asked Nonno.

“It’s where people go to make money and live like the rich, but they trade their souls,” said Signora Puglia.

“I smell something burning,” said the old man.

Ah, *il sugo!*” cried Signora Puglia, running to the kitchen. Nonno followed.

“Nonno!” said Peppe as he walked into the kitchen. He went up to his grandfather and pulled his coppola down over his eyes.

“*Picciotto!* Where have you been?” asked the old man.

Nonno, you know...” he said moving his head from side to side.

"Figghiu meu. You make a handsome young man. Your mother is a proud woman," said Signora Puglia as Giuseppe kissed her on the cheek.

Giuseppe lifted the lid of the pot and inhaled deeply. *"Sugo di mamma,"* he said.

"Where is Mina?" he asked. He broke a piece of bread and with the crust sliced through the thick sugo, then brought it straight to his mouth.

"Out," said Signora Puglia.

"Now that she's American, her nose is like this," said Giuseppe pushing his nose up with a finger.

"I can see up her nostrils," he continued.

"Lucky it's a small nose, is there anything up there?" said Signora Puglia.

"My niece is not a stupid girl. She barely had a childhood, learnt to cook before she could walk, never left the house. I think the air of the new world is good for her. My brother though..." said the old man.

"He has the sickness of the new world. He is either excited or anxious, he needs to cool down," said Signora Puglia.

Giuseppe took another piece of bread and covered it in *sugo*.

Thirty years later it was Giuseppe who, with his wife, travelled to America to find his cousin Mina. She was fully American, four children, short blonde hair, and would keep Giuseppe at arm's length, worried that he was there to claim a stake in her fortune. After the death of her father, Mina took all that he had left her to buy a number of pastry shops, for this was where her heart was most comfortable - between custard and crepe. It was on this trip that Giuseppe found his old friend Rana. He lived below street level. The windows were thin strips just below the ceiling. He could see the shoes of people walking by and could always tell who was about to knock on his front door. Rana never married but went to America to help his sister. Her husband was an abusive drunk who gambled. He bullied her. Rana disposed of him and his body was never found.

Years earlier, in Sicily, when their futures were still untold, Giuseppe slept in his own room, the two old men in theirs and Mina and his mother in the third room. The old men had grown up in the house - they knew every creak in the floorboards and the angle of every plastered corner. When sleep had covered their eyes and the moon had risen from behind the trees, Garofalo sat up in bed. He placed his feet on the floor softly and walked to the chair where he kept his newspaper and scissors. He folded the newspaper in half and tucked it under his arm, the scissors in his hand. He pulled the blankets off his bed then bent down to look under the bed. He started to run. He ran into Giuseppe's bedroom and smacked the paper against the floor, holding it down with both hands. He pushed his hands together and started to fold, evenly and quickly. He cut it into strips, then placed the strips one on top of the other and cut them into squares. These he cut into smaller strips and squares. In the morning Signora Puglia found a pile of paper in Giuseppe's room. "I caught him, rolled him up and cut. But the bastard slipped past my scissors," explained Garofalo.

They stayed in Sicily for another four months, as the next ship to America took a long time to arrive. They all went to Mazzara del Vallo to stay in the villa. They lulled in the shallows of the Mediterranean between rocky outcrops and small fishing boats, and every morning Signora Puglia would find a pile of shredded paper next to Garofalo's bed.

The Sugar Statues

A month before the Day of the Dead the Baker would begin to craft the statuettes that were so dearly desired by children, lovers and the old. He would push the doughy mixture of marzipan, water and sugar into moulds and bring them to life like the living did with the deceased.

The windows of delicatessens would fill up with his soldiers on horseback, maidens lifting water from a well, princes with a foot on a tree stump and babies sitting on potties. With his hands he formed fruit – apples, pears, bananas, prickly pears, oranges. Some he would arrange in baskets woven from caramelised sugar.

He added sugar to the water colours and, pulling the tip of the paintbrush to a point between his lips, painted each statuette. The statuettes looked porcelain, their surface a shimmer of sugar. The Mistrettas would buy one for each of their daughters, usually a doll with a bib and hat made from cotton and trimmed with ribbon and frill. Eva and Valentina desired the baby. They would point to it in the window, its dimpled arms and thighs naked. The baby was the biggest and the most expensive. When the girls were deep in sleep they would put the gift, wrapped in the Baker's paper, next to their bed.

The Baker had the paper specially designed with a repetition of his insignia. The emblem had elements of his mother and father – an apron and a chef's hat. They worked as butler and housekeeper for a baron in Naples. He grew up in one of the outhouses, using the workers' entrance to the property and playing cards with the gardeners when his parents worked in the main house at night. The staff children were taught reading, writing and psalms for an hour a day by the same tutor who instructed the Baron's children. Outside of that, he played with offcuts of dough on the black and white floor of the kitchen.

By the age of nine he had acquired a feeling for dough – its secret elasticity, its turgidity and how it gave in to moisture. So the cook cleared a space for him, gave him an apron and let him stand on a chair. The Baker grew up with the peculiar rituals of the rich – the ringing of the small bell, their bed stricken days, the curtsies and gestures, the conversations like a staccato in C minor. The children were pale and tired. They weren't allowed to play outside or dirty themselves. None of the windows overlooked the servants' quarters but he would see them when they walked with their tutor to the gate that led from the garden to the servants' quarters. He despised their scrubbed skins and clean smells. He liked the odour of natural skin - without perfume or oils - and the saltiness of sweat.

His insignia was light brown, the colour of bread as it is pulled out the oven. For decoration, he used ribbon of the same colour. For the Day of the Dead, Christmas and Easter he employed Rana's sister to do the wrapping. She didn't eat his bread and kept her fingers out of the cakes. When they made love on the tombstones in the cemetery in the darkness her fingers would graze the moss and grasses, leaving scars on the stone. It happened a few times; she enjoyed the pleasures of his flesh. It had started when the baker took off his shirt to roll dough along his chest – he believed that sweat and tears made for tastier bread. She faced him and took off her dress. He pulled off his trousers and in turn she took off her underwear. They stood in front of the burning oven until movement brought them together.

He learnt how her skin cooled against the tombstones, how fingers tugged on grass. He could walk through the cemetery in the dark with his eyes closed. They would climb over the wall on the opposite side to the main gate. He would throw a blanket over the wall, so that she would not scratch herself, and lift her up. On two occasions he felt other eyes on them. He suspected it was Rosario the cemetery keeper.

It was a year later, when autumn had settled into the trees, that Vituzzu Messina the baker had a word with Ciccio Mistretta. "I've fallen in love," he explained.

He was to close shop for a while to follow his new source of amusement – a Tunisian woman, with earrings as hooped as her locks, who was part of a travelling band. She wore a tarantella skirt and sang folk songs from Naples with an accent which he found endearing. Ciccio smiled. The baker would no longer be making eyes at his wife. Vituzzu felt no shame in letting his gaze linger over the shape of women and it did not matter if they were other men's wives. "Does the business of statues interest you? I have various moulds. I can give you the recipe," said the Baker.

"Mi interessa si." said Ciccio.

On his walk home, Ciccio lit a cigar and let his thoughts become entangled with the smoke. The sugar statues would bring in good money – new clothes for his girls and a pipe for himself. He enjoyed cigars, but he liked the idea of smoking a pipe. He could see himself with his wooden hand in his pocket, the other holding a pipe to his lips. It was the mark of a gentleman.

At home, with the stain of tobacco on his fingers, he announced the good news. Signora Mistretta clasped her hands. "Ah! What good fortune. I like Vituzzu, he's a good man," she said. Ciccio hid his jealousy.

She visited the baker without her husband's knowledge. She wanted to know more about the ingredients and the mixture. It was her childhood dream to paint the statuettes. "Get your almonds from u Picciuddu, grind them yourself and soak them in milk. Add an extra pinch of sugar to show respect to the earth in which the dead are buried and add two cups of water – they symbolise tears. You understand?" he asked.

As she sat in Vituzzu's kitchen, the baking trays sweated in the oven. She fanned herself and averted her eyes every time he looked at her. The women spoke of how he rolled bread dough over his chest to lift the salt from his skin. No one said how much they liked it. The conversation would often stop there.

At her kitchen table, on paper, she plotted a production line. The Baker gave her the keys to his shop. On the same piece of paper, in the right hand corner was the recipe. She would create the mixture, folding milk into almonds, and then add the sugar syrup. With the help of her daughters she would spoon the mixture into the moulds and pack it well. The girls would place the filled moulds into the oven and check them as they baked. Her responsibility was to stoke the fire and add wood as the logs reddened and burned. The oven was deep, large enough for nine moulds to bake at a time.

Ciccio ordered paints from a shop in Palermo that specialised in food colouring. He had walked past the shop on one of his visits to Palermo. Above its window was a red awning with black writing. In

the window were bottles of paint, squat like coloured beads. The paints were water-based and flavoured to match their colour – yellow tasted of citrus, red of peaches, green of melon, blue of salt and black of olives.

To the order he added paintbrushes – three thick ones and three thin ones, a set for each of his daughters.

They arrived a week later. “Paints are heavy,” he said to quell the postman’s curiosity.

Eva, Valentina and Pina unwrapped the parcel and held up the paint bottles. The colours were gemstones in liquid form. Then next morning they rose before the sun. They washed, dressed and ran downstairs. Signora Mistretta was in the kitchen, apron tied around her waist. The four of them put on their coats and made their way to the Bakery where the oven was hot and the dough ready for the moulds. Signora Mistretta had woken up just after midnight to start the oven and mix the ingredients.

On the table was an espresso cup stained with coffee – Gabriella had filled it three times since midnight. Next to it was a row of moulds. She showed her daughters how to fill them and then placed them in the oven. The girls watched the flames and waited. Gabriella fell asleep at the table with her head in her arms. The girls went to the front of the shop and from the window saw a few lights behind curtains - the flicker of people waking. They sat on the floor with their backs against the counter, coats pulled down over their legs, and hummed a song.

When the sun rose they woke their mother. Their eyes widened as she took the moulds from the oven. They were over cooked and what she released from the moulds were dark-skinned dolls, babies, maidens and princes. Gabriella let them cool then sliced a piece to taste. “It’s crunchy but good. It doesn’t taste of burnt,” she said.

“Can we paint mamma?” asked Eva.

“*Si*, let’s start,” said Gabriella.

Eva kept a baby in the potty aside so she could paint it last with greater care. She would give it to Giuseppe. They worked through the day and into the night until Ciccio walked through the door to claim them. He looked at the statues, sugar crystals in their faces sparkling as they caught the light. “It looks like your statues had a good holiday. They all have good tans,” he said.

Eva looked around at the babies and dolls placed along the surfaces of the baker’s kitchen. Their lips were red, cheeks rosy and their eyes alive. Some had yellow hair, others black. The one for Giuseppe had yellow hair which she had painted in curls. She would take it to him before November second, the Day of the dead. The strawberries, bananas and apples looked like they were made from porcelain – shiny and breakable.

Ciccio chose the best ones and placed them in the window of the haberdashery. The others he took to the delis as per their orders. The statuettes sold faster than he had expected and more orders arrived from Partanna, Gibellina and Castelvetro. Signora Mistretta and the girls made another batch, watching that they didn’t bake for longer than they were supposed to, and Signore Mistretta delivered them by horse-drawn cart to the neighbouring towns.

All the money he made he placed in the top drawer of his wife's bedside table for the girls to spend as they wished. Eva bought a silk dress patterned with flowers, she had turned thirteen in September and a month later was shaping into a woman. She hung the dress on the handle of the armoire so that she could admire it.

The bedroom smelt of roasted almonds as Eva had hidden the statue for Giuseppe on top of the armoire. It was two days before the Day of the Dead and she climbed the shelves to bring it down. She kissed it on its head and enveloped it in tissue paper, fastening it closed with a blue ribbon. She lifted the silk dress from its hanger and slipped it on, over her vest. She pushed her hair off her forehead and walked, both hands holding the parcel, to the Barber Shop. The cold bit her. She walked in the direction of the piazza towards the pharmacy. She held the gift to her hip, cupped her hand to her face and pressed it against the window. Petrina was inside counting bottles. Eva pushed the door open and shifted her aunt out of her trance. "*Bellezza!*" Zia Petrina's long shiny nails tickled Eva's face.

Eva hugged her aunt and then stood back to focus on her shoes. Around her ankle was a strap of snakeskin the colour of caramel. The rest of the shoe was patent black. "Do you like them? They're from Palermo," said Petrina tilting her foot.

"They're pretty Zia," said Eva, shivering.

"*Bella*, you're freezing!" Petrina took the shawl from the back of the chair and draped it over Eva's shoulders.

Eva pulled it tighter around herself. "I'm giving this to Peppe," she said holding up the parcel.

"Ah," said Petrina as her eyes shifted over a hundred thoughts.

"I'll see you tomorrow at the cemetery," said Eva as she moved her fringe from her eyes.

Inside the Barber Shop Giuseppe held a comb and a pair of scissors and concentrated on cutting the back of Marcelo's hair. Marcello had his chin to his neck and his eyes fixed to the mirror, watching Giuseppe's movements. Eva stood outside the door next to the red and white Barber sign. "Your girlfriend's here," said Marcello.

The scissors stopped and Giuseppe turned to look at the girl in blue with a parcel in her hands. He placed his tools in the pocket of his white coat and opened the door. "This is for you," she said as she handed him the package.

On the second of November, the Day of the Dead, the Mistrettas left the house early. It was six in the morning and they greeted the others who walked towards the plot that held their ancestors. It was as though the cold air had been tempered, as if winter had not yet woken up. The mist had lifted and it took with it the iciness. The girls wore new coats with hemlines reaching just above their ankles. As they walked, their coats sashayed in unison. The click of their heels was muffled - Gabriella had taken their shoes to the cobbler to be resoled.

They made their way to the top of the town where tall gates opened onto the cemetery plot. Rosario the cemetery guard greeted them, the bottom half of his face wrapped in a scarf. He shook their hands and when it came to kissing the ladies, unravelled his scarf. He was uglier than famine itself. His face was pockmarked, making his features more grotesque. He was aware of his appearance and tried to cover up as much as he could. Winter was good to him as he could hide behind scarves and the collar of his coat. Despite this face, Ciccio saw his goodness and secretly hoped one of his daughters would marry him.

The plot once belonged to Rosario's family. His great grandfather, who had come from Gibellina and who was a great architect, had bought a number of plots at the top of the hill just beyond Santa Ninfa. The town council needed a cemetery and offered the family good money. The deal was done on condition that Rosario would look after the land. And he tended it well, rising early, pulling the weeds around the tombstones and the mausoleums, consoling grief stricken families and occasionally consoling widows in his bed.

Rosario opened the gates for the Mistretta family. He had oiled the hinges the day before so that they would not squeak. He did not want to wake the dead on such a day, not with such an insipid noise, and not so early in the morning.

The cemetery contained family histories. Mausoleums held the remains of wealthier families. Ciccio explained to his daughters that it was the fashion to have them built in the shape of a pyramid or to resemble an Egyptian tomb. Others were simple – just a gravestone or a headstone with fresh flowers in a vase. Ciccio's grandparents and father were buried next to each other, the ground marked by a rectangular piece of granite. Eva, Valentina and Pina scattered flowers they had picked on the way - crocus corymbosus in yellow, white and lavender and snowdrops – over the lettering of their ancestors' names and the dates of their lives spent on earth. They closed their eyes and prayed silently. The cry of a Saker falcon, sharp and anxious, prompted outspoken amens.

They walked between the graves, their expressions solemn. They looked and read. They stopped to chat to friends and Eva detached herself from her family. She walked until she found the Puglia gravesite. It was a mausoleum with steps going down to a small door. Giuseppe's father, grandmother and great grandparents were buried there. She took a crocus from her pocket, the most perfect one, its white petals streaked purple cupped around the saffron stamen, and placed it on the first step. She knelt on one knee and crossed herself. She said a silent prayer for the living.

Nonno Dies

Giuseppe ran. Above him ducks in formation against a brittle sky. Two flaps of the wings and then glide. In the still air he could hear the beating of their wings, mechanical, as they propelled forward. In his pocket, the key to the country house clinked against coins he thought he had lost. His steps dislocated sand, twigs, olives and leaves that had fallen to the ground. He ran down a row of olive trees, buttressed by oleanders which had already shed their flowers. Leaves caught on his jacket and twigs clawed at his bare winter hands. On the ground next to the base of a tree a dead mouse. It was on its side, the hair from its neck up to its chin soft and white, ending at long incisors. A fly twitched near its open eye. Its claws were the colour of newborn pink. The tail extended to a cylindrical point and was still intact. The ants had not caught smell of the body yet.

He ran towards Santa Ninfa where there were people, where he could grab the arm of the first person he saw and ask them to help him. He ran away from the house in the country, counting the trees he passed, removing his thoughts from the stairs at the base of which his grandfather was slumped. He looked down at his shoes. He saw one then the other, unaware of his legs. The brown leather was dulled by sand; they looked like someone else's shoes, not his shoes with the high polish. His toe caught in a gap between root and sand, disrupting his stride. He fell forward open handed and felt the burn of a graze. His ears also burned, chilled by the air moving around his head. He thought of Nonno in the country house at the bottom of the stairs, a screwdriver in his mouth.

They had gone there to spend a few nights, to walk through the tall grass and to hunt. The house belonged to Eva's father with whom Nonno had become close.

Giuseppe's mother was being courted by a new suitor, a good man, but a man who wasn't his father and never would be despite the smiles and courtesy to him and the blessing of companionship for his mother. He understood that without a man to take care of her, she would have to live outside in a courtyard to scratch the ground with the chickens. She was not young and her beauty had faded, the robust radiance she once carried had been buried shut when they lowered his father into the ground.

Nonno had always protected him. For Nonno he was always in the right. He knew that Nonno had wanted to take him away and that he had chatted to Eva's father about using his house in the country. Nonno had spoken to him near the betting tables on Via Garibaldi.

A few of the men in town had taken to gambling, setting up makeshift tables with two trestles and a piece of board that could be folded up at the first sign of the *Guardia di Finanza*, the finance police. The gamblers grew in numbers with men from Gibellina and Mazzara del Vallo attending the Saturday night gambling. A system was established where men kept watch, casually smoking a cigarette or looking up at the night sky with its infinite stars. If one of the lookout men spotted a Guardia he would walk to the next man who in relay would pass the message on to the next.

Nonno had found an affinity with Signor Mistretta while standing in line at one of these tables. They were waiting to bet on horses using a number system called Isasilli. Nonno discovered that Signore Mistretta was intrepid. He loved to work, running a number of businesses at the same time. He owned the cinema, the haberdashery and had shares in Turiddu's barbershop. His motto was *ni arte*

ni parte – a man with no trade has no part. In return Signore Mistretta had great admiration and respect for Antonio Puglia, Giuseppe's father. "He was a man more whole than some of these other men," said Signor Mistretta lifting his wooden arm.

"He had to relearn everything after he lost his arm. To write, eat, even walk without leaning to one side," said Nonno, wiping his eye with a handkerchief folded into a square. Ever since the death of his son his eye wept.

"I know. It's not easy but you overcome it. Pity that he's no longer around. I could discuss business with him. He was wise and practical your son," said Signor Mistretta.

It was when Nonno won ten times the amount he had bet that he asked Signor Mistretta about using his country house. "*Compare* listen. Peppe's not himself. His mother ... there's a man. He needs to get out of town for a while..." he started.

Signor Mistretta placed a hand on his arm and said, "No need to say anything else. Take these keys and go to my house in the country. You know where it is. Stay as long as you feel."

Nonno cupped a hand against the other man's neck and buried his face in his shoulder. "*Diu ti binirica*. God bless you," he said.

The following afternoon, when Giuseppe had finished school for the day, Nonno brought him the good news. Nonno shook the keys in front of Giuseppe who was hiding in the alley behind Rana's house. An enormous fig tree grew there, protected from the harsh air and stroked by gentle sunlight. He was focused on the string of smoke coming from the tip of his rolled cigarette, blowing rings as he exhaled, disrupting the flow of smoke. The tinkling of keys broke his trance. "*Ehi picciottu* want to go on holiday? What do you say?" asked Nonno bent down, smiling.

Giuseppe's mouth broadened into a smile. He let himself roll backwards, took a long drag of his cigarette and blew out evenly, watching grey mix with the sky's past-midday blue. "Don't let your mother see you smoking. Wash before you greet her. She can smell it on you, *sai?*" said Nonno.

"*Sisignore!*" said Giuseppe as he got to his feet and gave the old man an exaggerated salute.

The salute was part of their ritual. Years before, Nonno had taught Giuseppe to be unafraid of locusts, to pick them up by their hind legs and make them his pets. When Giuseppe had discovered the beauty of insects Nonno made him stand on a chair, place his hand in the opening between the buttons of his cardigan like Napoleon Bonaparte and salute.

Giuseppe ran to the house his mother had made their home, packed his rucksack, pulled off his clothes and, naked, washed himself with soap and cold water. A day later he and Nonno were walking past the town's ancient gates into the open. Giuseppe waved at the Medusa. "*Ni vireme,*" he winked at the inanimate carving.

They walked at a pace a little quicker than a *passaggiata*, a comfortable speed for Nonno who, although strong, did not like to hurry when he was taking in the smells of winter. It wasn't his favourite season but he enjoyed the weeks leading to Christmas, the nativity scene in the church, the way children's play was significantly more animated, their anticipation of feasting becoming pronounced. Nonno had made Giuseppe a Pinocchio out of wood. It wasn't carved, but made of bits

of wood held together with nails and wire. He used a squat log with the bark intact as the body, a piece of wood the shape of a box for the head and a long straight twig for the most prominent feature - the nose. He stripped the nose of its bark to reveal a light smooth wood still green with life. He thought it ironic that it could keep growing. With nails he attached two twigs to the log for arms. He did the same for the legs, which were articulated, bending at the hip and the knees. For feet he stuffed grass into socks and attached them to the legs. He tied a blue sock between body and head to look like a scarf. With kohl he drew eyes, a mouth and ears. He pulled the other blue sock over the head as a hat, drawing lengths of hair on its forehead and around its ears. He would give it to Giuseppe on Christmas Eve before mass.

They walked the path to the front door of the house and Nonno slotted the key into the padlock, snapping it open. He pushed the door open and inside ribbons of light danced with dust. Giuseppe saw Eva everywhere - in the embroidered cushions, in the pattern of the lace curtains, on the wooden armrests of the old chair. He heard her footsteps on the stairs leading to the floor above and felt her breathing in the solitary air of the kitchen, which shared its space with the lounge and dining areas. The house was built of stone and was smaller than the Mistretta home in Santa Ninfa. There was a shallow groove on the edge of the sill of the lowest window, which looked out onto a cork oak tree - its branches stretched wide, its trunk thick and lumped with bark. Beyond the tree wild grass and rocks bunched like families. "That's where Signor Mistretta rests his rifle when he doesn't feel the urge to hunt outdoors," said Nonno as Giuseppe fingered the groove.

"How do you know? Have you been here before?" asked Giuseppe.

"No, Mistretta has described this house to me many times. How he likes to hunt. How his girls run down the stairs shrieking and chase away the guinea fowl. Ah! Can you imagine?" said Nonno laughing and slapping his hands to his bald head.

"I can," said Giuseppe.

Nonno left Giuseppe standing in the middle of the house, his mind wandering, and went outside to gather wood. A stream of wind cut the afternoon, separating the warm part of the day from the cold one rising with the coming of night. He picked up dry twigs and packed them on his arm. In the house he built a fire and stacked the remaining wood.

On the first morning Nonno warmed mulled wine and the two of them dunked stale bread and ate without talking. Giuseppe ate from an enamel mug decorated with a chain of flowers. Nonno ate directly from the pan.

They wrapped scarves round their necks and chins and, with hands in pockets, walked to the top of a hill to see the distant sea and watch the movement of clouds. Sunset stretched over the island like a cloth. The wind scrubbed their faces and the backs of their hands became ruddy with the roughness of winter. Giuseppe didn't mind. Later, Nonno would rub olive oil onto their hands like he had done since Peppe was a toddler. That evening, at the house, he warmed the liquid between his palms and faced them to the fire until he could no longer stand the heat. He then took Peppe's hands and rubbed the liquid into his skin, passing on warmth.

They passed the second day setting traps for birds. Giuseppe dug holes in the ground as deep as a hand. Nonno cut leaves off cactus pears and in each cut a half circle for the trapdoor. They watched

from Mistretta's hunting window as birds, too stubborn to fly away for the winter, hopped inside. Before sunset Giuseppe released them, holding them in his hands and feeling the strength of their wings before letting go.

On the morning of the third day, after mulled wine had warmed their joints, Nonno tripped over a piece of wood that had removed itself from the top step. He failed to regain balance and slid to the bottom of the stairs. Giuseppe watched from the kitchen, waiting for Nonno to get up. He didn't. He walked towards the old man, who was rolled into a ball at the bottom of the stairs, hands over cheeks. Nonno forced a muffled sound and pointed to his mouth. He couldn't open it as his jaw was broken shut. Giuseppe lifted him so he could sit, and dragged him to the wall so that he could lean against it. "*Stai calmo, I'll get you a cushion Nonno,*" said Giuseppe.

"Mmmm" said Nonno pointing to a screwdriver on the kitchen table.

Giuseppe grabbed it and placed it in his grandfather's hand. Nonno pushed the end past his lips and between his teeth as pain dug into his wrinkles and settled there. Giuseppe could hear metal grind against tooth enamel. Using the tool as a lever, Nonno tried to force his jaws apart. He stopped to breathe and waited for his heart to chase a slower rhythm. Then he tried again. And after that, he tried again. Giuseppe tried, knowing that it hurt. He massaged the old man's cheeks to ease the muscles but that too did not help to move the bones. Nonno's cheeks swelled.

"Nonno, I'm going to get help," said Giuseppe.

Nonno closed his eyes and moved his head from side to side to say No. Giuseppe thumped up the stairs to get a pillow which he placed behind Nonno's shoulders and head. With two blankets he covered him. He trickled water into his mouth with a spoon. He snapped twigs in half and placed them in the fire, turning the wood to stoke the small flame. Outside the clouds poured rain onto the trees and the long grass. The earth was no longer thirsty. Peppe was crying.

"*Nonno stai fermo. I'm coming,*" he said, grabbing his hat and scarf, more from routine than necessity.

Giuseppe ran and thought about his grandfather, the only person in the world who stood up for him. He had to live. His father died when he was ten - "of heartache" were his mother's words. When he reached the walls of Santa Ninfa he kept running, past the church to where his mother was - in the house of the man who was courting her. Giuseppe wasn't fond of him. He was a small man with thin lips and a thin moustache, unsuited to his mother, who carried a large figure. She ate cake at every opportunity even though the doctor warned her about having too much sugar. It affected her blood and in turn would affect her liver and kidneys. "*lo mi diverto,*" she would say, enjoying herself, as she placed a spoonful of sponge and cream into her mouth, her eyes closed to better savour the textures.

Giuseppe's fist banged on the door until it opened. The small man greeted him with a smile - he had always shown respect towards the boy, not meaning him any harm. "Where's my mother?" asked Giuseppe.

"Inside," said the small man.

“Mamma! Mamma!” called Giuseppe past his shoulder.

Signora Puglia came to the door and saw her son’s face crusted in tears. “What’s wrong? Where’s Nonno?” she asked, looking for the old man.

“Nonno fell. I think his jaw’s broken. He’s trying to open his mouth with a screwdriver. I left him on the floor,” said Giuseppe.

He wanted to get back to the country house, wanted to save him. Signora Puglia lifted her skirt and shifted her weight into a run. It was the first time Giuseppe had seen his mother run. He ran next to her to the Mistretta house. She knocked on the door, straining to breathe. “Signore... the old man has fallen. We need your cart, *per favore*,” she begged.

Giuseppe waited outside, watching through the open door as his mother and Eva’s father stood in the kitchen. Eva came down the stairs, her pigtailed bouncing. She stopped at the bottom step, her foot mid air, when she saw Giuseppe outside. He looked at her, his eyes holding hers, speaking of his desperation. She said nothing and moved her gaze to the adults. She listened. She looked at Giuseppe and he saw that she understood.

Signor Mistretta led Signora Puglia and Giuseppe to the stable where a large horse, the colour of burnt biscuits, stood. On its forehead was a white star. Pina was in the stable sweeping. She greeted the adults and nodded her head at Giuseppe, smiling. “Pina get the horse ready and bring him outside,” said Signor Mistretta.

She touched the horse’s front leg and led it out towards the cart. Animals responded to her, she had a way of talking to them that kept them happy and calm. Signor Mistretta pulled leather straps over the horse, attaching him to the wooden cart.

Giuseppe got onto the cart, lifted his mother up and extended a hand to Eva’s father. They reached the country house where Nonno lay on the floor. Dry blood veined the side of his face, which was swollen and grey. Signora Puglia lifted the old man, holding him so that he didn’t slump. His fingers were curled around the screwdriver. “How many times did he try to unlock his mouth?” Giuseppe wondered.

He opened Nonno’s hand, taking the tool and putting it in his pocket. He didn’t want his mother to see. “Mamma, do you think he’s dead?” Giuseppe asked.

“I don’t know *figghiu meu*. Sometimes people look dead and then spring to life,” she said, not looking at Giuseppe.

Signor Mistretta touched the old man’s face and hands, avoiding eye contact with the others. “The old man’s dead” he thought to himself. As he waited for Signora Puglia to decide what to do he looked around the house - there were more men than women, something he was not used to. “Let’s take him home,” said Signora Puglia.

Giuseppe helped her lift him off the floor. Signor Mistretta took his legs and they carried him to the cart where they laid him down and covered him with blankets. Giuseppe sat next to him. They rode back in silence.

At the small man's house they lay Nonno on the bed and waited. "He's dead, but let's wait just in case," Signora Puglia said quietly to Signor Mistretta.

"Let me know if there's any change. Knock on my door at any time, I'll probably be awake," said Signor Mistretta.

In the bathroom of the small man's house Giuseppe held Nonno's cut throat razor. The old man had wrapped it in a lotto ticket and secured it with scotch tape. The date lay across the length of the handle - 1938 ROMA AXVIII framed in red. The paper had taken on the feel of leather and held the smell of shaving foam and his grandfather. He slid the razor out of its sheath. The handle was ivory. Resting it in his palm he pulled the hook down with his thumb, rotating the blade outwards, letting it catch the candlelight. He swallowed dry saliva. "When last did I have a drink of water?" he thought to himself.

He cupped his hand and scooped water into his mouth from the basin. With every sip a thought: "Please let him live. Please let him live. Please let him live."

He looked at his face and shoulders framed in the oval mirror. "Am I being punished for the bad things I've done? For pulling the draping down in church? For smoking behind mamma's back?"

"Peppe," said his mother behind him, startling him. "We've called the priest. He's with Nonno."

In Nonno's bedroom the priest placed a silver coin over each of the old man's eyes and crossed holy water on his forehead with his thumb. His lips were moving, releasing whispers. Giuseppe stood in the doorway and then turned and walked away.

The Country House

For a large part of summer and on some weekends during the winter months, the Mistretta family resided at a house in the country. They had two country houses, one at Aquanova on a plot of land that divided a field of vines from a plantation of olives and another on a hill, accessed via a road that went past the cemetery. The girls would make their thoughts known every time they commenced their journey up the dusty road, too narrow for a cart to travel. It was only on the Day of the Dead that they passed beyond the cemetery gates to give respect to their great grandparents and others whose bodies were underground. Otherwise they avoided the place of the deceased like famine. "The dead have the best view of Santa Ninfa and the valley. On a clear day you can see the blue of the Mediterranean," Signor Mistretta's mother, Lorenza, would say.

The summer of 1938 was in full bloom – fruit ripened on trees, watermelons soaked the heat of the sand, figs bled white when plucked off their stems and in the air was the scent of pink oleander. The girls walked ahead of their parents, keeping to the part of the road furthest from the cemetery wall. "I bet you the spirits will visit tonight," Valentina joked.

"*E dai*, stop it Vale," said Eva.

"Even if they're lying down they can see us with the tail of their eye," Valentina continued.

"They can't see us, they're in a box covered in sand," Eva retorted.

"I bet you some of them are still alive, scratching the inside of their coffins, their fingers raw and their voices hoarse from screaming," said Valentina clawing the air.

"Stop it!" Eva pushed her.

"*E dai*, I'm playing," said Valentina.

Eva started to run, "So am I."

Her skin tingled at the thought of ghosts and spirits and she wanted to get away from dead family members, preferring to interact with them in dreams.

Valentina and Pina followed, catching up to Eva who had stopped to disengage the bolt of the gate to the house. A pathway led to a pergola, then there were a few steps down to a stone footpath that led to a giant carob tree. In the garden Turkish figs stood in disjointed poses along with cherry, apricot, white peach and fig trees. Pomegranates clung to the walls of the house. On the veranda outside the front door, the girls joined hands and sang *giro giro tondo*, falling down and pretending to be dead. Eva closed her eyes and let her tongue hang out, a thread of saliva collecting in a small puddle on the floor. "Gabriella, I think you'd better prepare the coffins," Signor Mistretta turned to his wife as he stepped over his daughters.

"No Papa. No!" they shrieked, running circles around him.

He unlocked the door and let the musty air escape. Inside a grid had been painted on the cement floor to resemble tiles. The kitchen was the largest room, with two bedrooms leading off the central area. The kitchen table, made of cement, was tiled in red and white – Signora Mistretta, her mother-

in-law Lorenza, whom everyone called Renza, and her sister-in-law Petrina, used it as a work surface between meals. Renza led in the preparation of meals, giving the other women tasks. Petrina didn't cook but she would make cannola.

On a night when the moon was cut in half, she spread lengths of muslin across a section of the table top. She prepared the dough, pulling it through the pasta maker to thin it out. She laid it on the bare part of the table and cut it into squares, curling each piece around a short length of bamboo before dropping it into boiling oil. She laid the cooked shells across the muslin, letting them cool before pulling out the bamboo. She then filled the skins with ricotta, which she had sieved for a smooth consistency and mixed with cocoa powder and candied orange rind. She placed a tea towel on a serving dish, stacked cannoli on it in a pyramid and dusted them in icing sugar. It was dawn, the sky a hazy blue, before she lay on her bed. She shared the room with Renza, Eva and Valentina. In the other bedroom slept Pina, Signor and Signora Mistretta. The bedrooms, like the kitchen, were sparse and contained only the furniture that was necessary.

Petrina watched her nieces as they slept, their eyes flickering under lids in a passage of dreams. Eva, mouth open, snored softly. Her hair puddled across the pillow.

Eva woke at eight to a blade of sunlight cutting across her. It entered from the broken section of a shutter and warmed her thigh, middle and arm. She had found the bullet casing that day her father, while hunting a fox, fired a shot which splintered the wooden shutter and smashed the pane of glass. The glass had not been replaced, a task that would be worried about in winter when insulation was needed.

In the kitchen Eva found a stack of fresh cannola. Outside her grandmother was spraying water along the veranda – she moved the watering can with its wide head from side to side in rhythm with the music in her head. She used the water from the dirty well; the other well contained drinking water. In the shade of the carob tree Renza had put seven chairs around a table on which was a bowl of peeled Turkish figs, their flesh red. A mesh cloth covered them; the flies flickered on its surface trying to get to the fruit. Eva took a cannolo and bit through the pastry and into the ricotta, the icing sugar afflicting her nose. She kissed her grandmother good morning and sat at the dry edge of the veranda, legs crossed. Renza watered nearby and sprayed Eva on her back. “Nonna!” she said getting up.

“*Dai*, I want to clean so that it's fresh fresh,” said Renza.

Renza woke up early every morning and made herself *caffè latte* which she drank standing up. If she felt hungry, she dipped a *torciglione* biscuit into it. She then watered the whole garden, starting with the carob tree and ending at the oranges. If there were ripe Turkish figs, she would cut them loose and peel them, ready for the girls to eat when they woke up. As her last chore for the morning, she swept the veranda and wet it, enjoying the vapour rising from the cement.

Eva sat under the carob tree, finished her cannolo and moved onto the fruit. The sweet juice made her thirsty so she climbed the steps to the drinking well and lowered the bucket, filling it to the brim. She carried it to the kitchen with both hands. With a ladle she scooped water into a jug and took it outside. Nonna was sitting at the table, legs apart, shoes off, feet resting on heels. Eva poured her a glass of water. They sat in silence punctuated by sighs until Valentina and Pina peered from the

door, their eyes slits against the light. Pina had a cannolo in each hand; Valentina preferred to eat fruit. Barefoot they moved to the carob tree and sat with their sister and grandmother. When the girls had eaten all the Turkish figs, Signor Mistretta appeared in the doorframe, washed and dressed in long pants and a short-sleeved shirt. People walked along the road, which looked down onto his house and he preferred to be dressed when he waved at them. “*Buon giorno mamma!*” He said kissing the old woman on her cheek.

“How was the water this morning? Wet?” The same question he asked her every morning. Renza shook her head.

“*Bellezze!* Did you all sleep well?” he asked his daughters.

“Si Papa, it’s so quiet here at night, only the sound of the stars twinkling,” said Eva.

She went inside to put on a dress and sandals. In Santa Ninfa, Pina looked after the horse, but at the country house it was Eva’s duty to feed and care for the horse. He slept in a cave in the hill that formed part of the Mistretta property. In the cave it was cool and the animal was protected from the heat. In an enamel bowl she mixed bran and water into a paste. In another bowl she poured fresh water.

Petrina showed herself at noon. She had coiffed her hair, painted her nails red and wore lipstick. Her dress was a cascade of chiffon and on her feet were espadrilles that laced up her ankle. “*Buon giorno.* Did you enjoy the cannoli?” she asked.

Pina ran up to her, “*Zia fatimi bedda!* Lipstick, nail polish, everything!”

“You ask me? It’s your mother you must ask.” Petrina cast her eyes across the garden for her sister-in-law.

“She’s still sleeping... *e dai Zia,*” said Pina holding on to her aunt’s arm and swinging it.

“*Va bene.* Help me bring my things outside. I want to tan my legs, look how white they are,” she said lifting her dress.

Pina and Petrina set up under the carob tree, the table halfway in the sun. She placed a mirror to the side of Pina’s face so that the girl could watch as she coloured her eyelids, cheeks and lips. Eva discreetly walked away to wee. She chose an orange tree at the back of the house where there were no windows looking out. She counted the oranges as she took off her panties and hooked them on a twig. Then she rolled up her dress and squatted. She looked down to make sure she didn’t wet her sandals. She waited for the last drop to fall, shaking herself so that she was dry. She stood up and put on her panties, careful not to let her shoes touch the fabric. She unrolled her dress and, rubbing her hands across the front, smoothed out the creases. In the house, she found her mother on the bed embroidering a curtain. “This is for your *corredo,*” she said, knowing that some day her daughter would get married.

Her mother had not lifted her head to look at her, keeping an eye on the needle and thread, and Eva was grateful – this way she did not need to respond. Thoughts of Giuseppe took control of her facial features and for this reason also she was grateful for her mother’s preoccupation.

Eva joined Nonna in the kitchen. The old lady was at the table, popping beans from their pods.
“*Pasta e fasoli* for lunch, what do you think?”

“*Buonissimo* Nonna!” Eva pulled a chair to the table.

She took a handful of bean strings and helped her grandmother. Pina ran in, a mirror in her hands.
“And who is this *bella signorinella*?” asked Nonna.

“It’s me Nonna,” said Pina.

“Me who? I don’t know you,” said Nonna.

Pina hugged the old woman. “It’s me Pina.”

“Careful, you’re going to rub off your lipstick,” Petrina said from the veranda where she was sprawled on a deck chair.

She turned the chair towards the door for a full view of the kitchen inside. “Mamma, when are we going to eat? I’m hungry.” She lifted her arms over her head, and turned slightly to the side so her face caught the sun.

“In a little while *figghia mia*,” said Renza.

When Eva was finished, a heap of beans in the bowl in front of her, she put a pot of water on to boil. Nonna poured the beans into the pot and added salt. Pina and Eva wiped the table and smoothed a tablecloth over it - letting it billow before it touched the surface. They went outside to fetch chairs and carried them to their places. They arranged the plates and cutlery and added an extra setting so that they were in the company of a round number. Pina glanced at herself in the mirror which she’d put in front of her table-setting. Petrina waved at a group of people travelling the road that looked down into the property; the men waved back a little longer.

Lunch was served just after one. Signor Mistretta sat at the head. Renza sat opposite him and served each of them, scooping the pasta into plates. In the hot months, he had the habit of dusting his underarms with talcum powder so he always smelt fresh, a trick he learnt from his mother. No one would mind sitting next to him. “Diego and his family are coming tonight. They’ll be staying for about a week,” he said.

“You always let them come, Papa.” Valentina was annoyed.

“They’re not fortunate. They can’t afford to go on holiday and they like it here. And I like them,” said Signor Mistretta.

After lunch Eva closed the bedroom shutters and lay on her bed. The mattress was lumpy but the cotton throw, in bright yellow, was smooth against her skin. She let her mind wander to Peppe – she only did this when she was alone, as the emotions and thoughts played across her face. She turned onto her stomach and slid her hand under her pillow to touch the cool side. She fell asleep.

The sound of a dog barking, being muzzled, whimpering, a leather strap through a buckle, more straps being secured and tightened, shrieking. Eva moved through the watery layer between dream and reality and woke to Valentina shrieking outside. Her sister was on the horse, kicking its sides,

spurring it to gallop. It galloped a few metres, turning up sand, and then threw her off. Valentina shrieked, rolled her head from side to side and got up to climb back onto the horse. "She wants it to gallop," said Petrina to Eva.

Eva shook her head. "But she knows he doesn't like to run with people on him."

"Ah, your sister," said Petrina.

They watched as Valentina had herself thrown onto the ground until her sides could no longer take the battering. She dusted herself off, scraped her hair off her face and pushed past Eva into the kitchen. Eva went to calm the horse. She steered him to where the grass was green and let him graze. She heard a whimpering sound coming from the back of the house and realised that her father had fetched Lola from Santa Ninfa. "Papa, you can't muzzle her. Let her be free."

Diego and his family arrived before sunset and set up under the carob tree. The women swept away the leaves and picked the stones out of the ground, creating a surface that was comfortable to sleep on. They laid down blankets and tied washing lines between branches. They threw sheets over the lines to divide the area and create privacy. Eva felt as though she was a witness to another world. Diego's sister took a piece of broken mirror from her satchel and combed her hair; it was long and reached the middle of her back. She gripped the comb between her teeth and tied her hair at the nape, letting it fall like a horse's tail. Signora Mistretta and Renza helped Diego's wife with the small children – they had five and the youngest were three year old twins. Renza put the twins to sleep, telling them that they could hold the stars in their hands. Signora Mistretta went to fetch water for the visitors to drink and wash themselves. Eva joined her on the way to the well. "I'll do it mamma," she said.

She let the bucket descend to the water and then pulled it up. She carried it with both hands to Diego's sister who was pulling two sheets together so that she could undress. "Here's some water for you to wash with and drink," she said to the girl.

She was her age, thirteen. She was dirty and smelt of sweat, like the peasants, but her eyes were pretty. "It won't be long before she's be married off," Eva thought to herself.

Above them the stars seemed to hang low in the sky. Diego's children stretched their arms to try and catch them. The visitors settled; Petrina brought out the remaining cannola and placed them at the entrance to the campsite. Eva and Valentina pulled a mattress onto the veranda and rubbed citronella oil onto their bare limbs. They slept under the stars.

Doing the Waltz

Giuseppe took his metal plate and tucked it into the front of his trousers. Since the moneylenders lifted most of their belongings, his mother had bought three metal plates from which they could eat. Signora Puglia had managed to hide a cheese grater, one that belonged to her mother, as well as a pile of rolled up administrative papers describing the extent of her property, a dried clump of lavender held together with a safety pin which her husband had given her, birth certificates, hers, her son's and her father-in-law's, her husband's death certificate, a small missal that her mother had given her on the day she announced her faith at her first holy communion, and black kid gloves. It was Giuseppe's duty to clean the grater, which he did thoroughly. The repetition of cleaning and the musicality that reverberated in its centre gave Giuseppe ideas for new songs which he then picked on his guitar. The cheese grater, together with a box of matches, would fall into the hands of Eva on the night that she became his wife and Giuseppe would continue his duty as grater cleaner until his fingertips, the nerve-endings worn with age and work, could no longer sense the sharpness of the grates.

Drumming his fingers against the plate and whistling, he walked to Rana's house, which stood in the middle of a narrow road just off Via Garibaldi. The front of the house was covered in lichen as it stood in a part of Santa Ninfa that the sun, in its quest for the reflectivity of marble and glass, had forgotten. The surface of the front door was uneven, as though the tree it was cut from had a burdened life. The house was modest with only the essentials. There were four chairs around a table and four sets of cutlery and crockery. Rana's mother had taken three sets of eating utensils with her. The other room served as a bedroom with four beds, a full length mirror and an armoire. The beds were draped with crocheted blankets, mended where many nights of tugging had made the fibres weak. It was through a hole in the door, a natural open whorl in the wood, that years later Giuseppe and Marcello would watch Rana's sister in the heated embrace of a German soldier. Nylon pantyhose would be strung over the handle of the armoire and talcum powder would cover the scent of the man's flesh on her body. It was in the guise of voyeuristic pimp that Rana would make money to gamble in the big cities of Palermo and Naples.

Giuseppe's mother referred to Rana's mother as *la nghiasciata*, as she held tightly to disorder. At any time of day or night her hair was a grey-blond tangle, the heels of her shoes were worn and a food stain, usually orange, decorated the front of her blouse.

Giuseppe walked with the posture of someone faking nonchalance, hoping his mother wouldn't suspect the evening that lay before him. He'd told her he wasn't hungry. Rana's parents and sister had gone to visit an aunt who'd fallen sick and had no children to look after her. "Heart murmurs," the physician had said.

Rana's sister had grown full-breasted and had started to resemble his mother. He'd overheard his parents talking about marrying her off quickly, but she needed a trousseau, one they'd gather from the linen chest of his great aunt. "Good excuse for a holiday. A rich aunt with only a few days to live," Marcello nodded.

Giuseppe cleared the kitchen table, piled semolina flour onto it and cracked a dozen eggs. He scooped the ingredients together and started to knead. The table was solid, a mule to move, so the dust and grime that had gathered at its feet stayed there. Giuseppe rolled out the dough until it was

almost translucent and cut it into thin strips. “*Pasta alla chitarra!*” he said with the ferocity of someone who had perfected his art. He slapped his hands on his trousers, generating fine white clouds.

Rana had a pot of water boiling on the coal stove. Giuseppe carried the strings of raw pasta over his arm and tipped them into the water. He inhaled the eggy smell, added a teaspoon of salt and stirred, letting the steam cover his face. “*Ragazzi*, in a few minutes we’ll eat.”

Draining the water, Giuseppe glazed the spaghetti with olive oil and placed the pot on the table where it singed a dark circle. Rana didn’t notice. They each put their plates on the table, Giuseppe and Rana with their warped metal ones and Marcello with his of decorated porcelain. “So who’s joining the Police Force with me?” Peppe asked his friends.

Rana wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, which had started to sprout wiry hairs. “You not going to the army?” he asked.

“No, as an only son I have to look after my mother, so for me the army is not compulsory,” said Giuseppe with an air of someone who knew better.

Marcello stood up and pulled a pamphlet out of his back pocket. “That Army General handed this to me the other day”.

The graphic was of wide-shouldered men with square jaws in uniform. Inside was a quote from Benito Mussolini outlining the benefits of serving Italy. “You want to look like that?” said Giuseppe throwing the paper back at Marcello.

Marcello coiled pasta onto his fork and brought it to his mouth. “Maybe I’ll go to America,” he said.

“I have an uncle in America. He makes corsets for the ladies,” said Giuseppe.

Rana made a remark muffled by a mouthful of food - something about bras and petticoats.

“Why don’t you go to America?” Marcello asked Giuseppe.

“I like it here,” said Giuseppe. He liked it wherever Eva was.

It was Saturday night and Giuseppe was playing in the band. He finished dinner, walked out the door and picked a lemon off a tree and held it to his nose. The skin of the fruit was bumpy and cool, trapping its scent.

There were two new members in the band, Ignazio who played the trumpet and Sinagori who played the fiddle and sang, bringing the number of musicians to five. When they made music on the bandstand in the piazza, Giuseppe felt the base notes hum under his skin. They all played in synergy, sensing the other’s pause and rhythm as if by instinct. As his fingers animated the strings of the mandolin, he looked over the *bel vedere* into the darkness of the valley and then at the lights outlining the piazza. He was happy.

When it was his turn to take a break, he sat at a bench next to his aunt, Zia Rosalinda, who hugged him close. “But are you blind?” she asked him, the palms of her hands pushed together for emphasis.

“Can’t you see she likes you? Why don’t you do something? Go talk to her?” she lectured.

Giuseppe cast his eyes downwards and pretended to kick a stone. A smile stretched across his face and he stopped it before his aunt noticed. He took her hand in his and slapped it gently.

Eva had been nicknamed *La Bedda* because her beauty was radiant yet unassuming. On Saturday nights she danced and laughed, unaware of herself and the space her body occupied. On other nights she danced in the bedroom with her sisters as they each took turns wearing their mother’s wedding dress. While Valentina looked at herself in the mirror, twisting her neck to watch herself from behind, Eva kept her eyes on the lace hem that swirled round her legs like the spume on the sea.

Giuseppe watched Eva as she spun on the dance floor. His aunt, following his gaze, poked him in the arm as though her stubby finger might inject courage straight into his bones. The soles of Eva’s shoes brushed against the paved floor in time to the music. Giuseppe’s eyes fell to her feet. They moved up her legs following the contour of her calves. The fringes of her shawl brushed against the backs of her knees as she drew it tighter around her shoulders. Jealousy pulled at his ribs when she leant in close to another man, dancing in his arms, nose pressed to his chest. He no longer saw people, only arms and legs moving to the songs and everywhere the red floral of her dress. As he sat holding his aunt’s hand, he wondered what Eva’s bedroom was like, where she slept. He imagined her lying in bed, her eyelids betraying the passage of dreams. A friend of his aunt’s took him by the arm, “Am I too old to dance with a handsome young man?”

Giuseppe led her on the waltz and then kissed her hand and bowed low when it ended. He danced with all the girls whether they were young, old, pretty or ugly, but not with Eva. He avoided her like leprosy.

In the darkness of early morning he walked past her house. He stood under the balcony and imagined himself serenading her with the melancholy of the mandolin, letting the notes rise into the vast night.

Giuseppe worked at the Barber Shop most afternoons and on Saturdays. Turiddu had taught him how to cut hair in various styles and how to shave. Eva would come past to say hello. Sometimes she’d sit at one of the chairs in the waiting area and watch as clients walked in and out. She’d listen to the banter. It was a different world to hers. The same as there were rules for hanging the washing on the line, there were rules to lathering and shaving. Her mother had taught her to hang the sheets out first, on the outer most line so that when someone passed and looked up they would see clean linen flapping in the breeze and not the dresses and undergarments hung up to dry behind it. In the Barber Shop she’d observe as her uncle held the razor and scraped downwards, starting at the cheeks, then moving to the chin and upper lip and finally the neck. Giuseppe had caught on quickly. He had built himself a formidable clientele.

Giuseppe no longer gave her piggyback rides but if he wasn't attending to a client, he'd trip out the shop to meet her and carry her books. When the attraction became unbearable, they began avoiding each other. Giuseppe's feelings for Eva became unplaceable, so he carried them in a handkerchief, which he wound around and in between his fingers like a meditation of the heart and loins.

Eva eluded him. His feelings for her overwhelmed him. He'd picture her floating on a cloud like Dante's Beatrice swathed in blue and red, her head covered, eyes pointed upwards, arms outstretched and palms up. And then there was the reality of the flesh and the swirl he felt in his stomach when he saw her in the piazza, the fringes of her shawl brushing against the backs of her knees. He would fixate on her waist accentuated by a thin belt and wonder how he would ever have her as a wife. He wanted to contain her, keep her close and safe.

With the arrogance of youth, Giuseppe's pride in his appearance turned to vanity and he always took the opportunity to look at himself in a mirror or the plate glass window of a shop. He was tall and slim in his starched shirt and new trousers. His shoes from Milan were polished to a high shine. On a day that he walked past Signor Mistretta's haberdashery, he caught his reflection and then looked past it to Eva. She was sitting on a stool, swinging her leg, looking into the distance beyond the shop window. Her mind was somewhere unreachable. She had the same expression of wonderment as she had when he first saw her at her parent's carnival party years ago. She was slender, her head was ruled by dark curls and she was tanned. The whites of her eyes glowed against her dark skin. He watched her from outside, through the dressed window and the spools of fabric. He opened the door and as the bell tinkled and Signor Mistretta looked up from his cutting table where he was absorbed in the pages of a novel, he walked towards her, took off his hat and got down on one knee. He got up again, as though the action did not happen and he merely stumbled into that position. "What would you say if I asked you to marry me?" he asked upright, clutching his hat.

"Ask me and I'll tell you," responded Eva.

Giuseppe enrolled himself in the Police Force. He'd missed the recruitment officer when he was in town so he caught the train from Marsala to Palermo Centrale. From there he walked to the Police Headquarters in Via Vittorio Emanuele, off Piazza Bellini. He was taken to a large room where a doctor who looked like a goat put him through a series of tests. The doctor checked him for any sign of disease, ensured that he wasn't flat-footed and was of a certain height and build that would justify his presence in the Force. Giuseppe was found to be fit and tall and after filling in a number of papers was taken to another room where a tailor took his measurements. There were five hats on a shelf, all of the same design but in varying sizes. The tailor took the middle hat and placed it on Peppe's head. He looked at himself in the full-length mirror. He made a handsome picture. The hat, with the official emblem on the front, gave him a deft air.

The tailor's measuring tape whirred in his hand as he extended it down Giuseppe's leg to the lip of his shoe, the front of which reflected the tailor's face. He'd polished them the night before, as a journey such as this required immaculate grooming. This he had learnt from Turiddu the Barber. "Always look your best, take pride in your appearance, you never know who you might bump into," he'd say.

The tailor's mouth held pins, the sharp ends against his tongue, and behind his ear was a pencil, which he took to scrawl measurements on a small square piece of paper. The tailor, like the doctor, was a silent man. Between those walls discipline and respect were spoken for, so there was no need for chatter. Muffled footsteps could be heard from beyond the door, echoing on the marbled floors and high ceilings. Flags decorated the entrance hall – the Italian flag, the Sicilian trinaca and Mussolini's Fascist emblem. Those flags sprinkled their dust over the entrance, the floors and the walls. They changed the view from the French windows – the people inside were watching over and inspecting the city, dissecting its parts into *quartieri*, without ever casting an eye pleurably over the surrounding trees, parks, roads, churches, markets and apartments.

Giuseppe left through the same entrance, looking up at the flags as he went out. "Come back in a week," the man in the office had told him. It was the first time that Giuseppe had signed his name.

Before boarding the train back to Marsala, he took a tram to the harbour where the *stile Liberty* of the new apartment blocks changed into the gilt of Byzantium. In this part of the city the skyline shone with domed roofs covered in mosaics of blue and gold that cut blades of sunlight. Ships loomed over fishing boats that swayed with the current. He walked along a pier, concrete and still against the motion of the sea vessels. The Mediterranean was deep and blue. Oil puddled on its surface and spotted the sea with points from which the sun shone stronger. He watched fishermen pull on ropes and move nets and netted baskets around the deck of a fishing trawler. On another boat three men and a dark-skinned teenager sorted through sea urchins that bled purple. It was at this very harbour that his father had done business, loading army boots, flour and salt onto his boat and sailing it to the mainland where he sold it to Archiraf, the Austrian general. He'd never travelled with his father to Palermo. He never sailed on his boat. It was part of his past, his life, that at that moment he wished he could pull into the present. "Had he sailed himself or had he commissioned a sailor?" he wondered to himself.

The dark-skinned teenager climbed onto the pier. The fisherman handed him a box filled with sea urchins sprayed clean. "Are those for sale?" asked Giuseppe.

"*Signore*, I'm on my way to the market. But I can sell you some here." The teenager put the box down.

"Tell me, did you know a man called Antonio Puglia?" Giuseppe asked.

"Yes, he had one arm, but he was strong, could do anything," said the teenager.

"Did he sail his own boat?" Giuseppe was curious.

"Yes, *Signore*, why do you ask?" replied the teenager.

"I knew him, but not as a sailor. How much for ten?" Giuseppe changed the subject.

"*Mille Lire*," answered the teenager.

Giuseppe handed him the money. "Where are you from?"

"Tunisia," he replied. "I ran away from home."

“You should run back,” Giuseppe looked at him.

The Tunisian shrugged his shoulders. “I’d have to walk on water first before I can run Signore.”

The following week Giuseppe fetched his uniform. Outside he unwrapped the brown paper, breaking the seal, and ran his hand across the folded jacket. His excitement, which he had kept tightly wound for days, unfurled and loosened. He was posted to Milan with its clean streets and corporations, under the watch of Chief Commissioner Di Rodolfo. At first he could not get used to the barrage of cars with their intrusive horns and black fumes. He stumbled against the rhythm of everyday life which thumped at a pace that made a Monday in Santa Ninfa feel like the weekend. He found the people pragmatic and cold. There was little time for discussing matters for the pure pleasure of letting the tongue run loose. Answers were given as a simple yes or no, with no warm up argument.

Chief Commissioner Di Rodolfo gave each of the new recruits a pile of postcards wrapped in a ribbon. “Write to your mothers. Tell them you’re still alive,” he’d say to them.

Giuseppe took the postcards and pushed them to the bottom of his backpack. Ten weeks later during a routine inspection, Chief Commissioner Di Rodolfo stood in front of him and looked at him for a long time. “Empty your bag,” he said.

Giuseppe followed the order and placed three boxes of cigarettes, a comb, a mirror, a calendar and the postcards on his bedside table.

“What’s this?” he asked, letting his thumb run along the edges of the postcards like they were the pages of a book.

“Postcards *Signor Commissario*,” Giuseppe answered.

He had not written or contacted his mother in ten weeks. The commissioner was a man who held family ties highly and as punishment Giuseppe had to stay up that night to fill every postcard. On each he wrote:

Cara Mamma,

I’m sorry I haven’t written.

your loving son Peppe.

Summer in Selinunte

The man with the white turban arrived in Santa Ninfa. No one knew where he came from exactly, only that he appeared when the days lengthened and grew warmer. He staked his place in the town square, halfway between the bar on the corner of Via Garibaldi and Via degli Angeli and the pharmacy on Via del Risorgimento, near the balustrade that separated the town from the valley. For show and for money, he squeezed his skinny limbs into a small box and would stay there from morning to sunset. His ribs hardly moved from breathing and many believed he didn't breathe at all.

The man with the turban marked the start of summer and Signor Mistretta decided it was time to go to Selinunte. All he had listened to since the September of the year before was talk of war, of Hitler and of Italy joining its German ally on the battlefield. He had grown tired of it, often cursing that fateful day in 1939 when the war started, and blaming his shortcomings, however small, on *du malidittu Sittembre*. He wanted to have a different conversation, one that didn't entail Mussolini, fascism or *la Guerra*. The old people enjoyed the new banter and exaggerated the war that had happened before. The old men who survived Caporetto, limbs intact and bereft of bitterness, found the nervous chatter of those younger than them amusing. "In the great war, when we fought in Slovenia against hundreds and thousands of men, we died, we were crippled, and those of us who were alive were dying of hunger. Our war was much worse than this war will ever be. We didn't know what would happen next. For the soldiers it was hell. For family waiting at home, it was limbo, neither here nor there," they said.

The two old men who made it their daily routine to pace the length of Via degli Angeli took bets. They walked mirroring each other, each with a hand behind his back, the other arm swinging with the motion of his stride. "*Scummettu che Mussolini sara ammazzatu prima che l'Italia entra sta guerra,*" the one would say, presuming that Mussolini would be assassinated before Italy went to war.

"*E io scummettu che faremu parti di sta guerra prima di Natali,*" the other would retort, suggesting that they'd be part of the war before Christmas.

The bets on the assassination of Mussolini and of Italy entering the war before Christmas kept them preoccupied. They listened to rumours and chatter and heard that hats kept the mind young. The theory was that a *coppola* lay too close to the skin, thereby restraining thoughts. So they replaced their *coppolas* with hats. The rumour was started by Gaspare - the man who lived under the stairs, the one who built the nativity scene in December, the man in charge of draping the church.

"I'm tired of waiting," said Signor Mistretta to his wife one Friday night as she pulled the cotton blanket over her shoulders.

"Waiting waiting always waiting... and what happens? Nothing," he said as he lifted himself to rest his head on his elbow.

Signora Mistretta watched his mouth as he spoke and recognised the boredom that he felt. Lines extended from the outer corners of his eyes and his skin had darkened in the sun. He spent many

afternoons meeting with the landlords and peasants in the fields. "Let's go away. To Selinunte. We'll leave in the next few days. Gives us time to book at the hotel and pack," said Signor Mistretta.

"*Ma sicuru,*" said Signora Mistretta with certainty, in a voice that reminded him of when they'd just met, when he was embarrassed about his arm, when he avoided touching her with it until she pulled the wooden hand from its pocket, lifted it to her lips and kissed it. They'd never spoken about his missing limb, there was no need to.

It was a Friday night and the warmth of the Scirocco, the wind that blew from the dense continent of Africa, mingled with the breeze. The air was still humid; spring had not yet shaken the wetness of winter. Signora Mistretta lifted herself out of bed, walked to the window and opened it wide. She closed her eyes and let the sweet smell of night jasmine fill her senses.

Signor Mistretta had her attention and fell back onto his pillow to rest his head on his hand. In the sanctity of linen sheets and his wife's body, bed was the only place he revealed his stump. The passing of years had done nothing to remove the strange sensation of his missing limb.

Signora Mistretta drew the curtains, leaving the window open and slid into bed, her back to her husband. In the light trailing in from the nearly full moon Signor Mistretta looked at the central line of his wife's back through her nightgown, the muscles moving under the skin on either side of her spine, and he realised that it was a few nights that he had been struggling with sleep. The last meeting with the landlords had left him an insomniac.

He slept in a vest and underpants, the way he was most comfortable. He vowed never to wear anything that took the form of a dress – the thought of a night shirt, even in winter, was abhorrent. He never understood how the priests wore cassocks that brushed the ground they walked on.

It was a few days previously, on a Wednesday, to the rustling of birds before sunset, that he had met with the other landlords. Some of the peasants were revolting against their landlords, shouting and waving their tools in the air, aiming them like guns. "I got a pick axe through my foot," complained Don Pasquale pointing at a shoe swollen with bandages.

"They were so humble. And now? Who do they think they are?" Signor Basilico pushed fingers to thumb as he waved the question; his voice rising as it did when he sang in the choir.

Signor Mistretta stood evenly in the middle with his hands behind his back in invisible handcuffs. Picking one side was not an answer. He felt sorry for the peasants, especially in winter. They had nothing really and some of the landlords worked them worse than mules. But he needed to cut the crop theft that had grown steadily over the months, the men and women working in the fields lowering their heads in denial. "It's the moles, they're over breeding," they'd say, even though he and a group of men kept the mole population down with the help of their ferrets and their Lupare. Most of the men had made their own Lupara by sawing off half the barrel from a shotgun, making the arm easier to hold with one hand. Signor Mistretta bought his from a gunsmith in Santo Patri dili Pirreri. It had been commissioned by a duke who never claimed it; the handle was engraved with his insignia.

"Giuliano has offered his services," said Signor Mistretta.

He'd heard his daughters refer to Giuliano as *Adone*. He was in his twenties with the divinely assigned proportions of a Greek god. All the women responded to him in the same language. Regardless of their age they'd cock their heads to one side, lower their eyelashes and pretend to avert their gaze. Even his wife lifted her chin, extended her neck and walked with a greater sway of the hips. He shook his head at the thought.

Giuliano's services came in the form of night guards, trained to keep watch and beat the backs of anyone attempting to steal cabbages, oranges or any other saleable goods. "He's a criminal, except that he does it in the open, in a formal system," Signor Mistretta explained.

"But what do we do? We've tried to keep watch but we need twenty of us to guard the fields every night," said Signor Basilico, his hands pulling on braces.

"And we'd have to do it in rotation," added Don Ingarra who was unmarried and lived alone, except for a fifty-year-old housekeeper who seemed to be there day and night.

"We've given the workers a quarter of our land as well as a percentage of crops picked. They're still not happy. They want half our land. My father, my grandfather, his father and grandfather all lived off this land. My great great great great grandfather bought it, I have all the papers. They can't take half of it away from me. How is my family going to eat?" demanded another of the landlords as he counted his fingers and poked his chest to give greater effect to his words.

Mistretta listened, moving his hands neatly to his pockets. "To live in peace we need to work together. If the workers are unhappy, we have a big problem on our shoulders. If we're unhappy our families will suffer," he said.

"Let's bring in Giuliano and his men for a month and see if the theft goes down. If it's worth the money spent...," he trailed off, shrugging his shoulders.

Giuliano's services came at a hefty price tag, but the landlords agreed that it was the only way they'd stay in business.

The next morning Signora Mistretta woke early and went to her daughters' room to tickle their arms and wake them. Moments later there was a flurry in the house. In the girls' bedroom the armoire was wide open and clothes, still on hangers, were draped across beds. On Pina's bed a box. It was a parcel from their uncle Zio Tommaso, their mother's brother, who'd made his way to America with a servant girl against his parents' wishes. A parcel arrived regularly. The girls would place it on the kitchen table and after cutting the string and pulling off the rectangular sheet of paper with address and postage stamps, would tear at the brown paper, opening it. Pina kept the postage stamps in the top drawer of her dressing table. The parcels were always packed tightly with clothing at the top, then shoes and magazines rolled in the in between spaces. Valentina would fight for the most beautiful items which, as outlined in the letter, were always for Eva.

The cardboard box on Pina's bed contained beachwear – from swimsuit to caps to shoes. The letter, written in large cursive with the first letter of each paragraph in a capital, which Zio Tommaso

decorated with swirls and flowers, described the fabrics and the styles which were in vogue. He would allude to fashion shoots in magazines.

For their holiday in Selinunte, they had one trunk between the three of them, so Eva put herself in charge of the packing. She could fit numerous outfits, underwear, magazines and still squeeze shoes into the spaces in between. Their uncle had sent them bathing suits from America - for Eva the one with the blue palm trees. It was in the style of a halter neck, the top part a little big on her bony frame, but she liked herself in it. In the letter Zio Tommaso explained that the bathing suits were made with a new fabric called Lastex, which had been blended with rayon. In his exaggerated cursive he wrote that they were the latest thing, all the ladies were wearing them as it streamlined the figure. Lastex added stretch and didn't droop like pure cotton and wool. He was finding a way of using it in his shoes. "The factory is going well and we're exporting to Venezuela," his letter read.

For Signora Mistretta, his sister, he sent a swimsuit with a skirt on the front. "The new fashion is to have a skirt on the front only, the back is formed as shorts, makes the look more sporty and practical."

A matching rubber bathing cap and sunglasses completed the ensemble. Signora Mistretta put it on for the girls. She thought she looked silly, like she was trying to be a fashion model wanting to impress a photographer. Her husband cast his eyes over her figure, stopping at her feet - wrapped in cork wedged shoes - and moved his gaze upwards again. "It's the sunglasses, they don't look right, too big for your face," he said as a way of approving the rest of the outfit.

"The shoes are very in vogue, they're called *korkers*. They're supposed to be very comfortable and most of the ladies are wearing them on the streets, to go shopping, not just for the beach. They're very versatile. Have a look at the magazines, you'll see how they can be worn," said the letter.

"For dresses, the look for this summer is nautical. Big blue and white colours, red bandanas worn in the hair or around the neck," the letter continued.

And indeed, Signor Mistretta had received yokes of cotton twill in blue and white stripes, the pattern broken by a thinner red stripe. In linen he received navy blue, white and ochre - the colour of chicken's eggs. Most of the fabrics came from Mr Kantillal Jivan in Gujarat, India. When Signor Mistretta was eighteen and his parents had just opened the haberdashery for him, he would spend many nights memorising the fabric catalogues. He had since then built up the kind of relationship with Mr Jivan where he simply told him how much he had to spend and the other man selected fabrics that not only fell in with the trend but also sold extremely well with tailors, seamstresses and the ladies.

He even let go the thread of curtain fabric selection, letting the man from Gujarat send him five of his finest every season. Mr Jivan called them *le piu belle*, having learnt Italian amongst other languages including German and French - a relief for Signor Mistretta who could barely write Italian let alone any other language. The ochre linen for men's suits had become popular with requests from tailors in Gibellina, Marsala, Mazzara del Vallo and Campobello. Signor Mistretta would've liked to have had a suit made for himself but imagined his wife telling him he looked like a *berbante*, someone whose boots no longer fitted him. Moreover he didn't want to draw unnecessary

attention to himself; lack of an arm was enough. He would continue to dress in the safety of pinstriped trousers in linen during summer; brown wool in winter.

The letter and the address card Pina had added to a pile of other letters, held together by two elastic bands. She would take them out to examine the postage stamps which she would copy into her sketch book. There was one stamp she repeated in various sizes, with the largest rendition taking up an entire page. It was of tall pine trees reflected in a lake, the whole image in purple.

Eva wanted to write to Giuseppe, to tell him about the parcel and her uncle in America. Tell him how eager she was to feel the waters of the Mediterranean on her skin. Taste the salt and listen to the popping of the bubbles in the spume.

Valentina thumped up the stairs singing like she was on stage at the opera. She swung into view, pulling on the doorframe, her free arm in a graceful pose above her head. She threw her head back to extend the note. Today it didn't irritate Eva, in fact she loved her sister for it and smiled. She put away thoughts of Giuseppe for another time and then, alone, surrounded by dresses and shoes, she packed.

It was two days later that Signor Mistretta loaded the trunks and helped his wife and daughters into two taxis. His sisters, Petrina and Ciccìa, didn't believe in travelling by car - it was too modern for them, they preferred to travel by horse-drawn carriage. After a slow descent to sea level they reached Selinunte, the new part of town facing the harbour. It was formed around a bay, with tourist shops in every street and avenue. A boy with a sign hanging over his front and back shouted, "Gra-ni-ta. Gra-ni-ta!"

The lemon sorbet was advertised as being the best on the west coast. A shop frying *panelle* fronted the sea. Every year Eva would watch as the ladies worked the chickpea flour into dough and formed it into flat rectangles for the frying pans. The sunset shimmered on the sea, like millions of silver fish dancing on its surface. Eva thought of Giuseppe; tonight she would write to him. Tell him how much she missed him and about the sea, the way it smelt and danced.

They checked into the same hotel they stayed in every year - Hotel Oasi with its three floors and windows looking onto the bay. The lady at reception pretended to be busy, scribbling in her visitor's book, watching them through glasses that had slid down to the tip of her nose. Signor Mistretta tapped his finger on the desk. "We'd like to check in Signora, the booking is under Mistretta," he said.

After a moment she looked up from her scribbling. "I'm sorry Signore, but we'll have to put the girls upstairs on the third floor, you and your wife on the second. But don't worry it's a lovely queen size bed, a gracious room."

Signor and Signora Mistretta looked at each other and no words were spoken between them, only a nod from his part to say that it was suitable. "We have our own room!" the thought rushed over Eva.

Her aunts arrived without suitcases. They did this every year, packing their bags with more than was necessary, putting them by the front door and then forgetting them the moment they climbed into the carriage. Petrina and Ciccìa were in the habit of getting caught up in gossip. They went back to Santa Ninfa to fetch their luggage.

Eva sat on her bed bouncing, listening to the squeak of the springs, her mind imagining past guests. She thought what it would be like to lie in the bed with Peppe. She enjoyed being alone, away from her sisters, in the privacy of her thoughts. The details were always the same - Giuseppe's smell of aftershave and cigarettes and his voice, which had become deep. He was a man, in the police force, and she was his girl.

Eva woke up. It was early. Selinunte was quiet. There was not a soul on the beach or in the streets, no sound of scooters, no loud music, no one selling cold drinks and no lovers hiding in the gaps between changerooms. The previous year her father had rented a changeroom where they stored folding chairs, balls and rackets. Eva had gone to fetch rackets and had discovered a boy, smooth cheeked, kissing a woman on the mouth. She could see his tongue pushing inside her mouth, wetness on their lips. His one hand rubbed her breast. She was older than him, could have been his mother. Eva watched, shocked, out of her body. In the still of the morning, she thought back to that scene and she understood what they had felt. She longed to feel it too.

Valentina stirred. A baby in the room beneath them started to cry. Eva listened for movement upstairs. Nothing, her parents were still asleep. She took off her nightgown and pulled on a dress splattered with poppies - another one of her uncle's gifts. She pushed fingers into her hair to separate the curls and, barefoot, left the room, tiptoed downstairs, crossed the hotel lobby with its mosaic floors, passed the glass doors and stepped into the street. In the humid air perspiration trickled down from her armpits. Her soles felt dry sand, then water around her ankles. She stared and tried to follow waves as they rippled and fell. She looked past the sea and into the horizon.

Against the noisy water she did not hear Valentina calling her and then she felt the shift of sand around her feet. Valentina dropped her arms around her, breathing hard into her hair, "I didn't even hear you leave. A mouse is noisier than you. Although they do say an elephant is quieter than a mouse. So you're an elephant!"

Eva turned around, digging her fingers into her sister's ribs, tickling her. They fell, rolling, knees and heels kicking and bruising. Valentina smeared handfuls of sand across her sister's mouth. Eva spat and laughed and kicked. Hair mingled with broken shells. Dresses soaked up water. Wet and tangled they ran across the road, left footsteps in the hotel lobby, scratched up the stairs and poured themselves into their room. Pina was awake waiting for them. "I saw you from the window," she said, excited.

Eva opened the trunk and six hands grabbed clothes and magazines, which scattered across furniture and floor. The girls put on their swimsuits, went down a flight of stairs and stopped at the door of their aunts' room. Eva knocked, knowing that her spinster aunts would be washed and ready to go out, beds tucked in and smoothed. The door opened and standing in its frame were two middle-aged women of the same size and build – hourglass with toned legs. "*Siti pronti? Let's go,*" said Eva.

"*Amuninni!*" said Zia Ciccìa, the older of the two.

On the beach the aunts pushed sticks into the sand, stretching red and white striped muslin across them for shade. They sat under it; legs exposed to the sun. The girls played in the water, stopping to

watch the boys jump from the rocks. Signora Mistretta joined them and sat, with her legs tucked under her, at the water's edge. She shaded her eyes with her hand.

When the rest of the holidaymakers picked up their things and went back to their villas and hotels for lunch and afternoon naps, they stayed. The aunts had filled a bag with thin salame, figs, peaches and green almonds. Eva took a stick of salame and three figs and climbed onto a rock where she looked out over the dark blueness. She peeled the skin off the top of the salame and bit. The figs she ate with the skin on; her lips bruising with colour.

Eva fell asleep under the tent, untouched by dreams. She awoke to see the women of her family kneeling where water met sand, their backs to her, their swimsuits contrasting with the chalk blue haze. The figures got up, turned around and walked towards her. Their feet were slow in the sand. Skins were saturated with sun and it was time to retreat to the coolness of the hotel.

They spent their days on the beach, sunning themselves, eating, swimming and playing cardgames under the shade of the tent. Pale skin turned red, then dark caramel.

Signor Mistretta preferred the shadows of buildings and the company of his table and chair at a bar fronting the sea. He could watch his wife and daughters, meditate as people walked by.

On the afternoon of the tenth of June, from his usual spot at the bar, Signor Mistretta, together with the other men, listened to the news on the radio. Italy had gone to war. Mussolini, from his balcony on the first floor of Palazzo Venezia, announced his decision to the populace:

Soldiers, sailors, and aviators! Black shirts of the revolution and of the legions! Men and women of Italy, of the Empire, and of the kingdom of Albania! Pay heed!

An hour appointed by destiny has struck in the heavens of our fatherland.

The declaration of war has already been delivered to the ambassadors of Great Britain and France. We go to battle against the plutocratic and reactionary democracies of the west who, at every moment, have hindered the advance and have often endangered the very existence of the Italian people.

Recent historical events can be summarized in the following phrases: promises, threats, blackmail, and finally to crown the edifice, the ignoble siege by the fifty-two states of the League of Nations. Our conscience is absolutely tranquil.

With you the entire world is witness that Fascist Italy has done all that is humanly possible to avoid the torment which is throwing Europe into turmoil; but all was in vain. It would have sufficed to revise the treaties to bring them up to date with the changing needs of the life of nations and not consider them untouchable for eternity; it would have sufficed not to have begun the stupid policy of guarantees, which has shown itself particularly lethal for those who accepted them; it would have sufficed not to reject the proposal for peace that the Fuhrer made on 6 October of last year after having finished the campaign in Poland.

But now all of that belongs to the past. If now today we have decided to face the risks and the sacrifices of a war, it is because the honor, the interests, the future impose an iron necessity, since a

great people is truly such if it considers sacred its own duties and does not evade the supreme trials which determine the course of history.

We take up arms to resolve, after having resolved the problem of our land frontier, the problem of our maritime frontiers; we want to break the territorial chains which suffocate us in our own sea; since a people of forty-five million is not truly free if it does not have free access to the ocean.

This gigantic struggle is nothing other than a phase in the logical development of our revolution; it is the struggle of peoples that are poor but rich in workers against the exploiters who hold on ferociously to the monopoly of all the riches and all the gold of the earth; it is the struggle of the fertile and young people against the sterile people moving to the sunset; it is the struggle between two centuries and two ideas.

Now that the die is cast and our will has burned our ships at our backs, I solemnly declare that Italy does not intend to drag into the conflict other peoples bordering her on land or on sea. Switzerland, Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey, Egypt take note of these my words and it depends on them and only on them whether or not they will be rigorously confirmed.

Italians!

In a memorable meeting, which took place in Berlin, I said that according to the laws of Fascist morality, when one has a friend, one marches with him to the end. This we have done with Germany, with its people, with its marvelous armed forces. On this eve of an event of century wide scope, we direct our thoughts to the majesty of the King and Emperor which as always has understood the soul of the fatherland. And we salute with our voices the Fuhrer, the head of great ally Germany. Proletarian and Fascist Italy stands up a third time, strong, proud, and united as never before.

The single order of the day is categorical and obligatory for all. It already spreads and fires hearts from the Alps to the Indian Ocean; Victory!

And we will win, in order finally to give a long period of peace with justice to Italy, to Europe, and to the world.

People of Italy!

Rush to arms and show your tenacity, your courage, your valor!

Signor Mistretta walked slowly back to Hotel Oasi, extending the route by exploring the four blocks of *pensioni* and *locali* along the beachfront. He watched the people, looking for a reaction similar to his. Instead there was cheering, men lifting glasses, already drunk with wine.

Caro Peppe,

The war has started. You'll probably be called to the military. I wonder what will happen to you, where you will be posted. There's talk of Africa. I pray you don't go to Africa. I think I must tell my father how I feel about you. Yes, I must.

I wanted to write to you about the sea, my new swimsuit that my uncle from America sent me. My sister singing opera and my mother in her rubber swimming cap. I wanted to tell you that I have eaten panelle fresh, hot in my fingers. I wanted to tell you about the boy and the woman kissing behind the change rooms. How my skin was scorched from the first day in the sun. How I slept under the tent my aunts made. How I jumped from a rock into the sea and I wasn't afraid. How wonderful that word looks on the page... kissing. I worry that you will not think of me now that Italy is at war. Can I tell my father how I feel? Can I?

Yours forever,

Eva

Military Transport

Morning filled the air with bad omens as chatter rippled through the police hostel. Outside, most of Milan was sleeping. From the window Giuseppe saw the glow of lamps and he imagined the stories behind the lit windows— a child woken by monsters, a man counting his gambling loss, a wife too tired to sleep.

The stench of war filled the rooms. Giuseppe tucked the sheet under his mattress, folding it so that it formed a perfect crease. The sheet was starched and had been whitened with bicarbonate of soda, a smell that had become familiar to him during his months in the Police Force. With flat hands he smoothed the sheet, pushing the ripples outwards. He was taking his time.

He longed for Sicily, not just Santa Ninfa, but his own people. The others did not know where Santa Ninfa was, so when asked about his origins, he answered simply: “I am from Sicily.”

He had packed his things in a leather suitcase that his father had used on his last trip to Marsala. His mother had given it to him. The Police Force had not issued any of the new recruits with standard cases, so they used their own. With their uniforms they were handed a spool of thread and a needle book – on the cover a picture of a naval submarine. He slid the straps through the buckles and secured them in the loops. He had no need for the length of rope as his suitcase did not bulge at the seams. The needle book he tucked into his breast pocket, over his heart and over two photographs – one of his mother and one of Eva.

The new recruits formed a line and stood to attention as the general shook each of their hands and wished them well. He was staying in Milan to lead another squadron. It had been whispered around the hostel that men were needed in the south where allied forces had easier access to the mainland, so most of them were being transferred to Sicily and Naples. First on the list were the islanders.

Outside the large doors with their gilded handles, the flags of Mussolini’s Italy flapped in the breeze. Men in black uniforms and small hats stood in a line. “*Le camicie nere*,” the man on his right whispered to him.

Le Camicie Nere were tall like the men in the picture that Marcello had shown him. “So they do exist,” Giuseppe thought to himself.

He climbed onto the truck from the back, his boot thumped hard on the metal step. Apart from bursts of orders from a general, Milan was quiet. “How his voice doesn’t dry up I don’t know,” said a man sitting next to him.

In the truck, the air was tight and Giuseppe thanked God for the openings at the front and back. He said a silent prayer to Mary asking her to protect him, his mother and Eva, and to watch the souls of his father and grandfather.

His shoulder ached from being pressed against the next man’s shoulder. They were beyond the city limits when the sun made long shadows across an island of flowers. The heat of summer hung on the truck like a blanket. Giuseppe tried to move his legs in the space in front of him, not worrying about touching the ankles of the men around him. No one was bothered about that any more. They were all the same now and there was no shame.

Alongside a village, the truck downed gears, braked and came to a stop. A door opened and boots crunched over gravel. A uniformed man stood in front of them. Hands behind his back, he told them they had one hour to stretch their legs and eat. A door creaked open and slammed. More footsteps on gravel. A sack thumped to the ground and another uniformed man, the driver of the truck, loosened the string and released the opening from its choke. He put his arm in until it was elbow deep and pulled out a handful of white bread rolls. He threw them to the men. "What do we do with these?" asked one of them.

"Feed them to the birds," said the driver.

Squatting down he dug deeper into the sack and pulled out tomatoes. Many oozed flesh and juice, half cooked by the heat. Flies, out of nowhere, attacked the fruit. Giuseppe hid a bread roll in his hat; the other he used as a base for a handful of tomatoes. "All this needs is a bit of salt, but it's not bad," he said to his compatriots as he took a bite as large as his mouth would allow, chewing hard.

He walked like he was being pulled by strings, his knees tight and his movements restricted. It took him a while to gain the fluidity of his gait and he looked around San Mauro Pascoli with its rust coloured walls, plaques with street names and vines that grew in the seams between bricks. It was as though the war had passed the town without seeing it. Dust and leaves whirled across the road and rattled the trees. He thought of Eva upstairs in the bedroom she shared with her sisters. On so many evenings he had stared at that window and the moon's reflection in it. The curtains were embroidered with angels and trumpets. Sometimes Eva would appear behind the curtain, pulling it to one side to show her face. They would smile at each other and he would mouth "Bring me something".

She would throw down a flower she had picked or a ribbon from her hair. Once, she had dropped the key from the armoire into his hands. "To unlock all my secrets," she had said.

Sometimes, he sat under the chestnut tree across the road. In winter, prickly casings would turn brown and split open to reveal their seed. The townsfolk would collect them and roast them and the aroma of chestnuts would rise from the chimneys.

It was past midday when the policemen got back onto the truck. Giuseppe fixated on the hat of the man sitting across from him. It had a gilt emblem – an eagle with open wings and the letters SPQR.

It was late afternoon when they entered the ring road around Rome. An orange light fell over the round trees. "The five hills of Rome," Giuseppe remembered from school.

Signore Punta had told them that Rome could be recognised by its five hills and its tall trees, and below, the ancient roads that led to the main areas of the city - the colosseum, the Parthenon and the Vatican. "During the Roman Empire all roads led to Rome, which was the centre of all life," he had told them.

Now, Mussolini, from his balcony in Rome, was at the centre of all life. The Pope had blessed his decision. In the hostel, the general had turned on the radio for them to hear the prayer and the blessing.

Giuseppe had never been to Rome. He recalled a poster of the Trevi Fountain in his classroom – the Greek gods and horses of white marble so alive they frothed the waters. Saint Peter the Apostle had hidden in catacombs beneath the city. Soon, he too would have to hide from the enemy. He had heard that Romans were elegant and detached from outsiders, wanting to keep for themselves the ancient beauty of their city.

In the truck, his movements limited, Rome, elegant and detached, reminded him of all the things he still wished to do. Jokes were batted from one side of the truck to the other. Pain spread across his shoulders. His arms had been pressed to his sides for hours. He thought of raising them above his head, but it would add to the tension already gathering. The hours passed slowly as the road wound through countryside and towns until they reached the port of Naples. “The capital of the Two Sicilies,” someone said.

“Not since the unification of Italy,” said another.

The city was belle époque, rugged, pink facades alongside green ones, men in Fiats and Alfa Romeos. A couple on a motorbike; her arms wrapped around his waist. A street sign: Via Caracciola, lamp posts, three piers, anchored boats, the promenade, people leaning over the balustrade looking down at a glossy sea. The city was congested and the truck stopped and started along the sea road. The Mediterranean was glossy as the sky. On the other side of the bay, Mount Vesuvius was still except for the cloud that hung over its cone. “She killed a hundred people in the last eruption,” said the man next to Giuseppe.

When?” asked Giuseppe.

“In 1906. Before the war. They say she’ll erupt again, soon,” he replied.

“Before this war is over?” asked Giuseppe.

“Probably,” said the man.

Giuseppe fell asleep. He woke just after midnight as the truck stopped and the engine switched off. His bones were rattled. They were at a hostel just outside of Naples. “They’re putting us with the Sicilians,” said the man who had been sitting next to him on the truck.

Giuseppe was hopeful that he would come across a familiar face.

Over the next few days they were taught military theory and issued weapons, which most of them didn’t know how to use. One morning a new batch of soldiers arrived. He looked through the faces but recognised no one. He looked over them again just to be sure, but it was only the intonation of their words that felt familiar to him.

One morning, they were shown how to work cannon 105/28. “105 millimetres is the diameter of the mouth, 28 refers to the distance it can shoot,” said the colonel as he stood with his hands behind his back.

The cannon was cumbersome and Giuseppe hoped that they would never have to use it.

One night they were woken up and told to stand in a line. They all stood at attention. Giuseppe looked straight ahead as he had been taught in the Police Force. "These are your uniforms," said the colonel with the thin voice, as his lackeys moved a trunk on castors in front of the men.

They handed out uniforms according to size. Giuseppe held out his hands to take the clothes and the helmet. The lackeys then handed out dogtags. *Giuseppe Puglia 15-09-1921* and underneath *Nina Biondo in Puglia* – his name, date of birth and his mother's name. "In the case that you are wounded or die, we know who you belong to," said Thin Voice.

The colonel paced; his hands behind his back. "Get dressed. I want you in uniform. By the time we reach Tunis you'll be soldiers ready for the tropics."

They were escorted to Naples harbour. By day it had been a mishmash of sailors, fishing nets and traders. Now it was quiet. On a boat, a lone fisherman, unable to sleep, played a tune on his harpsichord. The song stopped as the uniformed men walked past. The fisherman stood and lowered his eyes, not daring to look.

They boarded a ship. Giuseppe's boots were heavy against the metal staircase. As the procession of soldiers made its way onto the deck, he looked out. The moon cast a blue glow over the city. He focused on the bell tower of a church, white and tall amongst the buildings. The bell formed a dark shape. He wondered when last it tolled in memory of a dead person or for a wedding. He remembered the rhythm of the bell in Santa Ninfa. He marvelled at how easily he could distract himself from the reality of tight spaces, hunger, masculine smell and the sense of being tossed into the world.

They were led into the hull of the ship and shown their sleeping quarters – a series of bunk beds. Giuseppe sat on one of the lowest bunks. In the windowless cavity he lost track of time. Again he fell asleep. The colonel bellowed orders for dinner. A tin of fish was given to each of them, followed by a bread roll. "You have one hour to eat and get cleaned up before lights out," yelled Thin Voice.

"Guard duty starts tonight. Puglia, Lattuga, Camilleri you're up first. The rest of you, there's a roster on the notice board," he continued.

Giuseppe rubbed his eyes. He was tired of all the commands. He wanted to do what he wanted. He wanted to go home. He thought of the sea, a dark pool that joined the mainland to Sicily. He positioned himself on the deck for guard duty as the roster noted. He looked at the surface of the water and counted the waves as they rolled in groups of four. He stared at the reflection of the ship's light and the trail of the moon, like the trail left by a giant snail. "I can't swim to Sicily," he thought.

He blew a kiss into the darkness, in the direction he thought was Sicily. He waved to his mother and wondered if she knew where he was. He regretted not having written to her more often. He pictured her and Eva waving back at him. Something inside of him crashed.

Gibellina Design School

Signora Mistretta finished scraping the bottom of the iron dish. With a wooden spoon she pushed the dark sauce, thick with fat and bits of onions and tomatoes, to one end. It was rich with flavour from the roast chicken. The heat attracted fat and flavour to the iron and Signora Mistretta wanted to savour the flavours again over pasta. She spooned the sauce into a jug then poured boiled water into the iron dish to lift the remnants. She watched the flakes swirl around. Circles and ovals of fat, like constellations, formed on the surface of the water, which had turned the colour of ripe grapes.

She poured the stained water into the jug and stirred it into the sauce. She left it on the window sill to cool – a light breeze clung to the day in whispers. The coolness caused the topmost ovals of fat to coagulate and turn white, creating a seal across the top. Signora Mistretta touched her hair, an action that she now performed unconsciously, a habit, like others, that had crept into her body as the war lengthened. She turned her hands palm down, fingers outstretched to look at her fingernails one at a time, starting from the smallest finger on her left hand. Her thumbnails were ridged and on the right thumbnail was a pale mark, like the sea that Signor Punta had pointed to on the moon. He had gathered a group of women in the piazza to explain Copernicus' theory. "The moon revolves around the earth and in turn the earth revolves around the sun. Even in space there's hierarchy," he said.

"Look at those shadows; they are craters, seas as vast as the ones of earth, perhaps as deep. That one in the middle, lighter than the others is called Mare Tranquillitatis," he continued.

The evening had been magical - even with the streetlamps off and a few candles behind closed curtains dotting the hem of the piazza, the town was cast in the blue light of full moon. Signora Mistretta felt sealed in a box, so she made the decision to step beyond the threshold of the front door into the night. She immediately felt free. Outside, with the infinite expanse of air, she could fill her lungs with ease. She gave a loud sigh, looked up and fell into the sky. She knocked knuckle to wood, opening doors, and took the women by their hands. She reached the top of Via Sant' Anna with eight of the town's women linking arms and in the piazza they relished the mystery of the full moon and Signor Punta's science lesson given in loud whispers, indulging his teacher's manner.

That had been nights ago. In her kitchen, standing at the open window, Signora Mistretta looked into her reflection on the metallic surface of a tray. The skin between her eyebrows was smooth; the habitual frown had not lined her today. The chicken had provided nourishment. The day before a neighbour had given it to her for two buckets of wheat. She found a handful of tomatoes between the brittle stems of a hardy plant that bore fruit at the cusp of winter - its desire to survive thickened by the war. The onions she planted in July were ripe, the bulbs had pushed up beyond the soil and she pulled them out listening to the snap of roots. She felt rich.

The tray's surface was uneven so she lifted her chin up slightly so that the distortion fell across her nose, which she knew was small. She had told her mother, once, that her nose was too long and wished for a shorter one. Her lips were smooth and stained with lipstick. She pulled them into a smile to check her teeth. None of them had discoloured. Toothpaste was available but she preferred to clean them with ash from the stove. She closed her eyes mouthing a prayer for good molars – she knew that a set of false teeth would be difficult to get and she doubted that she had enough wheat, money and olive oil to pay for them. To find a dentist would have been difficult as many of them had

volunteered their services to the military, leaving the women to bear the pain of tooth decay. "At least Turiddu the Barber can pull teeth for fifty lire," she thought to herself.

It was mid afternoon and the house was still. She felt its heartbeat; it creaked along the floors. Her breathing was solitary and a slight panic lifted the hairs on the back of her neck. The war had morphed into an entity - a live thing that stuck to people, walls, trees, roads, wheat, sea sand, everything. When everyone was waiting for the war to start, it seemed distant, like its occurrence would feature in history books and nowhere else. Now it was real and she had allowed it to spread thickly over her.

She felt the urge to scrub herself and waited for the feeling to float through her. It was not the first time. She envied cats with their raspy tongues and their ability to wash themselves, separating every section of fur.

She pictured her husband walking on the piece of land they owned beyond the walls of Santa Ninfa. With the shop closed on most days he'd taken to caring for the olive trees, wiping moth eggs from the base of new shoots, where the desire for life was strongest. He had told her how he moved the leaves from the feet of old olive trees to admire the ancient grey bark and discover the roots' entry into the soil. She pictured him on his knees, scraping the leaves towards himself. Alone amongst the olives, he removed his wooden arm. He left it wrapped in his jacket to feel whole in his own flesh. Perhaps these were his only moments of deep happiness. Looking at the neatly spaced lines on her forehead she wondered if he knew how she followed him with her thoughts.

Her daughters rose with the grey of dawn. Nights, with their alarms and dense silences had become oppressive and they created tasks for themselves that required them to wake early. On most days it was to watch the morning open into colour and although none of them confessed it, each one knew that for the other it was a confirmation that they had made it through another night, escaping the infinite sleep. The duty of setting the alarm was Eva's. Before she closed her eyes to pray for the end of the war and Giuseppe's safe return, she wound the spring and listened for the rhythmic ticking. Satisfied that the clock's mechanics were still oiled, she pushed the lever that set off the alarm.

As Eva walked in a thicket of dreams, an alarm whaled. Eva sat upright and felt her bedside table for the clock. She lifted it to her eyes to make out the luminous strips; it was midnight. Valentina groaned and turned over, pulling the blanket over her head to block out reality. Pina slept without a murmur. "Come! Get up! Get up!" said Eva shaking Valentina then Pina.

Their mother and father came into their room. Gabriella picked up Pina, carrying her down the stairs and out of the door towards the cellar. Ciccio pulled Valentina by the hand and Eva followed. As the oldest and the last to enter the cellar, Eva pulled the door shut. She stepped down and reached for the candles and matches in an enclave in the wall. "Eva no!" said her father.

"Let's just wait," he said as he reached out to find her. Eva felt his hand brush against her thigh and took it. She knelt down next to him and listened to her sisters' breath moisten the air. She thought of Peppe and how, for him, sharing air in foxholes was part of daily life in the desert. Red flashes darted in front of her and she closed her eyes against the distracting darkness. She remembered Giuseppe's face, searching his forehead, eyebrows, nose, mouth and chin.

She bent her knees to the side and tucked her feet in, like she had done since she was a child. When had she stopped being a child? The thought surprised her. Since the start of the war her body had been taken over by panic and restraint. She could taste it. The family had crouched together, finding comfortable spots against each others' bodies, melting into one. Pina had fallen asleep on her mother's chest. The siren sounded again, longer to signal the end of the raid. Eva couldn't tell the time difference between sirens and the darkness offered no guidance.

Stuck together they waited until their mother shifted Pina so that her head rested on her other shoulder. She was twelve years old but still a child, sucking her thumb as she slept. They uncrumpled, moving slowly like a monster stirring in its cave. Signor Mistretta walked up the stairs and pushed open the trapdoor. It was still dark, the sky a plush velvet. The air was thin and cold. He took his wife's hand then helped each of his daughters out of the cellar. Eva shuddered as she moved from the clammy warmth of bodies into the cold. She shivered and rubbed her arms and shoulders, the wind shaking the tail of her nightgown. Through the gaps of her woollen socks she felt the icy stones that paved the road home. She heard other footsteps, people scuttling home in tight whispers.

In her bed she listened to the breathing of her sisters and followed them with her own, keeping time. Then she stretched her ears for the sound of her parents and the comfort of their snoring. She fell asleep.

Sleep broke with the ringing of the clock. Eva cupped her hand over the bell and placed her finger in front of the knocker. The sound muted, she lifted her head to read the time. The hands formed a straight line down the middle. She got up and went to the window, pulling the curtains apart. Black sky pushing down on grey – the morning could not shake midnight.

Today they had a purpose. They were walking to Gibellina to enrol Pina in design school. Eva poured water into the basin, washed her face, wet her hair and tucked her long fringe behind her ears. She looked for the stockings with the least holes and pulled them on. Albano di Gennaio, the stocking mender, was taken prisoner by the British.

"He was taken at Sidi Barrani," Albano's mother had said, turning the words slowly. Eva remembered her tone and moved the words around in her head as she dressed.

Pina woke up and pulled a thin leather case from under her bed. On her lap, as she dangled her feet, it looked enormous. With a hop she landed on the floor. Eva turned to look at her sister who was a child in a fantasy world. The drawings she kept in the case were well rendered; Pina had a natural talent for proportion and colour. When her uncle sent packages from America, the fashion magazines would go to Pina who would study every page – the fashion, the models, the poses and the fabrics - to use them in her own creations. Ciccio noticed her talent and suggested Pina enrol in the school of design in Gibellina.

Gibellina was five kilometres away and the school was a prestigious one. He'd accompany her there and back every day if her sisters couldn't. He would sell his horse if the money he had hidden in the bowels of his armoire ran out. The stallion was a thoroughbred, a true workhorse and he hoped he would find a buyer if the money dried up.

Eva rolled Valentina like she was a ball of dough. "I'm going to turn you into a bread roll if you don't wake up," said Eva. She hadn't played the bread game in years. As children they'd taken turns rolling. Eva loved being rolled. She would lie dead, letting her arms, legs and head move to gravity.

Eva moved Valentina's hair from her face and saw her smile. She was tired of fighting with her sister. "Come," she said, pulling Valentina up.

In the kitchen, the girls packed their rucksacks with water, bread and rocket leaves. Winter was good for the rocket that grew in every patch of soil in the yard. Bags packed, they stood next to each other with Eva in the middle - a row of youth in front of the patterned wall of the lounge. Signora Mistretta had called her brother-in-law to take a photograph of the girls. They were travelling alone and she wanted to mark the day. Donato was the town photographer. The girls stared into the lens without smiling. They agreed that in the wake of the air raid smiles would be insulting.

Eva folded a 2000 lire note in two and placed it in her shoe under her heel. With each step she wanted to feel its presence. Valentina was quiet. Eva searched her face to unravel her thoughts. Pina crossed her arms over the leather case which she held against her chest. Eva hugged her mother and squashed her cheek against hers. "We'll see you before dusk, Mamma," she reassured her.

"*Va iti vinni, Figghi me.* Go, my children," said Signora Mistretta, her feet inside the doorframe.

The girls walked beyond the town walls into the countryside. Wheat hissed as the breeze brushed through it. Above them a cluster of clouds. "Were you scared last night?" Valentina asked.

"I didn't know what to expect. Then I did. Then I didn't want to expect it," replied Eva, not wanting to admit fear.

"I was scared," said Valentina.

"At least we were all together and we could hide," said Eva.

They passed the cave. "I heard from Lida that Rana and Simona used to go there to make out," said Valentina, pointing to the cave.

"They probably aren't the only ones," remarked Eva.

They walked on the path in a line like soldiers. Eva in front, Pina in the middle and Valentina at the back. "What do we do if we see a German?" asked Valentina.

"We won't see a German, there's nothing out here for them to take," said Eva, remembering the German who walked into their store and addressed their dog Lola in Italian.

"But what if we do?" Valentina insisted.

"We run fast, very fast, back to Santa Ninfa. Or to Gibellina if it's closer," Eva suggested, considering the threat. *We should've taken Lola* she thought.

It was late morning and the sun had broken the clouds into wisps of grey. "Let's stop under that tree," she said as they walked up a rise.

The almond tree was bare of leaves and fruit but its thin branches threw silver against the sky. They sat in the dappled shade looking south-west in the direction of Africa. The Mediterranean glittered. Eva pulled off her scarf and let the breeze cool her neck. She heard her mother's voice in her head. "You'll catch cold," it said.

She chewed on the bitterness of the rocket, thinking of Peppe. "Why don't you ever talk about him?" asked Valentina, reading her face.

"Because he's not mine to talk about," said Eva, swallowing the wish that the war would end and she'd see Peppe again.

The promise of his arrival was her fairytale. She'd imagined it many times, playing the sequence over in her head. Variations of hearing a knock on the front door, running to open it and seeing Peppe. He would be older, strong and smiling, in his military uniform, a rucksack full of the spoils of war.

"It was his name you heard whispered in your ear in the piazza, wasn't it?" asked Valentina.

"Yes," confirmed Eva.

"Then you know you'll see him again," said Valentina.

Eva linked her arm through her sister's. Years ago they were walking like that in the piazza asking their fortunes, waiting for a whisper to tickle their ear with an answer. Pina stared at the sea. Her interests were insects and mice, she played with them and inspected their bodies; but it was fashion that inspired her. Midday saw the arrival of the girls in Gibellina. They had walked slowly, savouring the air with its sweet winter smells. Flowers, like nature's flags, stuck out the side of Pina's rucksack. Plaited hair fell on Valentina's shoulders like serpents. Eva asked an old man for directions who told her to follow the road to the castle, the design school was nearby.

A copper balustrade divided marble stairs and led to wooden doors with glass panels. Beyond was a reception room furnished with couches lit up by chandeliers. Eva's eyes fell on the cushions embroidered with farming scenes. The biggest one was decorated with a yellow wheat field dotted with peasants. Another one featured two donkeys and the other was embroidered with the outlines of the Belice Mountains surrounding Gibellina.

Signora Mistretta thought of them, three young girls walking along the path that chained the two villages to each other. It was five kilometres if they stuck to the path. She knew it would take them the whole day to travel there and back, so she'd picked rocket, tied it in three, bunches dug a hole in the bread and pushed the rocket inside. She pictured Valentina jealous, even though she was not made to sit in a classroom. Eva would worry about the money in her shoe, the pressure under her heel becoming a pinhead focus that would radiate to the rest of her body. For the entire journey, Pina would hold the leather case.

Signora Mistretta flopped onto a chair and let her arm hang over the back. Her legs apart, she relished her solitude. She watched the leaves racing along the street, the only sign of wind.

Nights grew longer as winter approached. People spoke in hushed voices, their heads down, pulling shawls and jackets closer to their bodies. In the darkness, silhouettes moved against walls, they scurried in the exposed openness of streets and paths. Even babies resolved to be quiet. Pina was

accepted at the Gibellina design school and was to start the following year. At the kitchen table laden with paint and brushes, the girls painted fruit-shaped marzipan. "You're not going to design school," said Signor Mistretta, eyeing Pina.

The paintbrushes stopped. Paint dripped, forming circles on the newspaper that covered the table. Underneath the yellow paint dish, on page three, after the news of war and the destruction of aeroplanes, artillery and tanks in Operation Crusader was an article about a professor who had fallen in love with a student:

A professor from the Gibellina Design School has been arrested for the murder of a fifteen year old student at the said institution. After a short affair she told him she could no longer see him as he was too old for her. According to her father he had found out about his daughter's affair with the professor, who was ten years the father's senior. Her lifeless body was found in a nearby field.

"You're not going to design school. *Basta!*" said Signor Mistretta as he slammed his finger over the article.

Africa

Twilight shifted the horizon as sea merged with sunrise. Giuseppe held the balustrade at the ship's helm where he had stood on guard duty since the deep of night. He saw land. It was Sicily. He recognised the flat roofed buildings and the light sand of the coastline. He waved and blew kisses, imagining people dead and alive – the dance of their hair and clothes as the breeze moved in from the sea. He saw Nonno, Papa, Mamma and Eva waving back until their arms grew tired. A pause. Then they blew kisses, both hands to their mouths. "*Arrivederci*," he said out loud as he kissed his hands and spread his fingers over the sea.

His kisses were lost in the water. They fell and tumbled. A tap on the shoulder and he turned around to face a soldier. "It's my turn. You can go," he said to Peppe in a northern Italian accent.

Off duty, Giuseppe's hand went to the photographs of Mamma and Eva, as if by instinct. Mamma smiled at him, her blue eyes grey and alert in the black and white image. The photo of Eva was of her as a girl, barely a teenager, pigtails sprouting above her ears. It was on the same day that she brought him the sugar statue, a baby on a potty; the day that he had asked her to pose. The photographers were in town. They came every ten days or so and would set up backdrops on Via San Vito, just off the piazza. That day they had hung a carpet from the balcony of the wall they usually used. They paid their rent in sugar – they would give a bag to Signora Punta, the teacher's wife, once a month. She would complain to her husband that it wasn't enough. "They ruin my wall and think they can buy me with sweetness," she had said, more than once.

He had watched them, husband and wife, at the Boys Lyceum as he knelt next to the roses and turned the soil. Signor Punta would stand in front of his animated wife and nod. He was much taller than her and, if they stood alongside each other, they formed a pronoun: "il".

The carpet was from Russia, thick and woven in a red and blue pattern. "Let them take a photo, *per favore*," Peppe had said to Eva.

He asked her twice before she lifted her eyes to him and said yes. She stood holding a plastic flower, her legs straight as she looked into the camera as the photographer had asked. Ten days later he delivered the photograph to Giuseppe at Capri Barber Shop. The travelling photographers had done their rounds in the nearby towns of Salemi, Gibellina, Santo Padre delle Perriere, Campobello di Mazzara and Punta Raisi and were about to set the camera upon its tripod in Santa Ninfa once again.

The photograph was not flattering. It showed Eva with eyes squint from staring into the centre of the camera, and a stiff pose. Her mouth was grim. But to him it didn't detract from her beauty. The dark swirls on the carpet contrasted with her dress. With his fingers he traced her silhouette and remembered the fluid silk, the colour of sky.

He sat on his bed and held both photographs in his hands. A soldier climbed down from his bunk. The bed shook. "We still going to Africa?" the soldier asked.

"*Si*. We're still travelling south, it seems," said Peppe.

He took off his uniform, folded it and placed it at the foot of his bed. In his vest and underpants he lay down. Dog tags fell to his collarbone. He felt for the inscription – his mother’s name, his name, his date of birth. He fell asleep.

Giuseppe heard a banging sound. In the waters of sleep he was in his bed in Santa Ninfa; downstairs Nonno was hitting a spoon against a pot. The clanging sound persisted. Bodies shuffled around him, he felt toes brush his back and rolled over to see men lifting their legs into uniforms.

The next night on guard duty the moon was almost ripe. A day or two and it could be picked from the sky. He remembered Nonno’s figs, how he wrapped pieces of sack around each fruit so that the birds couldn’t get to them. He would pick the ripe ones and let the milk ooze onto his hand. The first fruit of the season was always his. He would tear it in two and eat the flesh inside.

On the horizon clouds were tinged with red and there was a flicker of lights. They were approaching land.

He woke to a hand on his shoulder. “Come on, we’re here,” said the soldier.

It was seven in the morning. Giuseppe dressed quickly. “To the deck,” shouted Thin Voice.

He fell in line with soldiers moving up the stairs. No one spoke. Some soldiers were led down stairs. ‘We’re in Tripoli,’ said the General. The badges and stripes on his jacket glinted.

Under his uniform Giuseppe’s skin was wet. Sweat ran down the back of his neck. Africa was hot.

They disembarked. On the pier were military trucks ready to be filled. The soldiers climbed onto the back. The sides were left open, the canvas rolled up and strapped to the frame. The harbour bustled with dark skinned men in tunics down to their ankles. On their heads scarves that fell to their shoulders. Some wore small rounded hats. “My uncle brought one home from Egypt, when he fought in the Great War. It’s called a fez,” pointed the soldier sitting next to him.

Giuseppe heard Arabic for the first time. It was raspy and staccato. The trucks rode in single file down a wide street lined with palm trees. The buildings looked new and reminded him of Milan. It was as though all the Italians had been shipped out of Italy and replaced with Arabs. They entered a narrow street. On either side were alleys, narrow and cobbled, where people pushed past each other. Flat roofs and domes had the look of Palermo. The convoy wound through the old part of the city. Behind the last truck were military tanks. He counted fifty. The tank rumbled through streets and beyond the city into the desert. They passed a shepherd surrounded by sheep, nearby was a row of tents and people in a circle eating. A cart was still bridled to a donkey. Giuseppe wanted to free the animal, which had been tied to a tree that cast little shade. They passed a walled city called Homs – it was surrounded by military trucks and men in uniform stood around. More palm trees heavy with dates. Near Homs they set up camp, pegging tents and digging trenches until their arms ached. “No more space in the barracks,” they were told.

Word spread about a cinema at Homs, in a large tent, and an ocean one kilometre away. No one knew when they would go into battle, only that the fighting was over a hundred kilometres away near Tobruk. Giuseppe collapsed on a pile of sleeping bags. He dreamt of *pasta alla chitarra* with mamma’s *sugo* and nonno’s mulled wine.

Thin Voice woke them. "Up! Up! Up! We have a war to fight. In line. Everyone."

"Puglia!" He shouted as he stuck his rifle into Giuseppe's side. Giuseppe opened his eyes. His pupils narrowed. Instinctively, he grabbed the barrel of the rifle. Thin Voice was about to fall but recovered. Giuseppe got up and walked away. "Puglia! I'm watching you!" said Thin Voice.

As soon as sweat cooled his skin, it evaporated, taken by the African sun. Time took on another dimension. Days passed slowly. He wanted to tell Signor Testa that his theorems about the speed of the earth's rotation were faulty. The point in the desert, just outside Homs - where he stood, worked, slept, ate and watched as the next wave of men were sent to the fighting front - moved slower than the rest of the planet. It dragged behind, a gangrenous foot attached to a young body.

Giuseppe counted a thousand men in the camp, most of them young. Like him, they missed their families. Others were of higher rank and wore badges on their chests and stripes on their cuffs that signalled their place in the hierarchy. There were *cammicie nere* - Mussolini's men, handpicked by *Il Duce* himself. They were few but their presence was everywhere.

They were older and wore moustaches which Giuseppe offered to trim. "*Sono barbiere*," he told them, hoping for a distraction from the length of the days, days which fell and looped into each other.

"It's like this strip of paper. If I twist it and stick it, it keeps turning back in on itself," said a soldier called Luciano Lo Piccolo, a southerner from Calabria who liked to offer an American version of himself called Lucky Lo P.

His dream was to take his girl - a sixteen year old who, since the age of ten, had the duty of making pasta for her parents, three brothers and four sisters - to New York. He wanted to be rich so that she could live like a *Signora*. He reminded Giuseppe of Rana, although in appearance he was taller and more refined. His skin was the colour of caramel and his hair pitch black like Rodolfo Valentino.

Giuseppe shared a tent with Lucky Lo P and Pino Valetti, a nineteen year old from Rome. His grandparents had changed their surname because they were Jews and brought up their children as devout Catholics. A crucifix hung in their kitchen and a rosary hung on three nails above their bed.

Pino had no hair on his body. On his face were eyebrows and thick brown curls grew on his scalp. He had no need for the razor that he carried in his backpack. He walked with one hand on the hip and put his hand in front of his mouth when he laughed. He helped the chef in the mess tent, moving in his long apron as though it were a pinafore.

Every day they walked the kilometre of dirt road to the sea. As their boots touched beach they pulled off their clothes, damp with sweat, leaving a line of white and brown to the water's edge. They stopped to free their feet and ran into the coolness. Giuseppe stood waist deep and looked at the patterns that formed on the sand below him - sun and water pulsing in circles of turquoise and white.

As they walked to the beach, Giuseppe repeated the name of the day out loud so as to keep steady the unfurling of weeks. On a Friday they encountered three women on the road. They were girly,

eyes shining under draped heads. Scarves were pulled across mouths as they saw them approaching. Lucky Lo Pi held out his arms as if to embrace them and fear caught in their eyes. "Leave it, Luciano. Let's go," said Giuseppe.

Almost every night hundreds of soldiers went to the cinema at Homs. The captains and generals sat on chairs; the soldiers sat cross-legged on the floor, squeezed together in the best seats of the house – those near the front.

On Sundays fruit, vegetables and bread were delivered by a man the chef called Il Turco. Every one perspired in the desert heat, but Il Turco was oily. He left handprints on the aubergines and dust stuck to the finger marks on his truck. There were days when even the bread smelt of him. Once the chef swore at him with his fists, but Il Turco returned the next week with a young woman, small breasts pointing through her draped clothes. While Il Turco unpacked the crates, the woman left her seat at the back of the truck and returned when Il Turco started the engine. She was quiet and left hardly a track in the sand. "She walks on air," Lucky lo Pi said as his eyes followed her.

"You like her?" asked Giuseppe.

"A little," said Lucky Lo P swaying his hand.

Giuseppe liked his sincerity. "Although what is there to lie about in the desert, waiting to go to war? Waiting to shoot at someone you've never met?" he thought to himself.

When the morning bell rang at five, Giuseppe got up without protest. Sleep had become dull – the desert had gotten into his ears and poured itself into his dreams. He dressed in socks, boots, shorts and shirt, went outside to the flag pole and took his position for roll-call.

A soldier was missing. "Lost in the desert," Thin Voice said by way of explanation. Giuseppe felt envy. He'd mulled over a plan of escape, but he didn't know where to go. The maps were locked away in wooden trunks and only rolled open before an attack. Stealing the key was a risk with the consequence of a severe beating or, worse, time in the hotbox.

"Puglia, Giuseppe!" shouted Thin Voice.

"*Presente Signore!*" responded Giuseppe with a salute as he brought his left foot down hard on the ground. He looked straight ahead with blank eyes as they were taught in Police School.

The sky had the depth of an ocean, wide and unknown, and the sun commenced its daily punishment on exposed skin. Giuseppe had learnt to rub his nose with cooking fat to stop the skin from peeling. Today a handful of soldiers were ordered to dig in the general's tent, lowering the ground to drop the temperature. They were told to get shovels and pile the sand around the tent to create a small wall. "I want it finished before sunset, or you'll go without supper or sleep," said Thin Voice.

Giuseppe pushed the shovel down with his boot. By the time his shadow grew short, his back ached and the heat made him light headed and detached from the commotion around him. His legs itched with bites. "Sand fleas," said Lucky Lo P.

He kept count of the days and remembered the face of his mother, father, grandfather, Eva, Turiddu, Rana, Marcello, Signora Mistretta, Signor Mistretta, Signor Punta, his clients at the Barber Shop, going over the details of features like they were beads on a rosary. He kept digging, his movements automatic. Pino Valetti rang the bell and they broke for lunch. They fell in line with the other soldiers. Pino dipped a ladle into a metal barrel and poured soup into Giuseppe's bowl and placed a bread roll in his hand.

"Cabbage?"

"*Si*, cabbage with a little potato and tomato," said Pino. His eyes said "yes, I know, the same shit as yesterday."

"*Grazie* Pino," said Giuseppe, just to say something.

Giuseppe sat in the mess, waiting for his pupils to adjust to the shade. He spooned the soup into his mouth and enjoyed the tinkering of spoons against tin amongst the chatter. Lucky lo Pi was next to him, soaking up the coolness. He stood up as he saw the general.

"Puglia!" shouted Thin Voice above the din. "Back to work!"

Giuseppe looked into his soup and ignored him. "Puglia! At attention!"

Thin Voice was standing over him. Giuseppe leapt up, turned around and spat at his face. "*Va fanculo!*" he shouted.

"You defy me you piece of shit! You're not worth the sand you sleep on!" said Thin Voice. With a curl of the finger he called his lackeys.

"Take him away," he said to them, his eyes fixed on Giuseppe. A lackey grabbed Giuseppe round the waist and scratched him as he clutched a fistful of shirt. The other one did the same, lifting him so that his feet left the ground. Giuseppe thrashed against the strength of the other bodies, as fit and young as his. If there was music it would've been a dance, all of them swaying together. They carried him to the entrance of the mess tent. Outside, where there were few witnesses, Giuseppe was dropped so that his feet dragged on the ground. A fist to his stomach made him contract and bend like he'd been cut in half, his breath punched out of him. He forced himself to inhale. He turned to the lackey and knocked his forehead hard against his eye. "Fuck! My eye!" shouted the lackey, letting go of Giuseppe to bring his hands to his face.

Giuseppe pulled himself away from the other man's grip and got to his feet. Sand burst around him as he ran. "Run! Run!" he said to himself.

Where did Lucky Lo P say they could escape to? The lights. He'd said "Go towards the lights. The city offers many hiding places."

His fear was piqued and present in all his limbs. Where had he felt this before? His legs pulled him forward. The air was bright and turned his pupils to pinpricks. His face smacked against the ground. Sand rubbed his eyelids and stuck to the inside of his mouth between cheek and gum. Hands were wrapped around his ankles, pulling him.

Sand pushed up his nose. He held his breath. The miniature stones cut his skin - he could single them out, each one of them. He bent his knees but the hands only dragged him harder. He moved his shoulders to free his hands but they were held behind his back.

It stopped. He turned his head and sucked air greedily. He opened his eyes and granules of sand fell off his eyelashes. He blinked, unable to keep his eyes open. His eyes began to water and it soothed him. A kick to the head shot pain down his spine. "Take off your clothes," said the general, his voice calm.

Giuseppe turned around and tried to lie on his back, covering his eyes with a forearm. A boot in the small of his back threatened to kick. "Stand up and take off your clothes," said Thin Voice with brutal calm.

Giuseppe, spent, looked at him and saw the bitterness in his eyes. He pulled off his shirt, then his shorts and his underwear. "Your boots too," said Thin Voice.

Giuseppe hesitated; his feet would scorch on the desert floor. Slowly he unlaced his boots. His fingers ached, hands shook with tense muscles. He pulled off his socks and felt the heat sink into his soles. "Get in there," said Thin Voice, pointing to a square of corrugated metal.

Giuseppe looked at him confused. "In there?" he asked pointing.

The general pointed again. Giuseppe stepped into the box. "Down!" said Thin Voice.

He crouched and, as the lackeys brought the corrugated lid down, red florets appeared before his eyes as they adjusted to the dark. He heard the sound of wire being pulled through the latch. It scraped the sides of the box and goose bumps lifted on his arms. With the heat, panic rose in his chest. Footsteps. They were walking away. "Hey! Hey!" he banged against the walls.

His fists burned. "*Cazzo!* And now?" he rubbed his hands and then, open-palmed, covered his eyes.

Saliva formed thick in his mouth. He licked his fingertips, spat and smoothed them across his eyelids; the coolness was brief and soothing. He listened for sounds to orientate himself; there was only a ringing in his ears, and nothing above the sound of metal creaking. The desert swallowed everything, even voices carried on the breeze.

Light entered from seams and holes. The box was too small for him to stand up. He moved one foot and waited for the pain to subside as the blood circulated. He shuffled his feet and discovered that he could turn around completely. He kept his head low, lifting it for a few seconds when the pull in his neck became unbearable. His crown burned against the metal.

The heat intensified. He measured his container – four hands in length on three sides, the fourth side was five. From floor to top he measured twelve hands. After a while the ringing in his ears stopped. The light through the seams turned orange and the box started to adjust to the drop in temperature. Gunshots. "No, the metal snapping, becoming tighter," Giuseppe reassured himself. His mind was raging.

He thought he'd fallen unconscious a few times but had no way to be sure. He stretched out his arms and touched the walls, pressing his fingertips to them, imagining they were granite – cool and

icy. He kept his tongue in his mouth, worried that it would stick to his lips which were cracked and sealed with dry blood. He started to shiver and wrapped his arms around himself. He ran his knuckles over his ribs, pretending to play the guitar. He was on the bandstand in the piazza in Santa Ninfa, the music pure in the thick air. Eva's laughter. Her breath on his face as they danced. Ladies twirling - their dresses the petals of flowers.

His throat dried up. He wanted to hum the music but there was no sound. He found Eva, waiting for him at the back of his mind. She was walking down Via Sant' Anna towards the piazza, dressed like she was in the photograph. "Write to me. You haven't written," he heard her voice outside of him.

Mia Cara dolcissima Eva,

Your sweetness embraces me. When I am cold you speak to me, gently and without hurry. Your curls are as smooth as the petals of a rose. I long for the day that we can sit together on the bench overlooking *il belvedere*, not speaking, your hand resting in mine. Not looking at each other, just sitting. And the crowd will walk past and smile at us because they know that we belong to each other. On the other side of this postcard is a flower in bloom. You are my flower in bloom.

Yours,

Peppe

He shivered, hitting his head against the lid.

"Pippuzzu," he heard a voice, gravelly like the desert. "Peppe."

He felt a hand on his shoulder, the spot warm.

"Nonno," said Giuseppe, more as a question.

He blinked, trying to crack the darkness, but only sprays of red and green flashed before him, projections of his own mind. The blackness was thick and powdery in his fingers. "This screwdriver is still stuck in my mouth," said Nonno. "Can't pull it out, but I keep trying."

"Nonno, what are you doing here? It's late," said Giuseppe as he wondered about the time.

"You were cold," said Nonno.

Giuseppe stopped shivering; his head no longer rattled the metal. With Nonno, sleep was gentle.

The heat rose with dawn. The metal creaked – a ritual of the elements. Giuseppe looked at his feet, counting his toes and inspecting each of them. Sweat slid down from his armpits - he rubbed it over his chest and cooled himself down. Outside a shrill sound grew stronger. He hadn't heard it before, but now it was clear and uninterrupted. "Insects?" he thought to himself.

A steady tremor reached him through the ground. Footsteps, a number of them. "Are they coming to get me?" he thought, his heart quickening.

His tongue was dry and stuck to the inside of his cheeks. This is what a plant felt like without rain, alive through sheer determination.

The lid was lifted and light struck him in the face. He squinted. Three figures shaded the sun. Giuseppe could make out their silhouettes and then the colour of their uniforms. Thin Voice stood over him with his hands on his hips. "Get him out," he said to his lackeys, his finger pointing hard at Giuseppe.

The lackeys hooked his underarms and pulled him out of the box. As they let go he dropped to the ground, unable to straighten his legs. The general poured water over Giuseppe's head and handed him the flask – he had left a little for him to drink. Giuseppe shook as he brought it to his mouth and swallowed, pain tight in his throat. Then he lifted himself and crawled, naked and slow, to the camp.

Americans go for a Shave

It was the tenth of July 1943, three weeks after the summer solstice, when the Americans descended on Sicily. It was watermelon season and farmers were picking the ripe fruit to barter with their neighbours. Ciccio carried a bottle of olive oil for Pietro, the thought of sweet fruit ripened in his mouth and for a while he forgot about the heat and the unwelcome foreigners. “Cicciuzzu,” said Pietro as he put his hand round Ciccio’s shoulders.

On the ground tires had cut deep tracks and flies scavenged on the pink flesh of watermelons. “The Germans,” said Pietro, responding to Ciccio’s look.

“They plough through my crops in the deep of night. We hear them but what can we do?” he shrugged.

Pietro took the bottle of olive oil and lifted it to the sun to admire the golden colour. His fingers were etched with sand and his breath was heavy like a dog’s.

Ciccio carried the watermelon home. He would slice it so that it was ready for Eva when she got home from the Barber Shop.

On the radio Ciccio had heard the news of the Americans arriving; of hundreds of thousands of soldiers emerging from ships and running down ramps into the water with rifles in their hands. Thousands descended from the air in parachutes, many died, but most had made it to land. He’d received a news sheet - the postman was given a few from the postmaster who delivered mail to the inland towns and passed them on to the postal workers – which showed Americans in Palermo, troops on tanks and military vehicles in procession. In the photograph, *Palermitani* were waving. A woman held up her baby towards an American who was leaning over to give her his hand.

Eva was in the barbershop. Her dress, which she had sewn herself from two linen hand towels, was stained yellow from sun and sweat. The washerwoman, *la ‘gnuria*, came once a month to wash their sheets and clothes as Signora Mistretta couldn’t afford to pay for a weekly service like she used to. She had cinched the waist with a length of rope, the one she had kept from her childhood, when she had recovered from typhoid fever. To the top she had added blue ribbons for straps. She had found ribbon wide enough to hide her bra straps, a blessing for which she thanked Sant’ Antonino – the saint of lost things found and desired pregnancies.

There was a picture of the saint in the Barber Shop. Turiddu had bought it at the church, framed it and put it up in his backroom. When Italy declared war on Britain and France, he took it from the backroom into the shop and hung it above the mirrors to remind himself that there was nothing to do but feel protected by a force he didn’t know, one which he hadn’t experienced by sight, sound or touch.

Sant’ Antonino was always depicted with a boy in his hands, a smiling toddler. Eva looked up at the portrait and unstuck her thighs from the leather of the chair. She adjusted her dress and pulled it further down her thighs. It was the peak of summer and humidity clung to skin possessively. She crossed her legs. Her hands went to her shoes and she felt for dirt and stones caught on the soles.

She remembered her mother telling them, as children, not to run. "It'll ruin your shoes," she would shout behind them as they raced down the street.

It was a miserable Thursday; the day was soaked in boredom. Mamma and Pina were in Palermo working at the hotel their father owned with two other men. Politicians needed a place to stay and Ciccio had ensured that Hotel Alessandria was discreet and offered the opulence lacking in the deprivations of war.

Without her mother and younger sister, Eva was in fragments. She unfolded a letter from her mother and read it again:

Carissimi,

We are safe and keep ourselves busy with sweeping, cleaning, dusting, making beds and serving breakfast. The clients are friendly and give us tips. It's difficult to get a variety of food and we miss the fresh fruit from Aquanova. But people sell what food they have. Bread is expensive, so is pasta.

Pina was eating a biscuit on the balcony. She looked down and she dropped it. She was afraid the women would shout at her, but instead they asked her to throw down more. She came to tell me. I took the bag of biscuits and gave it to them. I have not seen hunger like I have been in Palermo. I remember my mother telling me about how it was in the Great War, when everything was scarce. It is the same here.

Eva and Valentina, I miss you. Ciccio, keep everyone safe.

Con affetto,

Mamma Gabriella

The haberdashery was closed. There were a few spools of fabric, cotton wool, buttons, zips, trims and tassels in the shop which had always been overflowing with the finest stock. Eva kept it clean. Routinely she polished the wood and rearranged the stock so that the shop looked inviting. People continued to have communions, weddings and funerals but money for new clothes was scarce and women took to altering the clothes they already had. Men would wear the same suits with shirts their wives had mended, clothes that children outgrew were passed on to siblings and cousins,

women would change their dresses by adding or removing sleeves, adding a collar or changing a neckline. Hardly any wore pantyhose. In one of her letters, Mamma described how the ladies in Palermo painted a black line down the back of each leg, so that from a distance it gave the effect of pantyhose. Eva didn't like the idea of paint on her legs. Besides, winter was months away and her thoughts circled around surviving the heat, the intruders and the monotony of waiting. She was weary of wondering when the war would end, what would happen next, how many more people would die and when, finally, she would see Giuseppe.

The bell on the door clinked and Turiddu entered. He had gone for a walk to find soap to clean the floors. "I knocked on seven doors before someone gave me a quarter of a block," he said, his eyes moving to Sant' Antonino.

The floor was clean, there wasn't a breath of wind to stir the dust, but Turiddu went into the back room and filled a bucket with water. He wet the mop and let the water form a puddle on the floor. His wife had insisted on cleaning the shop. "This is women's work," she had said as she tried to pull the mop from Turiddu's grip.

After going to confession where, to Padre Spano and in front of the holy trinity, he had purged himself of sin, he had told her that it was his way of cleaning the air and that he found solace in mopping.

As Eva folded the letter the bell jingled again. It undid the monotony of the day. Gaspare, who lived under the stairs, ran in. He stopped and supported himself on one of the chairs against the wall. He whispered hoarsely in Turiddu's ear, "The Americans are coming."

Eva tucked the letter in her bra and slid off the chair. A moment later Turiddu lifted her and carried her to the backroom. He closed the door.

The bell jingled once more and a soldier, American, sauntered in, a trail of dry mud in his wake. The mud turned liquid in the streaks of water that hadn't yet dried. He slumped into the barber chair closest to the door and slammed his booted feet onto the footrest. Two other soldiers walked in, leaving the door open and the bell mute. They pushed Gaspare aside and sat down. The soldier in the chair made a gun with his hand and, closing one eye, aimed into the mirror. "I popped that one with his trooper gun. I've never used one of their guns before. It's a damn good gun," he said.

Turiddu moved to stand behind the counter. He signaled to Gaspare to do the same. The men watched the foreigners, without saying anything. The American rubbed a hand over his cropped hair. Like his uniform, his hands were dirty and his boy body belied a bravado that could only be nurtured in the new world.

Eva listened from the backroom, her cheek and ear pressed to the wall. She heard them talking and listened hard for Turiddu's voice.

The American pointed to the mirror again, holding his hand like a gun. "Puugh" he said, his one eye closed as he aimed.

"Puugh. Puugh. I popped three Germans the other day, cut one through the middle with a Sicilian machine gun, you should've seen him fall, man," he said.

Turiddu walked to the counter and picked up a razor and a pair of scissors. He looked into the mirror at the American and raised his eyebrows in a question. "Shave," said the soldier, pointing at the razor.

Turiddu fetched a bib, opened it out and lifted it so that it caught the air and fell smoothly across the man's chest. The bib was striped blue and white – an old sheet that his wife had cut and reshaped. He tied it at the nape of the soldier's neck. Sweat and dirt came away with his fingers and he wondered when last he washed. He rubbed a wet brush over a bar of shaving soap until it foamed, then he lathered the man's face. Instinctively his eyes went to Sant' Antonino and he said a silent prayer. He looked at the backroom door and hoped the foreigners wouldn't think of opening it.

He added more water to the soap and slid the brush over it. He tried to thin the foam, to use little, but fear stuck in his throat. Soon he would make a trip to Naples to buy supplies. He was grateful to Sant' Antonino that even in wartime people paid to be groomed, in money, bread or salt, as it gave them a sense of dignity.

In the backroom Eva shifted. She wiped a strand of hair that was stuck to her cheek and lifted her knee onto the short table. Her weight moved the bricks under the board and they collapsed. The American stood up and grabbed Turiddu at the wrist, "Who's in there?" he shouted.

His friends watched from the waiting chairs. Gaspare pressed himself into the corner to make himself invisible. The American held the cut throat razor to the barber's neck and walked him to the backroom. With his foot he kicked down the door.

Eva covered her face with her arms – fear was right beside her, it had entered her world. The American pushed Turiddu to the wall, the better to move his eyes over Eva who had folded her arms across her chest. "Hello baby, what are you hiding from?" he asked.

He clutched her arm and she swallowed, trying to find her voice. He held up the razor and it caught the light coming in from the front of the shop – the blade sharp and matted with grime. The stench of war surrounded her, it mingled with the heat and bergamot smell of the shop, and she was aware of her exposed skin. His eyes, bloodshot against his white-foamed cheeks, followed her shoulders as they rose and fell with her breath. "What are you hiding from, huh?" he asked again as bits of foam dripped off his face.

Eva didn't understand. She felt like a lizard caught by its tail. "You see this? You're going to shave me," he pointed at her with the razor.

Turiddu nodded. Eva followed the soldier into the shop where he climbed onto the chair. She stood on tiptoes so that she could reach and, placing the blade at an angle against his neck, she moved upwards. She flicked the foam and hair into the basin, steadied her hand, and shaved the rest of his neck. Her whole life, she had watched Turiddu shave his customers and although it was her first time, she knew how to tilt her wrist so that it was only hair she removed and not skin. Before she moved to his cheeks, she wiped the blade, rinsed it and shook off the water. She watched the muscles in his legs relax and he undid his fisted hands so that his fingers rested on his thighs. Turiddu and Gaspare watched silently, their heads turning from one soldier to the other.

"I plugged an Italian on the beach. He was hiding in a pillbox," said one of the two soldiers sitting in a waiting chair. He made a noise with his fingers like bullets popping.

"Dumb asses! They have a habit of hiding in those places," said the other one laughing.

"They spray you with machine guns and then whine like pigs when you want to crack down on them," he continued.

Eva kept shaving. When she finished she wiped the remnants of foam from the man's face and she saw that he was young, eighteen like her. His skin was smooth and suntanned, paler where his beard had been.

He rubbed his hands over his face, his finger catching on the scar on his cheek. Pleased, he climbed off the chair, grabbed Eva around the waist and pressed her against him. He grabbed a buttock in each hand and rubbed her against him. Eva kept her eyes open without looking at him. She held her breath and thought of Sant' Antonino on the wall. "Will he protect me?" she thought.

He let go of her, the trace of his fingers still embedded in her skin and the fabric of her dress. He slapped the back of his hand across the other soldier's arm and sat down on a waiting chair.

Holding every sound inside of her, Eva shaved the other two. Their faces clean, they walked out the shop as they had arrived; boots stomping against the tiles. The last one out slammed the door shut, the bell jangled. Then he kicked over the red and white barber sign and shouted "Fucking Sicilians!"

Aquanova

Nonna Mistretta arrived holding two dead chickens by their necks. "The old chicken makes the best broth," she said.

She had gone that morning to Aquanova, the other family house in the country, to collect ingredients. She woke while it was still dark, before the ringing of the church bells marked the death of her husband as they usually did on that day, the twenty first of August. It was 1943 and it was nine years since he had passed. People said that at death one becomes young again, the beauty of youth glowing with the light of heaven. So she pictured her husband as he was in his twenties - strong with bright eyes.

It seemed that since Italy joined the war four years before, the church bells tolled more often. The altar boys, for the first few hours of day, were deaf to the world.

While the hen slept Nonna clutched its head in one hand. She curled the thumb and forefinger of the other hand around its neck. As the bird woke, it flapped its wings and scratched with its feet. Its tiny heart pounded as Nonna squeezed it against her, felt for the epiglottis and with a strong push of her thumb snapped its neck. Dead, it still ran around for a few minutes before it stopped and fell. She did the same with three other chickens, all of them hens. The rooster she wanted to keep a little longer, for at least another mating season. He slept in his own coop, away from the females who laid eggs for eating.

On her way to her son's house, she gave two chickens to the German soldiers she had befriended. They had pitched tents at the entrance to the town and burdened the nuns with requests of food and wine. She had learned some German, greeting them with *Guten Tag*.

She tucked the sack of birds under one arm to make the sign of the cross as she passed the church. When she arrived at her son's house she knocked on the door with her elbow. She carried the smell of dead poultry into the house. It clung to her clothes. She wore a long skirt that fell past her ankles, hiding her thin legs and making her appear shorter than she was. Her white blouse was stained with excrement – she had gutted the chickens at Aquanova and fed the intestines to the dogs. Over her clothes she wore a full apron. Its whiteness had greyed over time. In her apron pocket were eight eggs, still warm. She pulled the chickens out of the sack and let them flop onto the table.

Upstairs Eva lay in her bed, too hot to move. She undid the buttons of her nightie and pressed a pile of letters to her chest. They were all from Giuseppe. She untied the ribbon holding them together and opened the first one. Reading the erratic cursive, she imagined Giuseppe's pen marking the words on her skin. She smoothed the letter across her breasts, trying to feel the indents of ink on the page.

Her sisters were already up; the heat had pushed them out of their beds. They had left open the door to the balcony and a wisp of air, too subtle to be called a breeze, carried the scent of jasmine and lemons. Dust and pollen intermingled. Eva imagined the heat of the desert and the dry smell of sand. She placed the other letters, still folded, along the length of her collar bones. She squeezed her eyes shut and felt Giuseppe's hands where the letters were. She heard his voice reading the words in

a whisper. She held her breath and when she could no longer feel her skin, or her nightie, or the sheet, or the bedroom, she let a shudder rip through her body, tearing the seam of her soul.

Downstairs Nonna pulled a needle from her apron strap. The red thread came out with it, like she was undoing a bloody deed. She pierced an egg on its head and made another hole at its base. She pushed the needle deeper, widening it, then brought it to her lips and sucked.

"There is news of another air raid. We must leave town. It's too dangerous here." Signor Mistretta said it like he was reading the news.

"Those Americans should learn to suck eggs," Nonna said as she sucked the last of the albumen and yolk. A down feather floated from her head to the floor. "Thank God those chickens are still laying eggs. One a day, as always. That's one a day for me, as always."

Nonna wiped her hands on her apron. "Who will help me pluck these birds? My hands are getting rusty," she said, loud enough for her granddaughters to hear.

Upstairs in her bed, Eva lay listening to the sounds downstairs. The desert throbbed behind her eyelids. She had taken off her nightie and let the breeze lift her skin into goosebumps.

She got dressed and walked down the stairs in a blue dress. The fabric had pieces of rain and cloud in it. She was barefoot, toenails shiny with red enamel. Her uncle had sent her the nail polish along with some opaque colours, which had long English names like *Bachelors Carnation* and *Sweet Talk*, under the label Revlon. The colours came in matching lipstick. Eva and Valentina had fought over them, chasing each other up the stairs. Valentina had ripped Eva's cardigan at the seams, so fierce was her envy. For days after, Eva had hated her for it. The days that followed she wore a grey dress, the colour of spite, to irk her. The dress was made from the lightest cotton, a belt as thick as two fingers cinched the waist and accentuated the bust. Valentina was given the same one in orange by their uncle; the colour didn't suit her complexion. The yokes did nothing for her small breasts and it hung in the armoire like a penance.

Nonna looked up at her first born grandchild at the foot of the stairs, the most beautiful of the girls. "*Bedda, buon giorno*. Do you want an egg? They're fresh, I picked them this morning," said the old woman with a wink.

"Nonna!" Eva hugged the woman and kissed her cheek. The old woman smelt like she'd just arrived from a hunt.

"I'll have one with my coffee," Eva rubbed the sleep and lust from her eyes.

Upstairs she had kissed each letter, letting her lips linger on the paper, refolding and restacking them from first to last, then tying them with a ribbon. She hid them behind the armoire as it was the only place her sisters and her mother wouldn't look. She burned for the letters, burned with each arrival and protected the private words.

She cracked an egg into a cup and beat it with a fork. She mixed in a teaspoon of sugar until it was creamy and added coffee. Then she sat at the kitchen table and spooned it into her mouth, silently. "Eva, I need help plucking the chickens. Come, before they rise from the dead and start crowing." Nonna urged.

Eva put on an apron, a clean one fresh from Monday's laundry and took the birds into the courtyard. She sat cross-legged on the floor with a sack next to her. She smoothed the apron over her legs and placed a chicken in her lap. She ripped feathers from flesh, admiring the translucence of the quills, and released the wild smell of adrenalin. "Animals release adrenalin from fear," her father had explained to her once. "It's what makes them wild."

She noticed the same stench from the soldiers; it was the stench of savagery. She systematically removed feathers from wings and legs, leaving the head, neck and chest for last. These feathers she placed in a separate sack. The larger feathers they would use to fill the mattresses, from the down feathers they would make new pillows. Gradually the birds were reduced to a nude kill ready to be cut and quartered.

She listened to Nonna talking to Mamma in the kitchen. "The secret to youth is not making old woman sounds. Don't fart out loud. Don't burp. Be quiet when you bend to pick up your shoes. Sit with your knees together. That's what my mother always told me. Don't look at me now unwashed and stinking like I've been rolling in feathers," she said. Mamma laughed.

Eva stepped into the kitchen. On the stove a pot of water was boiling. Nonna had already dropped two onions into it. Eva dropped the birds on the table. "Ah! They're beautiful." Nonna clapped her hands.

She chopped off the heads, cut their necks at the base and threw them in. Steam puffed from the pot. Eva tied the feather-filled sacks and packed them next to the plates. Over time the smell would disappear.

The doorknob squeaked and the door opened. It was Turiddu the Barber, his wife, his two girls and his son, who had just turned five. "Mmmm. Mamma what a wonderful smell," Turiddu closed his eyes and lifted his nose.

The women exchanged greetings and Nonna hugged her other grandchildren. Ciccio put out his good hand and his brother shook it. The men looked at each other, exchanging words with their eyes. They had spoken only once of the incident in the Barber Shop. Eva had cried but then she had lifted her head, straightened her body and continued with her chores. "We must hurry," Ciccio's eyes said.

"Yes, before anyone notices," said Turiddu's eyes.

"Mamma. We need to get going," Ciccio said in his mother's ear.

She felt his wooden arm against her back, a reminder of that day at the mill when her life had changed. Lorenza never judged her son; she was an upstanding woman who treated him like he was complete. "*Va bene*, I'll wrap the rest of the meat and take it with," she said.

Upstairs the bedroom air held nothing of the war. It was warm and embraced the promise of dreams. Valentina and Pina were packing for the visit to Aquanova. With both the Americans and the Germans positioned in the mountains around Santa Ninfa, it was dangerous for them to stay in town. Pina piled clothes, a hairbrush, a drawing pad and pencils onto a blanket. Valentina was on the balcony, foot hooked on the balustrade, watching the line of Italian soldiers extend across the street and up three steps to the piazzetta outside the doors of Chiesa del Purgatorio. The soldiers laughed

and chatted. She couldn't make out the words. As the sun warmed the dusty street, the shadows of sweat under their armpits grew larger and darker. It was unusual for them to be waiting outside the shop at that hour. Their break was usually between seven and eight pm so the Mistrettas opened the haberdashery at six pm. "We'd better open the shop," Valentina turned sideways to face Eva, who had come upstairs to pack.

"It's not even ten o'clock," said Eva.

She noticed how thin her sister had become, her hip bone pushed through her dress. She would only eat if there was fruit on the table, and often fruit on the table was scarce. It had become a bartering commodity; Ciccio swapped figs and peaches for coffee and tobacco.

The sisters looked down to the street, where the soldiers at the back of the line took their turn to sit on the steps. Sitting allowed them to keep quiet, from between uniformed legs they could stare in silence. There was no reason for them to speak. Instead they curled fingers around weeds growing from the gaps in the cement. They ripped them out to throw at their friends or pulled the leaves to bite them with their front teeth. Years earlier, when Italy had gone to war and a hundred soldiers were posted in Santa Ninfa, the line moved straight down the road. As the months passed it buckled across the road like a giant worm.

Signor Mistretta could tell the poor soldiers from the middle class boys by how they kept their coupons. "The smooth coupons, they're from the poor soldiers. They hide them in their pockets, keep them safe. The dog-eared coupons are from the daddy's boys," he had said to Eva.

She helped him in the shop in the afternoons. The soldiers bought postcards to send home and coloured thread to mend their socks. They had stopped buying brown and black to match their uniforms, instead they asked for pink, blue, red and yellow. Eva referred to the coloured cotton with names she found fanciful – Fuchsia, turquoise, vermillion, saffron. Her words were soft and exotic and the soldiers seemed to like them. Ciccio would stack the coupons and tie them with elastic. He only brought a few home, the others he hid in his jacket pocket to use for gambling.

Valentina and Eva stood on the balcony. A soldier looked up and waved. Heads lifted in a wave that spread outwards towards the front and back of the queue. The soldiers sitting on the steps stood up, shaking themselves to reality, and looked up at the teenage girls, fresh-skinned and brightly clothed. Eva tilted her head, her hair falling over her face, to hide a smile. She saw the movement in the eyes of the young men looking up at her, the thoughts that flickered in them. Valentina blew kisses with both hands and lifted her arms over her head to wave. A wolf whistle pierced the air and then applause and more whistling. Valentina blew more kisses, put her hand to her hip and swayed to the music in her head. Eva leaned over the balustrade and looked down into the faces of the young men at war. She pictured Giuseppe in uniform, smiling like these soldiers and waving at girls. For a moment she felt threatened by imaginary girls in a desert she'd never seen. "Valentina, come, let's open shop." Eva nudged her sister from the fantasy brought on by the balcony, a height that had elevated her to a few moments of fame.

They took the keys from their father's bedside table and went downstairs. The soldiers at the shop entrance parted for them. Eva slid the key into the lock. Inside the haberdashery the air was dank, dust clung to it. Fresh air lifted the staleness. The sisters placed themselves behind the counter,

ready to serve. They sold fifty postcards and would need to order more from the stationer in Palermo. Eva liked the new postcards; there was the one with the ballerinas on a stage and an audience that filled the theatre up to the balcony seats. To give the pictures colour, strokes of pink paint had been added to their skirts. The flowers in their hair had been given green and red accents. Another postcard was of a rose not quite in full bloom. "A hesitant rose," Eva thought to herself.

Soon after the last soldier had exchanged coupons for goods, the girls closed shop and hurried into the kitchen. Their parents were dressed to go out and bags of food and clothes lay in a row on the floor. Turiddu stood near Ciccio while his family sat on the chairs, their backs facing the table. Espresso cups were stacked in the sink together with teaspoons still holding traces of sugar.

"Amuninni," Ciccio said. "Let's proceed slowly, like we have nowhere to go in a hurry. We'll leave in small groups or the Germans will get suspicious. Tell them we're going on a picnic. Turi', you go first. We'll see you at Aquanova."

At Aquanova the two families gathered. As the day extended, other people from Santa Ninfa joined them. The children of the widow, a woman who lost her first born child and her husband the previous year, made their way past the town gates and down the valley by themselves. The boy was twelve and the girl was four years old. They passed a group of Germans and asked them for sweets and chocolate. The boy ate one and tucked the other in his pocket to give to his mother later. The girl ate both of them, chewing quickly. Giuseppe's mother arrived with her husband Gaspare, his daughter Teresa and his son-in-law. She walked slowly as her footsteps sagged under her weight. Teresa helped her while the men carried bags of clothes, bedding and food. She brought her mandolin so that at night they could sing and dance to forget about the war and its uncertainties.

To pass the time, Turiddu took out his scissors and gave the men haircuts. They waited in line to sit on a small ladder used to reach the upper branches of the olive trees. They spoke about the air raids and the bombings of nearby towns, each of them silent about the possibility of returning to a crumbling Santa Ninfa. They wondered if their town would be bombed next. Turiddu had brought with him the picture of Sant' Antonino as he believed the saint would keep them safe at Aquanova.

Signora Mistretta filled Ciccio's pipe with fresh tobacco and lit it herself, sucking hard and letting the flavour scratch her mouth. She picked up the widow's daughter and put her on her lap. She was small and not plump like the other children her age – her knees and elbows stuck out like gnarled branches. She kept her hands in her hair and she scratched. The habit had merged with her character. For most of her life she had been afflicted with lice. Her nails rasped against her scalp as she wandered about with her eyes half closed.

The widow worked long hours to sustain her children – she walked to Partanna to wash clothes for a few slices of bread and a handful of olives, because it was too shameful to do the laundry of her neighbours. She was in her thirties, but the black clothes of grief had made her old. She had sent her children to Aquanova by themselves, pleading with her son to keep hold of his sister Domenica's hand.

When the Mistrettas and their friends walked beyond the walls of Santa Ninfa, the widow stayed to convince her mother-in-law to separate herself from her husband and join the group. Her father-in-law was layered in fat, too many years of being overfed had turned him to lard and he could not

move. One night he rolled into bed and could no longer lift himself. The other men had tried to move him, but his weight was too much to bear. His wife, unwilling to leave him, lay in bed next to him, making her peace with death. So the widow, her attempt futile, made her way to Aquanova.

“Give her a haircut,” Signora Mistretta said to Turiddu. “Look how she suffers. Cut her hair short so the lice will leave her.”

Domenica sat on the top rung of the ladder. Afraid of falling off, she held onto the sides. Signora Mistretta, reminded of the girl’s age, stood in front of her and held her hands. Turiddu cut her hair as short as he could with scissors. The hair fell to the ground to reveal a scalp marked with scratches. Her thin face looked boyish, her eyes bigger. Her hands let go of Signora Mistretta’s hold to meet her head. The hair was short and bristly and she rubbed her hands over it hard. She jumped off the ladder and ran, with her hands on her head, amongst the people. She began to cry, loud tears that rolled up the valley.

The widow arrived and the child ran to her, burying herself in her skirt. “What have you done?” The words were shrill and the widow repeated them until Signora Mistretta took her and explained that the child had lice and needed her hair to be cut.

The widow clung to her daughter. “Why can’t you just leave us alone?”

The Wedding Dress

It was Saturday the twenty fourth of August 1946 and the full moon had pulled flowers into blossom. Eva and Giuseppe's wedding, planned for June the following year, which allowed time for the families to prepare, was to happen in a fortnight. Giuseppe's mother had passed away, the sweets and desserts that had kept her content and in good humour had fed the diabetes in her blood and finally poisoned her. This left Giuseppe an orphan. He was in the sway of dislocation - by day thoughts of his new life with Eva, by night the desert, thirst and fear. He would dream of the time he and two other soldiers, lost in the desert, killed men in passing cars to drink the water from their radiators.

Memories of the move to El Alamein, where they were given a booklet on how to comport themselves on Egyptian soil, caught him one day when he was shaving alone at the basin. Mussolini had been convinced that the axis troops would reach Alexandria victorious. Peppe still had the booklet. Inside it described how they should behave around Egyptian women, as well as a few phrases in Arabic. He would often wake up with the feel of grenades in his hands and the tearing fear of machine gun fire. Sometimes he woke with sore legs; in his sleep he had been kneeling in the trenches, which were hardly a metre deep.

Lucky Lo P's leg had been blown off. Peppe never thought a human had so much blood, it stained everything around him. El Alamein was a train station and a barrack, hardly enough shelter to heal combat wounds. He regretted it now, but he and Pino Valetti had made the decision to quicken his death with a shot to the temple.

He had responded with numbness to his mother's death. At the funeral, he played her favourite song on the mandolin. The sound vibrated through him and he felt something he recognised as sadness. Years later, after he had emigrated to South Africa with Eva and their children, his mother would come to him in a dream, joyous, her blue eyes and wide laugh vivid, and he would wake up crying.

After the funeral, Ciccio Mistretta called his wife and daughters together to insist on a wedding. "*u picciottu* cannot be left alone to fend for himself. We'll have the wedding and then he'll come stay with us."

It took a while for Eva to find happiness in this. In her mind the wedding was far off and she could find the right fabric for her dress – it would be white silk with a lace of daisies over it, long to the floor, with the veil an interpretation of the lace in small daisies and dainty leaves. She had described it to her mother while sitting at the kitchen table. On a piece of paper she drew what she had imagined her dress to look like. Her pencil had tripped over a groove in the wood widening the volume of the skirt. "*Sai*, I actually like it like that. Santa Lucia has made her mark, a good sign," her mother had said as she crossed herself and kissed the pendant on her chain.

Eva kept the drawing in her pocket, unfolding it in moments of solitude. She would face the sun; let it find her face with its warmth. This is what she imagined marriage to be like – warmth from the sun.

Her father's statement surprised her. That night after dinner, he stood up and slid his thumbs behind his braces: "*Allora*, what do you say?"

"*Si, Papa,*" said Eva.

After she cleared the table and swept, Eva ran to Teresa's house. Eva considered Teresa, Giuseppe's step sister, as her own sister and often they would go for walks down to the piazza sharing secrets, their arms hooked. Giuseppe didn't think much of his new family, least of all his stepfather, but Eva and Teresa had found an affinity.

She took the route past Chiesa Sant' Anna, whispering a prayer and crossing herself. Teresa was crocheting a pair of baby's socks. The old women had wagged their fingers at her and hissed, "You shouldn't dress the chicken before the egg has hatched."

She told Eva that she already knew she'd have children - there were many nights that she dreamt of twins and often woke to the sound of a newborn wailing.

Teresa put her crocheting onto the chair to answer the door. Eva had arrived unexpectedly. "At this time of night!" Teresa said, smiling.

"Papa wants us to get married now," Eva said.

"*Adesso? Why?*"

"He doesn't want Peppe to live alone. He'd prefer it if he lives with us. Teresa, I'm not ready," said Eva.

"*O ora o chiu tardu la fatta sara fatta.* You know I don't listen to the old ladies and their ancient sayings, but this is good news," affirmed Teresa, holding Eva's hands.

"I don't have a dress," Eva complained.

Teresa opened her arms to create a half circle around Eva, tilted her head to the side and moved her eyes from Eva's waist to her feet, up her legs again and to her shoulders. "Come with me," she said as she held her hand and led her to the bedroom.

They walked through the sitting room and stepped over Teresa's husband's feet – his legs were crossed right over left, his body slumped in sleep and pressed into the sides of an armchair. Their heels click clacked across the tiles and reminded Eva of the sound of a couple dancing. She thought of the parties in her parents' house when she was a young girl – a time when things were simple.

In the armoire, in a box lined with patterned paper was Teresa's wedding gown. She pulled the box out and dropped it onto the bed, lifted the lid, passing it to Eva to hold, took the dress by the shoulders and lifted it up. The taffeta of the skirt made a crunching sound. Eva held her breath. She eyed the box lining – a repetition of a couple sitting on a blanket, trees on either side of them and a picnic basket.

Teresa laid the dress out on the bed and took the lid from Eva. With the back of her hand Eva touched the fabric, a smooth silk in white. "*Dai,* put it on," said Teresa.

Eva undressed and, in her bra and panties, lifted her arms and let her friend pull the dress over her head. Teresa was a bit taller than Eva and carried more flesh, so the dress surrounded her like a bubble. Teresa went to get her sewing basket and left Eva and the dress alone in the room. Eva

opened the armoire door to look in the mirror. She looked at the dress in the reflection and then watched the expression change on her face. It was the feeling of the floral burial dress she had worn as a child after she recovered from typhoid fever. She pinched the sides of the skirt and lifted it, standing on her toes and imagining heels.

“Let’s make this dress yours,” said Teresa as she entered the room.

The married woman loaded her mouth with pins and started pulling on the waistline. She moved to the shoulders and armpits where she took in the fabric and pinned it, the needles squeaking through the silk. The dress took Eva’s form, her narrow hips, slender waist and thin arms – which she held out to the sides. “Drop your arms, you’re lifting the dress,” Teresa uttered through pins.

Teresa kneeled on the floor to fold in the hem, sliding pins into the taffeta, silk and lace. A thousand pinpricks scavenged the skin around Eva’s ankles. “*A posto*, put your shoes back on,” Teresa said as she stood up. “No, no no. They’re too flat. Here wear these,” she added, shaking her head.

She handed Eva a pair of peep toe stilettos, took her hand and led her to the front door. “*Andiamo*, Signora Parigi will do the rest,” she said.

She led Eva past Chiesa Sant’ Anna, down to the piazza and past the pharmacy where they stared at their reflection. In the piazza a group of children were playing hopscotch - squares drawn on the cobbles - in the light of the streetlamps. They stopped their rhythm to wave at the woman in white. With toes curled to grip shoes that were too big for her, Eva swished towards Madre Chiesa, where the doors were open. Inside, Gaspare swept the centre aisle. He muttered to the saints, whose marble eyes avoided his gaze. Eva slowed down to look inside and imagined a hundred people in best dress standing in the pews. Teresa pulled her arm and Eva’s heels clacked again against the cobbles of the main road.

The light was on in Signora Parigi’s studio, casting a shadow of the seamstress onto the wall. She called it a studio as opposed to a sewing room. It was while confined to those four walls that she designed dresses for baronesses and princesses. She could copy the designs of Elma Schiaparelli and was especially good with women’s suits. Her sewing table was under the window which allowed a view of the town and Madre Chiesa with its processions, weddings, funerals, communions, baptisms, saint veneration and confirmations. She also kept tabs on those who entered the church for confession – she had observed that the greater the sin the lower the eyes were kept. Freshly confessed, they would exit with heads held higher, the weight of sin off their shoulders. Signora Parigi took to sewing like a sleepwalker, eyes glazed over but aware of her physical body and its actions.

Before Teresa could place knuckles to wood, the door opened with the seamstress’ svelte form in its frame. Eva examined her face and thought to herself how beautiful she must have been in her youth. “She’d look younger if she coloured her hair,” was her next thought.

“*Si?*” asked the seamstress.

Teresa stepped forward and explained, “*Buona sera Signora, un favore*. We need your help in taking in this wedding dress.”

“So late?” asked Signora Parigi.

“*Beh*, the wedding will be in two weeks. There isn’t much time,” said Eva.

“*Si lo so*, the news has spread quickly. Your father told me of his intentions the other day when I was in his shop. *Dai entrate*, there’s little time. Let’s see what there is to do,” she said, showing them in.

Upstairs in the sewing room there was a table covered in embroidered cotton and lace, one wall papered in magazine covers and another with framed photographs of old people dressed in black. It smelt like the haberdashery – fabric and a faint trace of sweat.

Eva climbed onto a podium in the middle of the room and looked up at the roof. It was pitched, with its highest point in darkness. . The seamstress started at the hem, pulling out the pins that had pricked the girl’s ankles and replaced them with a line of red tacking. With an unpicker, she ripped open the darts along Eva’s ribs and worked the fabric to fit, closing the gap with more tacking. She moved to the seams around the shoulders and recomposed them to fit Eva. “*Come ti sembra? Guardati nello specchio*,” the seamstress ordered in formal Italian. No one had ever heard her speak the local dialect.

Eva gazed into the full length mirror and nodded. She turned to Teresa: “I’m staining your dress with sweat.”

“*Un’importa*. I’ll never wear it again,” Teresa shrugged.

“Have you booked the church?” asked Signora Parigi as she watched the girls.

“*Ah, si*. It’s best we do it tonight,” said Teresa.

“*Andate*. Look, Gaspare is still there,” the seamstress pointed.

Eva took off the heels, walked barefoot down the stairs and out the door. The cobbles were warm, they had trapped particles of sun, and she felt like a child. In Chiesa Madre, Gaspare wiped the knee-rests and his mutterings echoed in the vaults of the ceiling.

The girls entered the church, dipped their fingers in holy water and crossed themselves. The lilies at the Madonna’s feet at the far end of the church made the air sweet. Gaspare straightened and looked at them like he had forgotten something. Teresa spoke: “Signor Gaspare, no one’s getting married today, we were just making the dress fit.”

“*Ah bene*,” he said holding his broom upright against his side.

“*La chiesa*, is it available on Saturday seventh of September?”

“*Mi sa di si*. I can say with almost certainty that there is no wedding, procession, communion or confirmation occurring on that day, in particular,” said Gaspare choosing his words.

“I’ll come past again tomorrow to speak to Padre Spano’,” said Eva.

“*Bene signorina... eh signora*. I wish you to always be in the presence of beautiful things,” said Gaspare as he bowed his head.

The girls left and Gaspare followed shortly after. He closed the doors behind him, the sound reverberating in the empty church. He walked past the girls and bowed his head to them. He crossed the piazza and entered his home under the stairs. Giuseppe had described it to Eva as he had been in there with his friend Rana. They had always wanted to see how Gaspare lived, so they took his key while he draped the church for all saints day and opened the door. Inside was a single bed and two shelves. A salami, bread wrapped in a dishcloth, a bottle of olive oil, a bowl of salt, a block of cheese, a spoon, a knife, a fork and a shard of broken mirror sat on the top shelf. On the bottom shelf two photographs – one of his parents on their wedding day and one of Gaspare as a toddler standing next to a rocking horse.

At Teresa's place, Eva pulled off the dress, folded it and put it back in its box, making it easy for Teresa to take back to Signora Parigi to alter. Eva dressed and with her shoes in one hand, her feet barely touching stone and sand, she made her way home. After years of imposed darkness, in the glow of the streetlamps she felt naked.

She turned the door handle and walked inside. She heard voices coming from the lounge upstairs. Her parents were speaking Italian, not Sicilian. Their voices were solemn and low, there was no laughter coming from her mother, whose usual speech was punctuated with giggles. She put on her shoes and walked upstairs, avoiding the parts of the floorboards that creaked. Standing in the middle of the lounge was mamma, papa and Padre Spano. "*Buona sera Padre*, I was just at the church looking for you," said Eva as she took the priest's hand and kissed him on both cheeks.

"Eva, we were discussing your wedding, *viene qui bellezza*," Signora Mistretta said to Eva in Italian.

Eva looked at her mother with a questioning expression on her face. "Signor Gaspare, he was cleaning the church, he said that the church was free on the seventh of next month," said Eva as she looked at her parents and then at the Priest.

"*Si*, we were just discussing that. Eva *viene*, let's go make Padre coffee," said Signora Mistretta as she led Eva by the arm.

"*Un tocco di Marsala, per favore*. It helps me digest," said Padre Spano' rubbing his stomach.

He was of Moorish descent, tall, lean with a full head of hair and grey eyes. He enjoyed taking the confessions of women, who lined up in the pews every Tuesday to purge their sins. There was talk of him making a fourteen year old girl pregnant. From Caltanissetta, a town nearby, she was pretty, dark and mature for her age. The rumour caught fire again when a girl who fitted the description was seen running out of the church.

Eva and her mother stepped in rhythm down the stairs and into the kitchen. "Your father called him. Where have you been?" she asked in Sicilian.

"I went to Teresa. I'm wearing her wedding dress. Signora Parigi will fix it for me," said Eva.

"Ah! *Dio la binirrica!*" She exclaimed, pointing her eyes to heaven. "My mind is going round and round."

"Mamma, is this right? Peppe's mother is still between earth and heaven. He is still in mourning," said Eva.

“Eva, *senti ‘na cosa*, a man needs a family. What family does he have? Your father wants you to get married quickly so that he can move in with us,” explained Signora Mistretta.

“*Si, lo so Ma*. It’s all so fast,” said Eva, aware of the stinging in her legs from the pinpricks.

“*Figghia mia*, you’re my eldest, my first. Remember what Signora Puglia said?” asked Signora Mistretta.

Eva put her hand to her chest and remembered the day she received the letter from Peppe, wanting her hand in marriage. His mother arrived at their door a few days after, with another letter from her son. “For your bunch of roses, I will give you my son, my only child,” she had said to Ciccio.

Eva looked at her mother, unblinking. “Eva, *statti bona*, everything will go well.”

Eva took off her shoes; her feet were hot. Through her soles she absorbed the coolness of the stone floor. She placed two spoonfuls of ground coffee into the filter of the moccia and filled the bottom part with water, up to the steam gasket. She screwed on the top end, lit the gas and placed it on the hob. Nonna had found a small gas cylinder with a hob attachment which she left at the Mistretta house for them to use.

Signora Mistretta stood on a chair to reach the bottle of Marsala in the cupboard. It had a handmade label - casa Regina, botta XIV, anno 1940, provincia di Marsala - a gift from one of the *mascherati* from their last carnival party in 1940. She took a glass from the drying rack next to the sink and poured the golden liquid into it. She swirled it and brought it to her nose taking in the aroma of sweet grapes and must. She took a sip. Satisfied, she drank a larger amount letting the Marsala coat her mouth. She handed it to Eva. “*Dai, bevi un po*, it’ll calm you down and straighten your mind,” she said.

Eva drank the rest of it and put the glass down next to the sink. A gargling noise rose from the moccia. The steam hissed, indicating the coffee was ready. “Come, let’s smooth this priest’s tongue,” said Signora Mistretta as she poured a capful of Marsala into Padre Spano’s coffee.

A knock at the door stopped Eva halfway up the stairs. Handing the tray to her mother she went to answer it. She knew it would be a long night, but the Marsala had given her strength. “That Marsala is so strong it’s broken me in half,” she said to herself as she opened the door.

The Amethyst Earrings

Giuseppe stood outside Signor Mistretta's haberdashery, eyes on the space where years ago he first proposed to Eva. He remembered her sitting next to spools of fabric and coils of silk rope. He remembered walking inside, taking off his hat, bending down on one knee and asking her what she would say if he asked her to marry him. She answered rhetorically: "Ask me and I'll tell you."

That was before the war, before the small man, before his mother died and before he'd killed men. In his pocket was a box containing a pair of amethyst earrings which had been his mother's. They were part of a set - his mother wore them with a necklace of eight amethysts. She had kept the earrings, hidden them in the waistband of her petticoat, when the Italian army came to claim all valuables to fund their attack on the British in Africa. Besides papers, handwritten by lawyers showing where his father had signed sureties for plots of land between Santa Ninfa and Gibellina, and the grater which he dutifully cleaned after grating stale bread or cheese, the earrings were the only objects that held the fingerprints of his parents. He wanted to give them to Eva.

He lifted his hand and knocked twice. He heard the hesitation of feet and then footsteps towards the door. The handle turned and the door opened; Eva was in its frame, behind her a glow from the light hanging from the ceiling. She took his hand and pulled him inside. They both looked up to the top of the stairs where the others were discussing God and forgiveness. Giuseppe pulled her outside. "Vieni, I want to show you something," he said, not letting go of her arm.

She closed the door and they were alone on the dusty street, the town all around them. Night had fallen hours ago, but it was hot and there were people around. They walked down Via Sant' Anna to the piazza where they looked out over the valley, searching for the flicker of a lamp held by someone watching over the land or thieving. They leaned on the balustrade, side by side, not looking at each other. Eva was sticky with sweat but she didn't care. Giuseppe led her past the church, where they were to be married, to one of the benches across the road. The wood was worn and it reminded Giuseppe of his childhood. They sat, not touching, a hand's distance between their hips. Giuseppe took Eva's hand, opened it and placed the box at the centre of her palm. Eva opened it. "They're the only valuable thing I have," he said.

Eva put them on and felt their weight. She shook her head, letting them touch the skin behind her earlobes. Giuseppe looked at her - dark hair against suntanned face. The earrings accentuated the curve of her chin. They looked new and shiny against her fresh skin.

The couple walked hand in hand to the edge of town where Rana's sister was having a party. With the war over the townspeople no longer waited for a saint's day to drink and eat in excess. People shouted in the streets and men took the arm of any woman in the piazza to dance - their voices the only form of music.

Outside Rana's house a long table divided the street in two. One end of the table was a few steps away from the front door from which guests entered and exited with plates of food. The kitchen was small with a cement floor and potted plants in a group. They were lush and well watered, not as Giuseppe remembers them. As a child, when he visited Rana, a layer of dust changed the original colour of floors and objects. Moreover, the plants were brittle. It seemed that the German who had

married Rana's sister had put order to the house. The stairs that led to the bedrooms were covered in orange and blue mosaics - Rana had told him that the German was good with his hands.

The table was made of a bedroom door taken off its hinges, placed atop four empty pots. A tablecloth covered it - the hem scraped the sand road, hiding the goings-on underneath: hands squeezing thighs, trousered legs touching bare ones, skirts pushed up beyond hips. The host, Rana's sister Marta, was drunk. The German sat next to her recounting a story in Sicilian. He sounded strange, like a child learning a language at school. For Eva, Sicilian was an old man's language; even children sounded old when they spoke. The German made it sound new. After five years of living among them he had picked up the dialect and its fables. As Eva stared at the German, Giuseppe said "He likes the wine, the oil and Marta, and he walks down the street singing *sciuri sciuri*. So Rana tells me."

Eva could not understand why Marta was with him. The Germans had descended on her town, taken wine and olive oil from the nuns (leaving them with little to give to the poor), eaten the baker's bread and enjoyed the pasta handed to them by reluctant but fearful wives. Rana was not fond of him. "*U Tedesco dintra casa* is a bad omen" - Rana believed that the man would bring him bad luck.

The German stood up. He was a big man, tall with wide shoulders and a square jaw. "*Viniti, viniti,*" he beckoned to Giuseppe and Eva before disappearing through the door into the kitchen. He came out carrying two chairs which he placed between Rana and Marta. The chair legs were rubbed to splinters. The German pushed them into place and dust puffed around them.

On the table were peeled oranges, carafes of wine, biscuits, glace' fruit, slices of watermelon and, to one side, a stack of plates scraped clean. The remnants of the main course were in a bowl on the floor for the dog. The women were Eva's age but looked much older, more experienced; they wore make-up and had their hair loose. Some of them wore a fringe, a style her mother had forbidden: "Why would you want to hide your eyes? Only liars hide their eyes, only women with secrets hide their eyes."

The women smoked cigarettes, real ones that came from a box, not the ones that her father rolled with paper and tobacco. A Moorish looking girl with a dark fringe handed a box to Giuseppe. "The only good thing the British left us," she remarked.

On the box was a sailing ship and the words *Senior Service*. Giuseppe tapped the packet against his hand, letting the tips of two cigarettes fall out; he put one to his lips and handed the box back to the girl. She thanked him with the lift of her chin. He struck the sulphur head of a match along its strip. The flame glowed orange against his face. He sucked hard, letting the tip of the cigarette burn red. A grey scab formed where the red had burned. Eva looked at him and formed a v with her fingers. She wanted to try. "*Vo provari?*" asked Giuseppe, handing her the cigarette.

She took it and her heartbeat lifted her body. She pursed her lips around the cigarette, closed her eyes and inhaled. She turned away from Giuseppe and coughed hard. Her eyes watered and her ribs hurt as she drew air into her lungs. She wanted to show him that she could enjoy herself, do the things the other women did. She wanted to show him that she wasn't a child. "Try again tomorrow, it takes time to get used to it. Then you'll love it," said the woman with the fringe.

She poured wine into a glass free of lipstick stains and handed it to Eva. Then she filled her own glass and lifted it to make a toast. "*Salute bella*, life is ours again," she said as they clinked glasses.

Eva drank. She felt out of place but she was enjoying herself. She could no longer feel the chair beneath her. The German was telling jokes - the ones about the Italians and the war and the ones about the Germans. "Did you know that during the war the Italians couldn't even disarm a bicycle?"

Laughs were lazy and forced. Giuseppe's face was close to Eva's. She could feel his breath, sour with tobacco, on her mouth and cheeks. His lips were against hers. She heard nothing until the dog, lying underneath the table, yelped. Someone had put a shoe to its ribs. Eva separated herself from Giuseppe and got up to clear the stack of plates from the table.

Marta was in the kitchen scraping *granita* into glasses. "Eva, *grazie*," she said.

Eva was flushed. "Marta, we're getting married in September. Papa doesn't want Peppe living alone. *E' orfanu*," she explained, referring to Giuseppe as an orphan for the first time.

Marta hugged her and kissed both her cheeks. "*Auguri bedda!* Peppe adores you, from always. As a child he loved you and never thought he could ever be with you. From his lips it was always Eva Eva Eva."

Marta had taken the form of a wife – the gravity of marriage had rounded her hips and abdomen, enlarged her breasts and added folds to her face. She had lost her sheen. "I don't know how to be a wife," said Eva.

"*Bedda*, it's simple. Keep a good house, make him feel like a king, laugh and be happy, make sons," said Marta, handing two glasses of *granita* to Eva.

Marta hesitated then said, "Make him happy in bed, even if you don't feel like it. Think about other things and learn to be quick."

They stepped outside holding the *granita*, which they placed at the centre of the table. Eva ate hers with a fork as there were no more spoons.

"*Vedi sti sigaretti*, they come from England and are sold in America. The Camorra brothers make a lot of money dealing them. Imagine how much they really cost, a quarter of the price we pay. The rest goes in their pockets. I'm going to America Peppe, to make money like the Camorra." Rana spat on the floor for effect, before lighting a cigarette.

"I'm getting married, Rana. *Mistretta* came to talk to me while I was at the Barbershop, had to leave my customer half way through a shave. My mother was already sick. He told it to me straight and clean. I'm starting a new life," said Giuseppe.

"*E di famigghia bona*. You've found a good family," admitted Rana. "*Cca un ci sunnu fimmini pi mia*, the women in this town are no good for me. I want an *Americana*, a blonde with long nails and legs up to here," he added, pointing to his chest.

“Bah! Americani. They’ll suck your blood and you won’t even know it!” said *Pepe*. *“My cousin e’ tutta americana. Those Americans have taken the Sicilian out of her. Send her my regards when you get there.”*

“I want to live like a King in Queens, eh, what do you think?” *Rana* asked, blowing smoke upwards.

“Io prima mi sposu e po si vidi. I’ve just buried my mother. Let me get married, settle a bit and then we’ll see,” said *Pepe*.

“Sta guerra c’ha rovinatu a noi e ha fattu ricchi ai autri,” complained *Rana*, envious of other people benefiting from the war.

“Why should we be the only ones not to make money? I think I’ll become a collector... money, booze, cigarettes, women,” he continued.

“Rana, taliati la schiena, there nobody will watch your back so you’d better watch it with your own eyes. Always keep your eye on the tip of the paintbrush,” warned *Giuseppe*, as he held out his thumb.

“Si! Without worrying about who’s holding it,” replied *Rana*, grabbing his friend’s thumb.

The man sitting next to the Moorish woman slung the strap of his accordion across his shoulder, put one foot on a chair, let the instrument breathe and began to play. The women got up, created a half circle in front of him and began to clap. *Eva*, cheeks flushed from the anticipation of womanhood, joined them. She had seen the frivolity and freedom of adulthood and she liked it.

The Wedding Photograph

Sparrows burst into erratic flight, warning of rain as Padre Spano placed the communion bread in the glass chamber, blessing it with words to his Saviour. The altar boys, still in civilian clothes, climbed into the bell tower to check the ropes. The wedding ceremony was to take place in the morning at ten. It was the first wedding since winter, summer had been quiet and now autumn brought with it the grace of a union. The altar boys had tolled the deaths of many and were eager to change the tune to one of celebration.

Eva woke before sunrise, walked down the stairs and opened the front door. The air was dark blue, with no sign of the sun. She left it open, letting in the day, and sat at the kitchen table where she poured a pack of cards into her hand, shuffled them and snapped them onto the table for a game of solitaire.

Giuseppe and Eva would have no photos of their wedding day. No one would remember what Eva's dress looked like, nor how the veil fell over her eyes. "She was in white," people would say, but details of the dress, her hair and her smile would evade them.

Out of respect for the recently deceased mother of the groom, Signora Mistretta decided that no photos would be taken on the day. Out of respect for Giuseppe, who was in mourning, and for his mother who had given Eva her only son, the wedding would be a subdued event. Only family and closest friends were invited. Giuseppe's parents and grandfather would be remembered in the ceremony, followed by a silent moment of prayer – Gabriella did not want to offend anyone living or dead. This was the conversation she had with her husband one night when neither of them desired the caress of sleep. She had helped him fill his pipe, a ritual for three hands which they performed as fluidly as a dance, and he stood on the balcony, leaning against the balustrade. He watched his wife, who sat at the edge of the bed, and listened to her justifications. He knew she would regret it but said nothing, preferring to avoid a night of arguing.

During the ceremony the priest spoke of roots and traditions, the development of love, the beauty of bearing children and the wisdom of age. After Ciccio kissed his daughter on the cheeks and gave her hand to Giuseppe, embraced him, and after guests threw rice over the couple, Signora Mistretta felt a pang of regret and ordered her brother-in-law, Vincenzo, to find a photographer.

Vincenzo was much younger than Ciccio and acted more like a son than a brother. He had always been in awe of Ciccio, if not a little intimidated. He was a school teacher, spoke French, Latin and ancient Greek and worked at the boys' lyceum in the town of Amalfi. He considered life a visual pleasure and in the mornings took his coffee watching the waves peel and froth on the Mediterranean. He had the same facial features as his brother but, eighteen years younger, still had all his hair.

Vincenzo was not as vain as his brother; he was quieter and thinner. He had managed to avoid the army with a pair of glasses, as thick as the base of a wine bottle, and a chest that fell below the required measurement. He was considered in ill health by the Italian army so he continued his studies in Naples at *l'Unniversita di Federico Secondo*.

Like his brother Vincenzo smoked a pipe. On the day of the wedding, in his pocket he carried a clay pipe with a long nose and a narrow holder. Like his brother, he had hidden his habit from his father.

The guests grouped at the entrance of the church. Giuseppe and Eva held hands, arms touching, and laughed with cousins, aunts and friends. Vincenzo stood detached from them, watching his niece. He was proud of his brother and anticipated the good times he would have with Giuseppe, who was only a few years younger than him. He had spent little time with him as a teenager, even though they were in the same school, as he kept to himself, preferring to read over playing rough with the other boys. His spectacles were expensive and if he broke them his parents would punish him by making him wait before ordering new ones. Fear of a blurred world kept him tame.

Signora Mistretta's hand tightened around his arm. "Vince', *per favore*, find me a photographer."

"*Va bene Gabriele', statti calma*, I'll find someone," he said as he placed a hand over hers.

With his walking stick under his arm he walked to the photographer's house and knocked on the door. He was new in town. He and his wife had run away from San Donati di Cosenza when, on the 23rd of September 1943, the Germans put the men on trains and sent them to labour camps in Germany. That was three years ago.

Aldo Trombetta had an indoor studio with backdrops, cameras and lenses. His work was good as he allowed a person's character to come through instead of insisting on the typical pose - heads turned slightly to the side, eyes staring into nothingness. He liked his subjects to look straight into the camera. Vincenzo banged again. The door opened and Aldo's wife stepped outside. She wore slippers and an apron over her dress - she wiped her hands on it. Vincenzo stepped back and took off his hat. "Ah Vincenzino, it's you. You're still skinny. Don't you have a wife to feed you?" she said.

"*Si, sono io* and no I don't have a wife," he said in perfect Italian.

"*Entra entra*, tell me your news, it must be a year that I don't see you, where have you been? We must get you engaged. Have a biscuit," she said.

Vincenzo stood outside. "*Signora grazie*, but I'm looking for your husband. Eva and Giuseppe have just gotten married and we need him to take a picture."

Signora Trombetta put her hands to her cheeks. "Ah! But he's not here. There's the games in Marsala and he's taking photos for the newspaper. *Che peccato!* Why didn't you come by earlier? Perhaps Erica is home, she has a *macchina fotografica*."

Signora Trombetta vanished. She reappeared wearing her good shoes, and no apron - her dress smooth against her squat body. She took Vincenzo by the arm and led him to Erica, a signorina with a camera and a good eye. They walked past the piazza and up Via San Domenico and stopped about half way up the road. Signora Trombetta pulled a pear out of her bag, offered a bite to Vincenzo (who shook his head and clicked his tongue) and ate it right to the core. The door to Erica's house was green, the paint stripping to reveal a layer of white underneath. Her parents told them that she too was in Marsala.

With the photographer's wife still on his arm, Vincenzo returned to the church where Gaspare was sweeping the rice from the steps. "They left about half an hour ago, went to Mistretta's house," he said, holding the broom upright and resting his chin on the end.

"*Grazie Gaspare*," said Vincenzo.

“Tell them Aldo will take *’nna bedda foto* when they are ready. Eva can put on her dress again, Aldo will put up a beautiful backdrop and it’ll be the same as on their wedding day,” suggested Signora Trombetta as she drew another pear from her bag.

“*Glielo dico Signora Trombetta,*” said Vincenzo, avoiding dialect.

With his walking stick still in the crook of his arm, he started to run. He wanted to get to the house before he missed out on anything else. When he reached the front door of his brother’s house, he bent down and wiped his shoes with a handkerchief. The roads in Santa Ninfa were dusty, unlike the cobbled and tarred roads of Naples and Amalfi. He pushed open the door and went upstairs into the living room where the guests sat on chairs against the walls. Gabriella had borrowed chairs from the wives of her husband’s hunting circle. There was no music or dancing and conversations were hushed. Giuseppe was still in mourning and people showed their respect by behaving as though they were discussing Christ and the Holy Trinity.

Valentina, in a turquoise and yellow dress, walked from one person to the next offering them muscardini and sweet cakes from a tray. Muscardini were Eva’s favourite biscuits as they were shaped like sea urchins when their thorns had fallen off. They were hollow and coated in icing sugar. Gabriella had rented the Baker’s oven to bake them. Eva and Giuseppe sat on the couch in the middle of the room. She held his arm and leaned into him, extending her dress over the seat, stroking the fabric.

Signora Mistretta caught Vincenzo’s eye and mouthed “*e lu fotografu?*”

He took a *muscardinu* from Valentina and walked over to his sister-in-law. “*Non, c’e. We even went to find Erica. But they’re both in Marsala photographing the summer games. Che c’e da fare?*”

“Ah.” Signora Mistretta bit the side of her index finger as if to punish herself.

“Signora Trombetta said her husband can photograph them in his studio when they’re ready. Eva can wear her dress again, they can choose a good backdrop...”

But Gabriella had stopped listening. She looked at her daughter, her eldest, her first to be married. In white, a wedding dress she had to borrow. The war had left them, like others, with little money left in their drawers. She cursed the night she decided to ban the photographer and cursed her husband for agreeing with her. She touched her face; beneath her fingers her cheeks were smooth, the skin on her forehead bumpy, the space between her eyebrows grooved. Her daughter was beautiful in white, her skin fresh and her cheeks and lips rosy with make-up. The townsfolk called Eva *la bedda* and Gabriella thought of how the young men serenaded her.

She had moved Eva and Valentina’s beds together, covering the mattresses with a single sheet that belonged to her mother. It had been given to her as part of her trousseau. She had never used it and wanted to pass it on to her firstborn. She moved Pina’s bed into her bedroom and had brought a mattress from the cemetery house. Valentina would sleep on Pina’s bed and Pina, the youngest, would sleep on the mattress. “If the door is closed, you don’t go in,” Signora Mistretta had told them.

“Your sister will be married, so you need to treat her like an adult, not like a child. You will make Peppe welcome, like he is a sister, *capito?*” she had explained to them the day before.

Pina and Valentina didn’t mind sharing with their parents. When they were younger there were many nights that they lay their mattresses at the edge of the balcony, doors open to the summer air and the scent of night jasmine. They’d lie on their stomachs listening to the serenades coming from the street and ask their mother to look out to see who it was. They’d fix the hem of the lace curtain to their heads and pretend it was a veil, wondering what it would be like to be a bride.

Eva sat on the edge of the bed, the doors of the armoire open. She looked at her clothes and noticed the hangers, which were padded with printed cotton and trimmed with lace. Ribbon had been wound round the hook. Her mother had prepared them for her and she hadn’t even noticed they were missing. Gabriella had given her a bag; it was leather and inside were nighties, pillowcases, blankets, towels and sheets that had belonged to her own mother. Pina had made her curtains, embroidered them with angels and trumpets – her favourite design. She had wrapped them in muslin and left them on the bed for her sister.

Eva remembered the washerwoman coming on Monday - the washboard in a bucket of soapy water in the courtyard. Mamma never did laundry. Even during the war Papa would pay *la gnuria* to come past once a month. Eva felt sorry for the woman, especially in winter when the cold water stung her hands and turned them red. Papa paid her well and gave her fabric cut-offs from the shop. “She has a whole family to feed,” he would say.

Giuseppe watched Eva, standing upright with his hands in his pockets. He had loosened his tie and his jacket hung behind the door. His hair was slicked back and his thin moustache had grown thick. He was an older version of the boy she knew. He had the same eyes, the same way of standing but he was unfamiliar.

“I’m going downstairs to have a cigarette, would you like one?” he asked.

“Si,” she answered.

She was still in the wedding dress an outline of grey had formed under each arm. It had been a hot day and the sweat had trickled all the way down to her ankles. In the church she had been worried that somebody might see and would wonder if she’d forgotten to go to the toilet.

She had hidden Giuseppe’s letters in the trunk, underneath winter coats and magazines. She remembered the letters and watched Giuseppe’s face as he waited for her to get up. She unzipped the dress and pulled it off her shoulders, revealing her bra. She stood up and pushed down the taffeta until it was a heap on the floor. She stepped out of it and waited for Peppe’s response. “Every time I looked up at the desert night, it was your eyes that looked down on me from the brightest stars,” he said, his hands still in his pockets.

The Honeymoon

Eva and Peppe walked arm in arm down Via della Libertà in Palermo. He had on a three piece suit from Milan and his brogues were polished to a high shine. It was a Friday evening, their first day on Honeymoon. They had caught the train that morning, two days after their wedding. The air was moist and caused sweat to catch under his collar. On his arm was his bride, the woman whose soul was clasped around his heart. He looked down at her fingers curled around his arm - nails long and painted red.

On her finger was a ring, simple and smooth. It bent the light that shone from the passing cars and scooters. She stretched her fingers to look at it then closed her eyes, the better to feel the rhythm of Peppe's footsteps. The sea murmured against the boardwalk and released its spray into the night.

Via della Libertà stretched ahead of them, buildings in *Stile Liberty* on either side. Some, which had been bombed during the war, were being torn down to make way for new apartment blocks. "Are you hungry?" Giuseppe asked.

"No, *staiu beni*," she answered.

He didn't believe her. She must've been hungry - they hadn't eaten since they left Santa Ninfa. They had arrived at *La Stazione* in the late afternoon and had caught a taxi to Hotel do Mar. The honeymoon was a gift from Ciccio. He had insisted they stay there instead of his hotel, Hotel Alessandria, as the balconies overlooked the Mediterranean. "It's more romantic, more for young couples," he explained. He had swapped two weeks with the owner, who wanted a few nights of rest, away from the noise of the city centre.

Giuseppe was hungry but thought it rude to eat if she wasn't going to. They had formed a union and he wanted to do things together. Eva was his precious ruby - he'd loved her since he first saw her behind the lace curtain, that carnival night. He still saw the child in her. "You must stay a little girl," he had said to her in the bedroom Signora Mistretta had prepared for them. He had curled his body around hers and held her hand. That is how they slept for their first two nights of marriage.

They walked past the *Teatro Massimo* where people were gathered on the steps. Eva wanted to see what the theatre looked like inside. She loved opera and on many mornings as a child she and her sisters were woken by Giacomo Puccini's *La Boheme* as it resonated from the gramophone in her parents' bedroom. It was her mother's favourite music.

They passed the heavy doors and went into the theatre. The stage curtains were drawn. The chairs were covered in velvet - a plush burgundy that reminded Eva of ripe grapes. The energy of the performance and the applause hung in the air.

Still holding hands they walked outside and watched the theatre crowd. The ladies wore hats and gloves. A woman held a fan decorated with a peacock. She fluttered it in front of her face so that it blew wisps of hair off her forehead. Eva had a fan in her handbag, a gift from Giuseppe's mother the day her son returned to her from the war. She pulled it out, the tortoiseshell and silk cool in her hand.

Eva eyed shoes and hemlines, noting the fashions of the emerging middle class. They were daring with their clothes and wore the latest fashions from Paris and New York. The older women wore their clothes more conservatively, as if time had grafted the dull colours to their skins. She touched her hair; her curls were rigid with lacquer. Her mother had suggested she use it to copy the styles in the magazines. In Santa Ninfa, with its five thousand inhabitants, it was easy to be fashionable - but in the big city she looked like she had come from the village.

A group of women, all about Eva's age, were discussing the performance. The tallest of the four wore gloves in white; they were striking against the mint green of her dress. She sucked on a cigarette, tilting her head up as she blew out a stream of smoke. She held the cigarette like she had been smoking her whole life. Her handbag was made of snakeskin and blue eye shadow highlighted her eyes, just as Eva had seen in magazines.

"Dai, let's eat something," Giuseppe urged.

"Can I have ice-cream? I know it's not proper food, but..." Happiness coloured her voice.

"Let's get ice-cream," said Giuseppe, relieved.

They walked past a club. Above the entrance Costa Azzurra was lit up in rope lights. Inside a band belted out songs from America, big band tunes. There were trumpets, a piano, a cello and backup singers in halter neck dresses and satin gloves that extended past the elbow. "Let's go get your ice-cream and we'll come back here," suggested Peppe, his mouth mirroring Eva's smile.

They found a *gelateria* in a narrow road off the main street. It was a hole in the wall with an awning and the words *Gelato Fantasia* printed across it. Beyond the hole, three people busied themselves as they served customers and scooped ice-cream into cones. "Lemon sorbet *per favore*," said Eva to the man serving.

"Here you go Signorina." He handed her a cone heaped with sorbet. Cold air swirled in front of her nose as she bit a chunk from the top. "You have some on your nose," said Giuseppe, as he wiped the spot with his handkerchief.

"Where's your ice-cream?" she asked.

"I prefer cigarettes," he replied, lighting up.

Giuseppe walked slowly. He enjoyed the feel of her on his arm, the sway of her hips and her small steps that barely touched the tar. He watched as she let the ice-cream melt onto her hand then licked it off.

"Let's go to America." Giuseppe threw the idea into the air and watched Eva for a reaction.

"Or Venezuela. Or South Africa," he continued.

Eva bit into the cone. Pieces flaked and fell to the pavement. "And my family?" she asked as she pushed a bit of cone into her mouth.

"They'll come with. I'll speak to your father," said Peppe.

Talk of moving to a new country made Eva uneasy. "Let's go back to Costa Azzura," she said.

"Amuninni" said Giuseppe as he dropped his cigarette to the floor and stubbed it out.

They arrived back at Hotel do Mar close to three in the morning. They took the elevator to the third floor and went into room 303. She held his gaze and took off her clothes. She stood in front of him naked.

In his eyes she was perfect. He undressed, then took her hand and led her to the bed. She lay down and he took both her hands and kissed her palms. He took the box of matches from the bedside table, lit a match and when the flame had burned almost to the end he blew it out. He gave it to her. "Write in my hand the number of children you want," he said as he gave her his palm.

She wrote, snapped the match in two, then closed his hand, leant into him and placed her mouth on his.

Shaving by Moonlight

The moon bled at the edges. A cloud, a slow drifter, had cut through it. The milky light flowed past the edges of the window frame to pool on the floor. Giuseppe looked in the mirror and rubbed the palm of his hand up his cheek, lifting the stubble. He dipped his fingers in the warm water. As he splashed and flicked, beads of water collected on the mirror. With eyes closed he breathed in the humid air. He pulled the cut throat razor from its wrapping. His grandfather had given it to him, wrapped in a sheet of blocks and numbers. The numerals were in his grandfather's hand, carefully rendered to fit into the green and white blocks of the lotto paper. He kept the razor in its paper skin, which had taken on the feel of leather, smooth and pliable. It held the smell of his grandfather and made him present, even though his body was gone.

He pulled the shaving brush from the spout of a white jug, wet it, and moved it over the soap to build foam. He covered the stubble, which had become part of him. He moved it over his neck, over his chin and then, with a finger, wiped it off his lips. The next morning he was going to work at Capri Barber Shop. Eva was pregnant with their first child and they lived with her parents. He preferred to shave at night, in the dark, like he had done for years in the desert. One day, in his Barber Shop in Doornfontein, South Africa, he would shave in the light.