

From Darkness, Light

Sample pages

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Part 1

Many people want to know how I came to meet “the great Shero Bosellini?” Well, he was not “the great” anything when I met him.

He had some reputation as a painter in Italy in the early 1940s, but of landscapes. Nothing like the masterpieces he is known for today.

That he was a genius as a painter cannot be disputed, but he was also a genius as a madman. All men are mad of course, but Bosellini, he had a special brand of madness, as if a little man sat hunched beneath his rib cage tickling his heart. This, the world has forgotten. There are few people alive who remember how Shero Bosellini lived and the world has never known what happened to him. He just—poof!— disappeared as a magician does. But I—Maria Catalano—I know how he lived, and how he managed to leave this world almost unseen.

I will tell you the story, but you must be patient. You cannot understand the story of the painter unless you know something of the storyteller. With Bosellini, this is especially true because the painter and the storyteller are *intrecciai*, woven together like the light and the darkness.

The year I met Bosellini was 1943. I was sixteen and living on the dairy farm of my parents with my younger sister Este—short for Estella. We lived outside of Salerno, but if you were to go there now, you would see only the smallest part of the town I knew as a girl. Salerno today is a city, but then, she was a seaside village, a baby suckling at the breast of the Gulf of Salerno. Behind the village rose the Colle Balleria, a hill, nothing more than a bump on the hip of the Apennine Mountains, but Este and I called the hill our mountain. The Salernitani called her *Masso Della Signora*, which means The Rock of the Lady. She was given that name because the hill has two humps that look like the soft curves of the back of a woman as she lies with her face toward the ground. Our farm climbed the leeward side of the lady, cut from the forest of pine and cypress that closed us in on all sides. For hundreds of years the Catalanos and their ancestors herded cows on that hill and sold the milk and the cheese that the cows gave.

Our house and the farm buildings stood near the top of our mountain, and a short walk through the woods brought Este and me to the ridge where all the romance of Italy lay at our feet: the shimmering Gulf of Salerno, as blue and still as a mosaic tile; the mountains with their broad gray-green faces against the cerulean sky; all of this bathed in the pure, clean sunlight that is seen nowhere else in the world. Separating the mountains and the Gulf was the plain, sweeping like a scimitar from Salerno in the north to Agripoli in the south. Today that land is ruined with resorts, but in my girlhood, just before and during the war, the plain was as she had been for thousands of years: white sand, walnut groves, olive trees, and pastures, all wrapped in the mingling odor of salt and sea, cypress and pine. When we went to the top of our mountain, Este always wandered off to pick flowers, but I sat on the ground watching the clouds dance along the peaks of the other hills and the fishing boats rock in the calm lap of the Gulf. And I dreamed. I wondered where in Salerno or the villages along the coast or perhaps in the boats, was my future

husband. He certainly had to be there because we who were born on the coast of Amalfi were like the mountains—rooted for centuries and unmoving. Never once did I think I would leave.

I also did not feel the shadow spreading over Italy at that time. Mussolini, he promised a new Roman Empire, but the Allies had defeated the Germans and Italians in the African desert, and the Italian stomach for war had begun to turn. The whisperers—the people who told things that could not be broadcast on the radio—began to say that the Allies would soon invade Sicily. Then, where in Italy would they go? Who knew? But the young Maria, she did not care about such things. She lived in *paradiso*.

However, every paradise contains a snake, no? My snake was Papa.

You must understand Papa. He was a man more comfortable with anger and hatred than gentleness and love. He loved uncomfortably, in silence, but his anger was always on full display. His face would turn the color of the eggplant and his wires of black hair would go stiff on his head. Some little time—seconds—would pass in silence, and then he would detonate. A well-known story in Salerno told of a man known to be an animal thief coming to the village just before the war. The people were afraid, but Papa found this man and asked him if he planned to steal any cows that Papa owned. The man laughed but would not say yes or no, so Papa threw the man to the ground, took a knife from the pocket of the man, and carved an X under his right eye. He told the man if any of his cattle disappeared, he would make the X larger next time. The story was told often in Salerno, and everyone treated the Catalanos with great care.

But most often, Papa grew his rage on the farm like he grew the hay for the cows. I remember one such time. Este was always so happy and carefree, and she sometimes did not watch or be as careful as she should. She was in the kitchen tossing a tomato in the air while Mamma and I prepared to make the sauce. Este, she was nine, threw the tomato too far, and the

fruit landed on the stone floor right before the feet of Papa who was coming in the door. His face, already red, leaped to purple and the entire room was swallowed in the pause. Then Papa yelled, “Stupid girl! You think tomatoes are to be wasted? You will learn the cost of even one tomato!”

He reached across the wooden table and grabbed Este by her long hair, dragging her screaming onto the table. That was something I could not bear. Este was the owner of my heart; I would have walked through fire to prevent a finger of smoke from touching her eyes. So I hit Papa on his arm, breaking his grip on Este. She tumbled to the floor, and Papa and I each looked into the face of the other. Yes, the eleven-year-old girl found herself staring at the first madman in her life. I did not blink, I did not fight back, I tried not to flinch as he beat me with both fists. Finally, I could not keep myself upright any longer, and when I collapsed, Papa grabbed me by my hair, dragged me across the floor, and rubbed my face in the broken tomato.

Then he pushed me aside with his foot and ordered Este to clean the floor. That is when I picked myself up. Papa sat at the table; Mamma stood cowering against the wall of the kitchen. I gave them both the look to show I was not defeated, and I went off to the long, narrow room that held the single bed Este and I shared. Este came to me as soon as she finished the cleaning, singing in the way she did, the way Mamma taught her, to block out the sound of Papa’s anger. She lay down on the bed and took me in her arms, and I began to sing with her. Este had the voice of the angels, and I did not, but we did not care about the quality of our singing. We sang, keeping our voices soft so no one could hear. That was the way we healed each other.

Six years later, in the April of 1943, Papa—whose hatred for the Germans had long roots because they killed his brother in the Great War—was delivering milk to the hospital when the Italian military police stopped him on the narrow road from our mountain to Salerno. They

brought him to a building used by the German Gestapo, and Papa found himself facing a German officer dressed all in black and wearing the cap with the death skull. The man stared at Papa for much time without speaking. Then he said, “There is a very good chance you will never see your family again, *Signore* Catalano. You have been identified as a traitor.”

“I am not.”

“Some of your own countrymen say you are.”

“They lie.”

The German opened a file and selected three photographs. “I have here pictures of your wife and daughters. Beautiful women. Especially attractive to soldiers who spend so much time among men. You remember a girl by the name of Mastuccio?”

“Bina Mastuccio. I knew her father.”

“Then you know she disappeared for three days, and we found her in a cave in one of your hills, nearly dead after having had an affair with several of our soldiers.”

“She was raped and beaten,” Papa said.

“She had no one to protect her.” The German waved the three photographs. “When you are spying, do you think about who will protect your wife and daughters, *Signore*?”

“I will protect them,” Papa said. “I am not a spy. I am not a traitor. I am a milk man.”

“We shall see.”

They put him in a cell for three hours. When they released him, they kept the cart, the mule, and the milk. Papa walked back to the farm, and when he came into the house, he pushed Este and me out of the kitchen and into the parlor. He began to scream at Mamma, yelling and cursing and telling the story between sputters and rages. Este, who was just about to turn fifteen, stood as close to the door as she dared. I was not very interested. I had grown up and had more

important things on my mind than Germans and threats. I went to the big window that looked out to the woods on the ridge, but what I studied was my reflection in the glass. With the uncomplicated vanity of a teenage girl, I thought that the face I saw in the window was more completely beautiful than any face I had ever seen to that point in my life. Like Este, my skin was flawless, but I had the high cheekbones and the soft face that tapered to a narrow chin. My hair was thick and brown-black with that wave so common in Italian girls. But the jewel that centered my beauty, that was my nose, so straight and perfect. I turned my face in the glass to imitate the cameos I saw some of the women in the village wearing. The day was near dusk and as our mountain grew darker, my reflection in the glass hid the one part of my face I did not like: my large eyes that changed colors from brown to hazel to dark green depending on the light. In the reflection, my eyes were blank disks like the glazed eyes in the carved busts of the old, beautiful Italian goddesses. You find my beauty hard to imagine, no? Nevertheless true: I was beautiful. Yes, I was beautiful.

In the kitchen, Papa dropped his voice so we could no longer hear his words, and after a few minutes, Este moved away from the door, wandering the parlor in her bored way. When Este had no purpose for moving, she walked like an owl flew, flitting silently so that she could startle you if you were not paying attention to her. She was doing that, moving in and out of the background to my reflection in the window when the door opened, and Papa came into the room. Mamma stayed in the doorway, pieces of her body quivering as if she were trying to keep all of her parts from tumbling onto the floor. Papa came to me and laid his rough hand on my shoulder while calling Este to my side. He set us with our backs to the window. The very last of the daylight had almost drained away, but he turned off the electric tap and lit a candle, which he moved back and forth as he inspected Este and me.

Finally, he straightened himself and put his hand on my shoulder again. “Maria,” he said to Mamma in that tone that did not invite argument. “She is the oldest and the most visible. She will be needed to work the farm.” His voice sank to a whisper which, from my father, came out as hoarse and grisly. “Perhaps things will be over before Estella gets much older. But we must keep her out of sight.”

I did not know what he meant with the words “visible” and “things,” but I remember feeling the tingle of alarm and mistrust. I searched the face of Mamma, and that was when I saw her nod. She trembled but she nodded. For how many years did I try to tell myself I did not see what I saw? However, Bosellini used to say many times, “What lies can be told about something that stands in the light?”

That night, Papa led Este outside and away to somewhere else on the farm, and I was sent to bed alone. Sleep had a hard time with me that night. I kept slipping out of his arms and waking because I was not used to lying in the bed by myself. Each time I woke, I opened my eyes and monitored every sound. Once, I heard the voices of Papa and Dr. Rinconi, and I was about to close my eyes again when Mamma came in, a lighter human shape than the absolute darkness of our windowless bedroom. She sat down on my bed and called my name softly. When I sat up, she put out her right hand and caressed my face.

“I have brought you some milk,” she said, holding out to me a small glass with her left hand. I became alarmed. Mamma only brought milk to me in the night when she thought I needed comfort. I took the glass and drank, turning my head to the empty bed beside me. When I finished, I looked at Mamma and said with fear in my throat, “Where is Este, Mamma?”

She once more caressed my face, and then taking the empty glass from my hand, she held me by the wrist and gently moved me from the bed. She led me out through the kitchen to the

parlor where Signore Rinconi and Papa were waiting. Even though Signore Rinconi was a doctor, no teenage girl likes to be in a room with a strange man while in her sleeping clothes. I lowered my head, but I made certain that I could still see out of the tops of my eyes. One of the chairs had been covered with a sheet. Este was not in the room.

Papa and the doctor fell silent when I entered. They were standing by the window with a nearly empty bottle of wine on the table between them, the bottle turning the flickering candle light into sinister pinpoint flashes. Next to the wine bottle there was a basin, a large knife, cotton wadding and a long piece of baling wire. Nothing was said as I stood quietly. I turned around, but Mamma had gone. I turned back to the two men. Papa stared at me while Dr. Rinconi looked away, his eyes fixed on the window. I wondered if Este could be outside, so I went and stood beside the doctor, searching, but the world was so dark, and I began to feel the sleep fall heavily on my head. Standing became so much of an effort, but still I held myself against the window searching for Este.

“Are you certain,” I heard the doctor say to the window, although I knew he was addressing Papa. “Could she not be sent away, too?”

“No,” Papa replied, “what good will she do for me there? She is needed. This way, she can go into Salerno and not be in danger of anything more than comments.”

“This seems ... extreme,” the doctor said.

“The times are extreme,” Papa replied.

Two men talking about a girl standing in front of them as if she were not in the room is strange today. A girl of today would not stand for such treatment. But in that time and place, children, especially daughters, did not speak to an adult unless spoken to. And even through the growing sleep in my head, I heard the edge of the knife in the reply Papa made to the doctor, as I

am sure Rinconi did. Visitors always had to be careful in a farmhouse run by an uneducated, short-tempered, hate-filled man.

I turned away from the window and looked at Papa. I knew him better than the doctor did but feared him less. Still, the alarm and mistrust that I felt earlier began to grow. More than that, and I tell you nothing that I would not have said to you back then, I did not like Papa. I liked him less the way he finished his glass of wine. I did not like the phrase “This seems extreme.”

I wanted to ask again where Este was, but my lips, they did not want to work, and what I heard come out of my mouth did not sound like words. I felt my body slide down to the floor and the doctor’s hand steady me. I looked at Papa as he watched me. He grew narrow in my eyes, and then there was nothing but darkness.

Sixty-five years later, sitting here in Philadelphia, I can feel the sensation of coming back to the world in degrees. First, the hurting head. Then the numb heaviness of my body. Finally that my face was on fire and being pinched and pulled by little tugs. I tried to lift my hands to stop the pinching, but my arms, they were bound to the arms of a chair. Cotton pressed against my eyes making me unable to see, so I felt with my hands the loose sheet I saw covering the chair earlier. I tried calling out for Mamma, but my face and my lips felt like they were covered in wax and did not move the way I knew them to move. I listened for the singing that Mamma always, always began when I was afraid, but I heard nothing. Finally, the pinching and tugging stopped.

“There,” I heard Dr. Rinconi say in a relieved voice. “That is finished.”

A hand removed the cover from my eyes, and Dr. Rinconi stood before me holding the baling wire and wadding. He untied my arms, but I kept to the chair, weak and sweating and looking up at the doctor; his face was like the Gulf in a storm, gray and helpless. I looked down

at myself and saw my body still with the sleep clothes on and covered with a second sheet, but this sheet had the stains of fresh blood. I remember wanting to stand, but the thought floated away through the pain, a fish I could not catch. Finally, I lifted a hand to my face. Stiff hairs stuck out everywhere and a big gauze bandage lay over my nose.

“There will be plenty of scarring as you wished,” the doctor said to Papa. “Her nose will heal, but not for some time and not well.”

Papa thanked him.

“What happened?” I heard myself ask and the words came tripping and stumbling out of my mouth. The stiff hairs stuck out of my lips, as well. No one answered, but Mamma, she came to me. The doctor removed the sheet, and Mamma wrapped me in her own flannel shirt. Papa? He stood looking out the window. Mamma and the doctor helped me to stand, and she led me out of the room and away to bed singing “*Fi la nana, e mi bel fiol.*” She kept singing until I pretended to fall asleep. But I did not go to sleep. Not then. Not for a long time. I kept hearing footsteps coming toward me even after Mamma left my room. I kept seeing a shadow standing by the doorway. Never did that shadow come closer, but I thought I could see a figure standing still, watching me, and I was afraid.

Being afraid, such a thing was new for me. I had been a fearless girl, and I became again a fearless woman, but in between, on that night and for so many days to follow, I had much fear. I was afraid of the shadow in my room, yes, but I was also afraid of the shadow around my heart. I did not like shadows. I was a beautiful girl who loved the light. My life, my future, my way of thinking well about myself, these things I believed were presents locked within strong boxes waiting for me to bring them out into the light. And what key would open those boxes? My

beauty. But then, *bella cosa tosto è rapita*, a pretty thing is soon taken, both from the surface and the depth.

I had no control over how I handled the shadow that came to my room. Whenever I saw that darker figure in the darkest part of the room, I could do nothing but quiver. The inner shadow, that I fought with false weapons. I hoped, and then made myself believe, that once the doctor removed the bandage and the stitches from my face that I would return to being beautiful. I heard what Dr. Rinconi told to Papa that night, but although the doctor was a fool, he was not an idiot. When a man asks you to carve the face of his daughter, you quickly learn to tell that man what he wants to hear: “There will be scarring.” I chose not to believe him. When the day came, and he removed my stitches, I went to the glass to look and see once again the beauty of Maria Catalano. What did I find? I found what you see: vile shapes of blotchy worms frozen in place where there had once been smooth skin. And my beautiful nose was nothing more than a plug of coarse skin around the openings. For the irony, only my eyes remained as they had been: Two sad virgins from the old stories surrounded and threatened by the hideous serpents.

I also noticed something else. After Papa took my face, Mamma insisted that I eat more to help me heal. I had never been fat, but I had the arms and shoulders of a peasant girl whereas Este was thin and wiry. After weeks of much eating, I looked in the mirror and saw that my middle had thickened like my arms and shoulders. Whenever I left the house, even to walk on the farm, I was no longer allowed to dress in regular clothes; Papa ordered me to wear old-fashioned, shapeless, peasant robes in brown and gray. I wore the robes and looked formless like a *patata*.

Strangers came to the farm to order the milk and cheese, and they stared at me. The workers stared at me. Even Mamma would stare when she thought I was not looking. The

shadow stared at me during the night. Papa did not stare; he did not look at me at all. In return, I talked to none of them. I put my head down when I walked or worked in the garden or sat at the table. They all talked and moved around me.

Este did not stare. Papa put her in a storage space next to the “cold room.” This was a square room built into the hillside; one wall with the door and the roof was completely exposed, but the other walls were underground. The large, main room held the cheese and milk, but the storage space was only large enough for a cot, a small table, leaving Este little room to move around in. She had pencils and paper and dolls with her but just one window in the ceiling, so the room was shadowy and smelled of old milk and musty earth. One of my chores was to bring Este her food. The first time I came to her room, she rushed up to me and touched my cheek, drawing a long thin finger over the stiff stitching. Then she gave me her smile of comfort. That was all. Every time after that Este flitted through the small space, talking of everything and nothing like she used to when we would be sent to bed.

I wish I could tell you that I, too, comforted her by showing her the concern of a sister, but I cannot say that and give you the accurate truth. Este had to be miserable, locked away in that terrible smelling room with only a small square view of the sky that she loved so much. But I gave her no comfort, only *gelosia*: the jealousy.

Why? Because I knew one day the war would be over, and Papa would be dead and Este would come out of her prison with a face that had been changed only by nature, who changes all things. Her face would be her own. Her beauty would be her own. The lack of fresh air had begun to pale her, and even the paleness she would make her own. Forevermore, Este would be the beautiful Catalano girl. Maria Catalano would be the ugly sister, the dreaded one, the most recent of warnings not to cross *Signore Catalano*.

My chore became to help make the deliveries in Salerno with Old Armo, the cart driver. He was the only worker to not stare at my face. He looked straight ahead through watery eyes, straining to see. Old Armo said nothing, he heard nothing, he thought nothing. His thick hands moved on the leather reins, but his jowly cheeks, they bounced in time with the back ends of the mules. He spat occasionally through broken teeth or else I would not have known he had a tongue.

The first day I went to deliver was my first day off the farm since my face had been ruined; that was the 20th of July, 1943. Old Armo drove us down our mountain when the sun was just rising, promising a bright day with much heat and unstinting light. The people who ordered the milk were waiting because milk would not last long on such a day. For the first time, I received the look of horror from the townspeople. We rode past a German squad and one of them saw me and began to laugh, tugging at the tunics of his fellow soldiers and pointing. Soon they, too, were laughing and joking at the expense of my face. I put my head down, fearing at any moment to pass a boy my age, that future husband I used to look for from the ridge of our mountain, only to be laughed at or reacted to with the horror. Humiliation grabbed at my heart and pulled the breath from my lungs. I could hide my head now, but I could not hide forever. Word would circulate, and my future husband would hear and never would he come near to me; he would go on and marry another. *Meglio nascere senza nazo che senza fortuna*: the proverb that says “better to be born without a nose than without fortune.” I had neither.

The whisperers, they would spread the news about my face as they spread the news about so many things. Earlier that July, news reached our mountain that the American and English armies had crossed the sea from Africa and landed in Sicily. As July wore on, and the Allies would not be driven out of Sicily, the talk turned to where: where would the Allies strike the

mainland? Salerno became a sauce made of apprehension and terror and hope, for the Allies, they were our liberation from the Germans that few of the Italian people liked. Still, the Salernitani knew that when the Allies came, the cost of that liberation would be high.

I did not feel such tensions on *Masso Della Signore*, but the moment the cart joined the road into Salerno, those tensions dropped on Old Armo and me like a heavy cloth. So, people began to look for a diversion, for the something that would take their minds off of a possible invasion. Soon, they found the something, which I heard about on that very first day; that is why I can date the moment so precisely. The news that came to me said that a well-known landscape artist had taken rooms on *vicolo S.Bonosio*.

Yes, Bosellini.

Nothing else was said of him other than he painted wonderful trees.

One week later, a boy younger than Este appeared at the farm and told my mother that the painter wanted two bottles of fresh milk and one glass jar of casein—the powder of milk after the butter and cream have been taken away. He explained that the powder was used by the artist to make paint. The boy requested that the items be delivered during the morning to the studio of the artist on *vicolo S.Bonosio*.

Vicolo: the word means a back lane or what is called in America an alley. The street is very narrow, but the delivery cart was built for these lanes, being long and narrow with short axles and thin wheels. Old Armo found every address in Salerno with the ease of a man who had just visited. He pulled the cart against the back of a house trapping himself in the driver's seat, yet still I could have reached across and touched the wall of the house that Bosellini occupied. Most of the dwellings in old Salerno had their doors on the level of the street, but the building that housed Bosellini had ten stairs made of block and stone leading up to the entrance way.

Those steps on the outside, the overhanging roof that covered the entranceway, and the brick window frames, they all belonged more to the great villas around Salerno than to a flat squeezed into a narrow lane in the old town.

I climbed the steps carrying the two bottles and knocked on the door. From inside, a voice called out, but I could not tell if the voice said to come forward or go away. Thinking I was expected, I opened the door.

Rooms in the old town did not have *servizi*, the amenities. These were not apartments. They had one room with a narrow bed, a bureau, and a tall, thin wardrobe on one side and a small desk and straight-backed chair, sometimes two, on the other. Off the main room there would be a washroom and in the better flats, a tiny *cuchina* and a small closet. That would be all. The room Bosellini occupied was such a flat, only there was no wardrobe, no bureau and no chairs. In the far corner of the room stood a single bed. Finished canvases were stacked against the wall next to the bed, but as they showed me only their backs I had no idea what Bosellini had painted. Drop cloths lay on the bare wooden floors. Canvas and wood and tools to make other frames were scattered in no particular order; truly, they lay like dropped cloths. The entire flat smelled of paint, turpentine and cheese.

One easel was positioned to catch the light streaming in through the window. This easel stood holding a blank canvas and staring at Shero Bosellini. Bosellini, who was standing in the *in guardia* position on the top of a battered old desk across the room, returned the stare holding a paintbrush in his right hand and a paint-smear palette in his left. He sent the brush tumbling end-over-end until the bristles struck the canvas and the paintbrush clattered to the floor bouncing off a stray piece of wood and coming to rest on a cloth a meter from the easel. “*Magnifico!*” he yelled out, and then there was silence in the room as we stared at each other:

Bosellini on that desk and me just inside the door. Both of us were seeing something for the first time. Bosellini never before saw a girl as grotesque as Maria, but his reaction was not to turn away or to mock. No, Bosellini focused on my scars with such a penetrating intensity that I felt myself being devoured.

And what did Maria Catalano see for the first time? This: never before in her life had she seen a naked man.

Bosellini wore a pair of ballet shoes and nothing more. Much of his body was covered with black hair, ending in his head where thick thatches of hair stuck out one way and another. His beard, so lush and dense, was black but speckled with the color of many paints. His eyes, they were wide and black and radiated energy with such intensity that they burned. What flesh his hair did not cover showed fine, powerful muscles, especially in his shoulders and arms and calves. He picked up another brush, passed the bristles through some paint, and flung the brush sidearm across his chest, his arm muscles flashing, his great knacker and testicles swinging in maniacal time with his motion. The paintbrush scored another direct, bristle-first hit, leaving a large splotch on the canvas. I looked at the floor.

“What?” he cried. “Have you never seen a man before now? You are embarrassed?”

I nodded.

“Ay, Omphale! You are a peasant!”

I was a naïve, inexperienced girl, not too young nor too stupid to know when I was being mocked, but I still had not recovered the fearlessness of Maria. So, I stood cowering before this naked, hairy man, but he was an adult who had addressed me and I knew I had to make an answer. All I could think to say was the truth: “Yes. I am.”

I heard a laugh then that made my flesh tingle, followed by a soft thump. I let my eyes crawl along the floor toward the desk, but when I saw the ballet shoes, I stopped. A rustle reached my ears, and the hem of a smock fell into my sight, stopping at mid-calf.

“There. I am now dressed to meet the peasant girl who brings me my casein and my milk. On the table, *per favore*.”

I looked up and saw him gesturing toward the desk. Obediently and silently, I brought the items to the spot and set them down.

“Does the peasant girl have a name?”

I did not answer. Now that the situation had become level and the shock was gone, I began to shake. I could not bring myself to look at him. The nakedness I had witnessed only a moment before was too much. I tell you, I tried closing my eyes as I set the milk on the table, but all I could see was his great thing waving at me so wildly that I opened my eyes again and stared hard at the milk until the memory passed. Then I returned to the door, turning toward him and waiting to be dismissed, as my father taught me.

“Does the peasant girl have a name?” he repeated, shouting.

“Maria,” I said. “Maria Catalano.”

“Well, Maria-Maria Catalano, I will judge your produce and decide if I shall be seeing you again.”

He picked up the bottle of casein, opened the top, and sniffed. Then, he tapped the smallest amount into his palm. Taking up a water glass, he dropped that pinch into the glass and held the tumbler up in the sunshine, making a study of the way the powder settled into the water. He grabbed a piece of wood off the floor and stirred the mixture and watched again. Stirred and watched. Sniffed. Watched some more. I remember shifting from one foot to another, but I am

sure he did not notice. From the desk, he took a bottle with clear liquid, and the moment he removed the cap, the smell told me the bottle contained ammonia. He added some to the water. Studied. Shook and studied, leaning in so close to the glass, I thought he might drink. Then he straightened himself, grabbed the bottle of pasteurized milk and shook the bottle as he walked backward. He nodded, taking the paper stopper out of the bottle—cork could not be gotten once the war began—and drank long. When half the milk was gone, he leaned forward again, stared at the other glass, and then nodded. Without turning around he said, “I will see you tomorrow, Maria-Maria, with another bottle of casein and two bottles of milk.”

“*Si, Signore,*” I answered.

He merely waved his hand, not looking my way again, so I left the flat, going down the stairs on shaky legs. Old Armo gave me a queer look, but I gestured for him to drive on. He shook the reins, his face dropping back into the empty stare that resembled more the mules that pulled us than any man.

As Old Armo and I clattered through the streets that morning, I could feel something coming alive in me, like the sun that was just about to break over my shoulder and shine into my darkest places. When Papa took my face, he took my hope of ever being loved. I assumed he also took the feelings that made me desire love. That was not so. I saw my mad painter and there came a stirring, an arousal, the water moistening the very hard bottom of the long-dry well. Shero Bosellini rode with me everywhere that day. He came on every delivery. He walked the farm beside me. That night, he climbed into bed next to me.

Ah, no. This is not a pornographic story. Pity, no? Such a good dirty story this would make: the mad painter and the defaced ogress having a go at each other on that battered desk while Old Armo patiently snorted in time with the mules below. I would very much like to tell

such a story to you, and I wish I could tell that story truthfully. But the story would be a lie. I will not say that that first morning was the only time I saw all of Bosellini, but never did he see all of me, and what little physical contact we had in our life together would not have turned one head in the middle of the *piazza*.

With love, however, came strange currents of other feelings. In the days that followed, when I came with the delivery and Bosellini was not painting, he talked to me in the most general way. These were rarely conversations; I did not make conversation easily. I was a girl who tried to hide inside herself, a girl in love, a girl too well-trained as a child and too inexperienced as a woman. Despite having a tyrannical madman for a father, I felt wholly unprepared for a man as volcanic as Bosellini.

He would talk of many things, most of which did not appear to go together. He talked in riddles because I did not yet understand such talk. He would always begin by talking of art and the nature of art and the job of the artist, which is beauty. Once he said that beauty was the fused image of the sacred and the profane, and he was the fuser. He was the priest at the sacred marriage of Diana and Pan—I did not know who they were at that time—that was the reason he painted landscapes. However, he understood that there was something more. He asked me if I ever noticed that his later works began to feature a darker, denser woodland somewhere on the canvas.

I nodded the barest of nods, hoping this was the answer he wanted.

His eyes became wide, “Then, Maria-Maria, did you see the cave in my last painting?”

I could not tell him I had never seen one of his paintings, so I shook my head.

That *caverna*, he said, called to him. “I must go and look for that cave, Maria-Maria. That is where my destiny lies but even the great Aeneas needed his Sibyl. Where is my Sibyl? Where

is my golden bough?” He raised his paintbrush and waved it over his head so that drips of paint flew around the room. By now, the voice of Bosellini had grown to a yell. “You see the bough before you, Maria-Maria. This bough will take me into the very secrets of life. Do you understand the importance of this moment?”

Again, I shook my head—I did not understand anything—and he called me a peasant. Almost always at the end of these talks, he would call me a peasant because the look on my face would tell him I did not understand. However, unlike others, Bosellini never called me that name with mockery in his voice or even superiority. In fact, I came to hear the word as a pet name, like one lover would call another “darling” or “sweetheart.” Bosellini would call me “peasant,” and I must have become visibly happier because he would look confused. Then he would chuckle and wave me away.

But when he was painting, and as time went by this was more frequently the case, I received little more than a grunt from him.

I tried to not let my happiness show at home, but what teenage girl in love for the first time does not glow? And during that summer, when a pall hung over Salerno on even the most glorious of summer days, who could miss Maria’s scarred face rising up *Masso Della Signora* like a pockmarked sun every morning, shrieking “I am in love” in a voice louder than I could scream? Not Papa, who worked on young love in the same way that sour milk works on the stomach. His own face went dark whenever he came into my presence. He muttered like a man with a storm brewing, and Mamma grew nervous at dinner, which was the only time we all were together. I avoided Papa as much as I could, but I also did my chores well and on time. I did not fear Papa’s violence; what else could he do to me? However, I realized in one horrible moment that he did have one great power over me: “What if he decided I could not deliver the milk

anymore?” The picture of Old Armo climbing the stairs to the room where Bosellini painted while I stood among the old women working the cheese caused more pain than one hundred lashes with a stick. I swore an oath with myself then. I would become dour on my trips back from Salerno. I would make Papa think that any romance he suspected was over, that he beat the idea out of me.

I must have made myself look too miserable too soon. A week after I decided not to look so happy, I came to the studio. Bosellini was painting. I set down the milk and the casein on the desk and moved quietly toward the door having learned that when he worked, I should not wait to be dismissed. My hand was reaching for the doorknob when I heard him call out, “Maria-Maria.”

I turned. He was still attacking the canvas with his brush.

“What is physical size?” he said, as if talking to the painting. With Bosellini, one could never be sure, but since he could have been talking to me, I waited. “Baaaa! Just take care to be the size of heart you should be. Let no one take that size from you.”

He leaned in closer; stepped back; tilted his head to one side. Tossing his arms into the air, he yelled “Ay, Orcus? Again, you have taken my soul, eh? *Bastardo!*” He threw his brush against the wall but immediately selected another and went right back to work.

I left quietly, going back out into the streets where fever ran wild, a fever that I could not remember infecting Salerno before.

The time was August. The whisperers talked of nothing else but the Allied invasion of Italy’s mainland. That invasion would come very soon, they said, but still they did not know where. Some said Salerno, and I remember the day when our village went into a frenzy with the news that an English *sottomarino* had been spotted in the Gulf, but the fishermen mocked such a

story, saying that they should apply for permission to carry depth charges in their boats: that way, they could fight off the submarines and catch more fish. They knew that the signal for invasion would not come from the sea but the sky: with the bombers in the shape of V. To look up at the sky became second nature to Italians in those days, looking for airplanes carrying bombs.

You cannot conceive the heights of the anxiety when thinking your city could be attacked. There were those on both sides hoping such an attack would come, either to show that Hitler and Mussolini could together plant the new Germanic-Roman Empire by destroying the Allies at Salerno, or to have the Americans and the English drive the Germans away for good. But most people took no sides. They were tired of war, tired of life possibly continuing or possibly ending. They began to say they did not care which would happen, but they continued to listen with eagerness to the whisperers.

My heart felt the tension, but my brain sometimes lagged. The fear did not seem real to me. Then, Old Armo and I left the farm on a morning covered with a rare fog. We rode the cart path down to the lane that turned south toward the road that would lead us into Salerno. Day was just coming, and the light filtered weakly through the fog. As we came nearer to the main road, I heard heavy rumblings. Old Armo heard nothing. He reined the mules to the right onto the roadway for the ride into the village, and immediately, the cart began to shake. That shaking registered on the face of Old Armo one moment before monstrous shapes broke out of the gloom behind us. Armo yanked the mules to the side of the road, and the machines passed, grinding into the road the spot where the cart had been a minute before. Tanks. Great gray hulking things, each with a black cross outlined in white just below the gun turret. When the tanks passed, Armo said nothing. His face spoke of nothing. But when he roused the mules into action, I saw his hands

shaking on the reins. I thought I felt the cart quivering with the weight of the tanks, but no, the tanks had passed out of range, and the cart was not shaking. I was shaking.

The only place where the anxiety and the fear of attack retreated was on our mountain. Even more, Bosellini was a landscape painter, and I had the most beautiful landscape in Salerno near to me, so I took some colored pencils and any scraps of paper that I could find and tried to draw our mountain. I went out to the ridge where Este and I used to go, but the sight of the Gulf and the absence of Este only made me sad. I retreated back through the woods to the large field where the cows were not grazing this year. I was determined to draw the field and the pine woods beyond, even though I had no talent as an artist.

I was in that field on an August afternoon when three German jeeps came along our little mule road and pulled off, driving across the field to the edge of the woods, not far from me. The soldiers got out and formed a ring around three officers in shiny boots and peaked caps worn slightly tilted. They hiked into the woods toward the ridge, but two soldiers stayed with the Jeeps, facing our farm with their fingers on their machine guns. From where I sat, I could not see their features, only that they were not much older than me. Fifteen minutes later, the three officers and the soldiers came out of the woods. The man in the middle did most of the talking, but he spoke the German, which I did not understand. Occasionally he looked back at the woods and made sweeping gestures with his arms.

I felt myself grow both angry and relieved. What business did the Germans have bringing their war up here? The rumors and whispers of war coming closer hung like a black fog over Salerno, and I pictured those three jeeps pulling strings of that fog up onto our mountain. If war came, then the beauty of the hill and the ridge could be destroyed forever, and that meant Bosellini would never come to the mountain to paint. He painted only the living, beautiful things,

not the ugly and the destroyed. I wished for Bosellini to come to our mountain, to spend time with his paints or drawings, perhaps even for me to accompany him, and I was angry at the Germans for possibly keeping him away. But the same thought also brought relief. Bosellini joked with me, he took some time with me, but as I said, he did not paint the ugly and the destroyed. If war came to our mountain and Bosellini stayed away, then war was to blame. If the Germans or the British, the Americans, even the Italians stayed away, but Bosellini still did not come to the most beautiful spot in all of the region of Campania? The only explanation then could be that the ugliness of Maria kept him away.

Yes, vanity in young girls has deep roots. Papa could take my face and my beauty, but he could not so easily take the idea that I was the center of the universe.

The rest of the day passed like the blackness was already around me, and that night, the other blackness came to my room: *l'ombra*, the shadow.

The shadow had never stopped coming, appearing usually when I was upset, but sometimes for no reason. I no longer felt threatened or afraid; instead, the shadow had become something of a familiar comfort. *L'ombra* only came to me in the dark, and if I loved the dark, then logic said that I should love the shadow. In the darkness, no one sees your face, and so all people are equal. I wondered in the beginning what the shadow saw, but then I thought perhaps *L'ombra* does not see anything or does not care. That was fine. I claimed the shadow for myself alone. Of course these feelings and decisions, they took place only in my head. *L'ombra* did not change. The shadow stood just inside the door, in the darkest part of the room. The shadow became my friend. I would sometimes speak to that darker-than-blackness, but the shadow never answered.

I understand why you would call this loneliness. My lover was a man who never touched me and my friend was a shapeless, invisible form. But can you say you have never wished to become invisible? That is what I wanted—all the time. In darkness, one becomes invisible or, like *L'ombra*, a shadow. In the darkness, there is no beauty and no maiming. Only the light shows the differences and then brings on the ridicule. In darkness, there was peace and wholeness. There was also the second reason why the shadow did not bring me loneliness: I was not alone. *L'ombra* never answered when I spoke, but occasionally the shadow would call my name. Very softly and in such low tones that her voice sounded like a piece of song drifting in from somewhere else in the house. Also, in the night after the Germans came to our mountain, *L'ombra* touched me. Perhaps the shadow could feel my *agitazione*. I was asleep, but I came awake suddenly when I felt a sensation on my cheek. I sat up in the bed so quickly that I caught sight of a figure: thin and lighter than the windowless pitch of the room. Only for a moment did *L'ombra* remain visible; then the shadow melted away.

I pushed myself out of bed and followed.

A moon shone over the farm that night, and enough of the light came into the house that I saw the shadow moving toward the door at the back of the kitchen without making even a quiver of sound. *L'ombra* crossed the threshold of the house. I had my night clothes on, but what could be done? I was filled with the desire to catch my very own shadow.

Outside, *L'ombra* became lost in the darkness of the deeper night, but I kept going. I thought I heard something in the field, and I knew that field, every rise and every rock, so I hurried onto a stone that would give me more height. What luck. The moon, which had gone behind a cloud, reappeared and then, yes, I did see the shadow, but no longer a shadow. I almost jumped off the stone watching Este cross the last ten meters of field before entering the woods

with a quick flitter. I was not mistaken. Her dark hair and pale skin made more pale by her confinement was unmistakable. I ran across the field, but I could not catch up to her. She turned into the trees not far from the spot where the Germans had entered the woods that afternoon. I followed feeling the indentations of their tires. I knew the path she would take; had we both not played in these trees all of our lives? I came to the edge of the trees, and stopped, not wanting to go out onto the ridge until I could see Este again.

Such a sight!

The moon turned the ridge into a silver-gray tunic, and Este stopped at the very edge. Slowly she began to turn in a way that I could never have imagined her moving. She put her head back, and her one arm beat against her thigh as she circled—the movement was too slow to call a spin. Another arm raised up and waved. She put her body forward and backward without ever changing the pace of the turn, her face reflecting light, her hair absorbing light; she was like the moon turning, the one side always light and the other side always dark. We both had seen the gypsies dance outside *Cattedrale di Salerno*, but the movements of Este passed beyond even the old steps of the gypsies into something older, then something older still, until she looked ancient. I imagined such a dance being performed by the worshippers at the Paestum. But from Este? This was a girl I had never seen dance in my life!

I kept myself hidden for two reasons. When Este was imprisoned for most hours, why should I rob her of her few minutes of freedom? Also, Este loved the moon and its light, the way the light of the moon transforms all things to magic. Each day, I was able to spend a few minutes with the man I loved; should Este have been denied the same? Which of us felt love that was more futile?

Este made one final pirouette, bending until one knee touched the ground. Even more strange, she kept going, lowering her head to the ground until the moon fell fully on her long, dark hair. She stayed frozen in that position then leaped to her feet and ran for the woods. She came through the tree line not five meters from where I was standing, and despite her nearness, once she came among the trees, I could not see or hear her. Este was also the fastest runner I knew. When I came out of the trees and into the fields of the farm, not even the shadow of Este was in sight. I stopped and listened. Had I heard the owl calling at that moment I would have believed my sister had the power to turn herself into a bird. Instead I heard nothing. I saw nothing. I crossed the field to the farmhouse but did not go inside. I went to the cold room; the door was locked. I wanted to knock but would Este come to the door? Would Papa hear? I could not take that chance so I walked back to my little room.