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La storia di la strega = The strega's story

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LA STORIA DI LA STREGA

THE STREGA'S STORY

A THESIS

PRESENTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT

OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

BY

JOAN McMILLAN

MAY 2005

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Persis M. Karim", written in black ink above a horizontal line.

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Mitch Berman", written in black ink above a horizontal line.

Professor Mitch Berman, Second Reader

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Gloria Collins", written in black ink above a horizontal line.

Professor Gloria Collins, Third Reader

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Thea L. Williamson", written in black ink above a horizontal line.

ABSTRACT

LA STORIA DI LA STREGA

THE STREGA'S STORY

BY JOAN McMILLAN

La Storia di la Strega is a memoir of an Italian-American childhood in Los Angeles. It delves deeply into the lives of the women in my family: my great-grandmother, Mamma Nonna, my mother, my grandmother, and my aunts. Family stories are explored and lessons are given to the children in the family as to their Italian heritage. Mamma Nonna was a *strega*, which loosely translates to “witch”; she was also a healer and midwife who commanded great respect in her East Boston neighborhood; her life is explored as well, particularly her experience of immigration and the loss of traditional culture.

The book also depicts my grandmother Mary's life as a single mother in the 1930s and 1940s, and my mother's gradual descent into mental illness. Central to the book is my own education as a young child of the mysteries within my family and the vital importance of legacy.

Acknowledgements

This book would not have been possible without the love and support of my family, especially my four children, Christopher, Stephanie, Emily, and Matthew, and my partner, Fritz Nordby. Their enthusiasm for this project is the true jewel I will treasure long after the writing is over. I also wish to thank my siblings for their help in shedding light on shared memories, especially my sister, Maryanne McMillan Jones, as well as my brother, Paul McMillan, and my sister, Patricia Fredrick.

I wish to extend my deepest thanks to my thesis committee, Dr. Persis Karim, Gloria Collins, and Mitch Berman. Their support in gathering together the disparate threads of complex stories will always be invaluable to me. I am eternally grateful to certain San Jose State faculty members whose wisdom, support, and creativity helped me during the writing of this book: Dr. Chris Fink, Dr. Gabrielle Rico, and Dr. Harvey Birenbaum, whose mythology and Blake classes in particular opened my eyes to the “tyger” that burns bright within everything that lives. I also wish to thank the Lurie Chairs, Al Young, Molly Giles, and Simon Winchester, who gave me the extra push I needed to keep going. My fellow students and my writing group will forever be in my heart for their encouragement, friendship, and belief in this project.

Last, but never least, to Dr. Kristen Iversen, without whom this book would have remained three pages written a few hours before her Creative Nonfiction workshop. Thank you, Kristen, for starting me on a path that transformed my life and made me remember that I, too, have a story to tell. *Mille grazie!*

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Introduction

La Storia di la Strega is a work of creative nonfiction based on my Italian-American family of origin. It encompasses the early formative years of my life and illuminates the family stories which I heard extensively during those years. As such, *La Storia di la Strega* is partly memoir and partly a deeper exploration of familial lore.

The basic frame of *La Storia di la Strega* is that of memoir, encompassing my childhood up until age eleven, and is loosely structured around the summer during which my maternal grandmother, dying of cancer, lived with us between hospitalizations. However, the narrative also recreates several family myths, including my maternal grandfather's decade-long relationship with Mae West and my great-grandmother's covering-up of an accidental double infanticide by a young woman in her community.

This book also delves into the Italian immigrant experience as it affected my family, as well as the impact on them of life in America, and the disintegration of traditional culture. It explores my place in the family as a child born in the United States, yet nurtured within a tightly knit Italian cultural tradition. Southern Italian cuisine was also an integral part of our family life, and many of the stories told in *La Storia di la Strega* are structured around times when the women were in the kitchen preparing meals together. Food is used in the book to enchant, to seduce, to show anger, and to kindle love.

A main thematic thread which runs through *La Storia di la Strega* is embodied in the character of Mamma Nonna, my maternal great-grandmother. She was a *strega*

(similar to a *curandera*) and chose not to pass on her healing abilities to subsequent generations. I explore the possible reasons for this extensively in *La Storia di la Strega*. The memoir ends with a long monologue by Mamma Nonna in which she reviews her life and concludes that no one among the adult women of the family is suitable to become a *strega*. This conclusion on the part of my great-grandmother does entertain the idea that perhaps one of her great-granddaughters might inherit the gift.

Amy Tan's novels *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife* are extraordinarily strong influences on this work. I learned from these novels about the importance and necessity of preserving family history through story, especially as older generations pass on. Although Tan's stories are fictionalized, they are based on tales she heard in her family of origin. Tan's work also contains characters who grow up between the dual worlds of traditional culture and an "American" lifestyle.

Within the genre of creative nonfiction, Mary Karr's *The Liar's Club* has also been an important inspiration. In particular, Karr's meticulous attention to detail and her willingness to thoroughly explore her past inspires me to attempt the same with *La Storia di la Strega*. Though *La Storia di la Strega* is structured differently than Karr's work (which follows a fairly straight line, plotwise), I am strongly influenced by Karr's ability to turn childhood memories into readable prose.

Other works which have influenced this book are Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* and Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life*. As in Karr's work, the detailed exploration of memories becomes something more than just a simple reminiscence. It becomes a reminder of the universality of experience which both transcends and illuminates culture.

In particular, Frank McCourt strongly and authentically captures the voice of a child in *Angela's Ashes*, an example which I found to be the most challenging in writing *La Storia di la Strega*.

In terms of structure, I have been influenced a great deal by the way Laura Esquivel structured *Like Water for Chocolate* in terms of preceding each chapter with a recipe. I have followed this device in my own book.

Francine Prose's novel *Household Saints* comes closest to depicting the type of family life and community in which I was raised. Prose captures a strange and deeply woven thread of mysticism which also permeated the lives of my own Italian family. *Household Saints* also illumines the sense of traditional culture and its inevitable fragmentation, a theme which I explore to a strong degree in *La Storia di la Strega*.

La Storia di la Strega thus encompasses more than just a simple, straightforward memoir of my childhood. Thematically, it is a work which reflects both the complexity of growing up between two cultures, and the vastly intricate network of family and story in which I was raised

To the memory of my great-grandmother,

Donna Maria Barrasso

and of my grandmother,

Mary Dorothea Vardaro

who lived these stories,

to my children,

Christopher, Stephanie, Emily, and Matthew,

who inherit them,

and to my beloved, Fritz Nordby,

whose love, support, and belief in me

eased my journey as I wrote.

This is the way it is with me—
you are nested inside me,
your voice a whisper that grows clearer
with each day.

—Maria Mazziotti Gillan, “Heritage”

Peperoni Arrostiti

My mother told me it's time to start learning to cook some of the things she makes all the time. She says I don't remember stuff and so I have to write all this down. She writes down the Italian words so I can see how they're spelled. She told me the first thing I need to do is learn to make roasted peppers. This is really simple. You don't even need a pan, so it's easy to clean up. You need some nice ripe red peppers, at least a couple of pounds, some tongs to hold the peppers, and a bowl.

Turn on the stove pretty low, so the flame just comes up to the grate on the burner. Then you put the pepper on the grate and watch it. That's the tricky part, watching the peppers. They turn black and puff up, that's OK, but you can't let them burn under the skin. The peppers have to be turned a few times, to cook them on all sides, nice and even, until the skin is blackened all over and the peppers are starting to turn soft.

When the peppers are done, you put them in a bowl and cover it. This is the magic part, you just let them sit! My mother sometimes put them in a grocery bag, if it's clean. All by themselves the peppers soften and the skin loosens. After 10 or 15 minutes, you pull the peppers out of the bowl and put them under running water, the skins just slide off.

The rest is really easy. You cut open the tops of the peppers and remove the stem and the seeds, then you cut the peppers into strips and put them back in the bowl. You have to save any pepper juice that falls into the bowl. Then you pour olive oil over the

peppers, add just a little salt and black pepper, and put them into a jar or another bowl, so the oil just covers the peppers, and mix in the pepper juice, too. My mom says this is a good way to start a meal, especially when the family comes over to visit.

Joanie McMillan

Chapter One

Malocchio

My mother made extra trips to Montella's Market the summer before my grandmother died. Montella's was an Italian grocery store on the corner of Lassen Street and Sepulveda Boulevard in the San Fernando Valley where I grew up. Montella's, small and dark, had a mural of Italy on the ceiling and a hand-lettered sign on the counter: "Welcome to Montella's: if you can't smell it, we don't have it." The store contained a chorus of intense smells, all layered together: hard cheeses hanging from hooks on the back wall, heavy ropes of braided garlic, salami, bread with a tough golden crust, the fragrance of everything Italian to me.

We called my grandmother "Nonni." I know a lot of Italians who use a variation of this word for grandmothers; I've heard it more often as "Nonna." Nonni was diagnosed with uterine cancer after a year in which she began to bleed regularly, long after menopause. Distrustful of doctors, Nonni waited until her stomach grew to the size of a six-month pregnancy. By then it was too late: my uncles and aunts did enough novenas to fill Saint Jude's inbox every day, but Nonni's cancer continued to spread. That's the time when my mother started visiting Montella's, not to get flat red onions or special Contadina canned tomatoes, but to find a magic cure for her mother.

Nonni was a patient for eleven months at Valley Presbyterian Hospital in Van Nuys. The hospital, large and gray, had a round central wing which reminded me of a UFO. Children were not allowed in patient's rooms, so I stayed alone in the waiting area

across from the elevator, playing with my Barbie. It was the year before the Apollo moon landing, and I sometimes made Barbie walk an imaginary lunar landscape over the hard black chairs with their aluminum armrests. Eventually the elevator doors opened and there was my mother, always looking angry, her black eyebrows hunched down over deep-set eyes. Angry as she looked, she did not yell at me, which was unusual for her. My aunts used to say that my mother was greatly afflicted with the *sangue pazzo*, crazy blood, a type of hidden madness which erupted like a hemorrhage in a person, then retreated to some secret mental grotto. That year, the *sangue pazzo* seemed to be dormant in my mother, who said nothing to me as she pulled out of the hospital parking lot onto the wide Los Angeles street.

In Italian culture, there is a curse called *malocchio*, evil eye, a curse anyone could put on you. Usually *malocchio* occurred because someone was so filled with envy that it burst from them like a ray of invisible lightning, seeking a victim. *Malocchio* caused people to sicken and die, according to my relatives, who were only a generation or two away from Italy. My great-grandmother, Maria Barrasso—whom we always called Mamma Nonna—was from Grottaminarda, a small town in Naples. She emigrated to the United States in 1897, married my great-grandfather Pietro, and settled in East Boston. She was a *strega*, not quite a witch and not quite a folk healer, but a little of both. Mamma Nonna established a thriving *strega* practice in her neighborhood, dispensing love charms, herbal potions, and other remedies from her kitchen. She also delivered babies, a service for which she was paid in food if the family was poor, money if they were not.

I met Mamma Nonna twice in my life—she was small, weathered to wiry steel, and wore dark-flowered housedresses. She called me by a special nickname, *ciccanella*. My mother often said scornfully that Mamma Nonna called me *ciccanella* because when I was born premature, I looked yellow and scrawny as a plucked chicken. Years later, when I looked up the word in a dictionary of Italian colloquialisms, I discovered *ciccanella* actually means “little wildflower” in the Neapolitan dialect which my great-grandmother spoke.

I never heard Mamma Nonna utter a single word of English. When I was five years old, Mamma Nonna traveled from Boston to stay with our family for a few weeks. That was the visit when I accidentally walked into the bathroom as she sat on the toilet, thick support hose and heavy black slip down around her ankles. A tidal wave of scolding in loud, rapid Italian followed me as I slammed the door and ran like a jackrabbit down the hall.

Mamma Nonna’s specialty in her household *strega* practice was the cure for *malocchio*: a ritual involving a white china bowl used only for that purpose, water, salt, a drop or two of olive oil, a new knife, and a fragment of a palm from Palm Sunday. My mother said Mamma Nonna always left the church on Palm Sunday with sheaves of fronds, enough for several *malocchio* rituals. No one dared to confront the *strega* for taking so many palms—in the first place, nobody wanted to get on her bad side, and everyone eventually needed to knock on her kitchen door. It was rumored that Mamma Nonna dipped holy water straight from the baptismal font with a silver cup, to take home for magical purposes, but none of my relatives ever saw her actually do this. Mamma

Nonna died two years before cancer woke in my grandmother's body, so my mother began weekly consultations with the elderly owner of Montella's, to erase the smudge of *malocchio*.

Since I was only eleven years old, I didn't think of *malocchio* when we opened the screen door to the market and stepped inside. The first thing I always looked at was the mural on the ceiling—the boot of Italy was painted a bright leaf green, the major cities indicated by Christmas lights set into holes drilled straight into the plaster. Milan blinked on and off in bright red; Florence shone a clear turquoise blue. Rome, a golfball-sized purple bulb encrusted with crystalline plastic, gave off a dull violet glow. These lights reflected off the glass fronts of the wooden candy bins, which contained candy I could never get at the TG&Y dime store. One bin was filled with Jordan almonds in delicate Easter pastels; another with something my mother called *confetti*, strips of cinnamon stick encased in a thick, white sugar coating and dyed in garish colors. My mother never ate Jordan almonds, saying that in Boston during her childhood, Jordan almonds were put into the coffins of babies before they were taken away to the cemetery. She still bought the candy for me, even though she invariably told me that story as Annunziata Montella dipped almonds out of the bin with a scoop and dumped them, rattling, into a pink paper bag.

My mother left me at the candy counter so she could go to the back of the store, past the meat counter, to speak privately with Annunziata. I hated the meat counter and always avoided it, especially the tall butchers case with its white enamel trays filled with too-red beef, the veal slices pale as a lily. Even more frightening was the deep alcove

just across from the butcher's case, curtained with dark fabric, the same kind of cloth as my great-grandmothers baggy dresses. No light ever shone from underneath the hem of that curtain; it showed only a strip of inky blackness. My sister told me that an old Italian man lived behind the curtain like the Wizard of Oz in the movie and if I walked too close, he would reach out and grab me. It seemed that the alcove contained everything shadowy about being Italian, things whispered between my dark-haired relatives in a language I did not understand, about evil that lurked in wait for any unsuspecting person: *il malocchio, il sangue pazzo*.

Though everyone scurried that year to find a remedy for Nonni's cancer, I overheard my mother say on the phone to her cousin Josephine that my grandmother seemed unafraid of dying. She worked crossword puzzles and read books in the hospital—*I Believe in Miracles* by Kathryn Kuhlman was her favorite (and slightly scandalous to my Catholic aunts and uncles because of its Protestant author). She even came home to my parent's house for a few weeks, resting most of the time in their king-sized bed. Instead of their practical beige woolen blanket, Nonni slept under an afghan in the most blatant shade of shocking pink I have ever seen, before or since. Its color alone could have banished *malocchio*. Nonni's friend Gail knitted it for her as a Christmas gift. My grandmother had a coterie of friends consisting of women she met during her years as an Avon lady. When Nonni first got sick, she still filled Avon orders over the phone; her friends visited her apartment to pick up their cosmetics and perfume. My mother worriedly told her, "Ma, you're going to have to quit working."

Nonni replied, “And then what would I do? Sit around the house and watch *Days of Our Lives*?”

But eventually Nonni lay quietly under her bright afghan on my parent’s bed, death hovering like an invisible angel just outside the window. My mother brought her small treats from Montella’s: especially *torrone*, a nougat candy I loved. The sweet, chewy squares were packed in small boxes printed with a picture of an Italian woman, her chestnut hair curly as vines. *Torrone* tasted like citrus-scented honey studded with almonds, each piece topped by an edible papery layer, white and thin. I loved to peel off this layer and put it on my tongue, pretending it was the real communion wafer I received at Our Lady of Peace Church on Sundays. Nonni rarely went to Montella’s herself except to buy pickled pigs feet (I wouldn’t even look at the tall jar filled with pieces of strange, briny pinkness). She also shopped there occasionally for my Aunt Anna, who lived several miles from Montella’s. Anna’s husband Mike was a gourmet cook. Once, after Mike baked a particularly wonderful batch of *cannelloni*, Anna said fondly of Mike that “He ate so much, he looked like a pregnant man.”

Nonni never left the house during the time she stayed with us. She slept, or when she woke, embroidered on a lace-edged pillow. The pattern she chose was an ornate tree, birds with turquoise feathers in its branches. Once, Nonni gave me lessons in how to make simple embroidery stitches: lazy daisy, buttonhole, and herringbone, French knot. I was allowed to choose any color of thread I wanted from her workbasket. I cut lengths of bright blue, blood red, and she showed me how to draw the long needle slowly through a linen square.

My family moved only twice during my childhood; from my birth until age ten, Nonni lived literally in our spacious backyard, in a small pink stucco house my father built for her. I could see the side of her house, flanked by two pear trees, from my bedroom window. My mother, given to fits of *sangue pazzo*, raged at my father, keeping me awake, but I felt safe when I saw Nonni's bathroom light flick on, shining through lavender glass panes. Then I knew she was home and no matter what happened, I could run across the yard to her unlocked door.

When I was in third grade, we moved from that house to a different one, and Nonni went to live in an apartment for senior citizens. Even though our new house was spacious and had a kidney-shaped pool, my mother blamed all our family problems on the move, saying that the house had a bad spirit in it, because a bad man built it. Apparently the contractor was involved in several shady, semi-criminal activities (I never knew exactly what) and ended up fleeing the country.

Nonni never complained about having to move; in fact, I never heard her complain about anything. Sometimes I wondered if my grandmother had really given birth to my mother, or just found her in a basket on the doorstep one day, like a changeling in a fairy tale. Even my mother, not generally introspective, mentioned once that they were Alike day and night. Mom yelled at the slightest provocation and the strangest things: we were not allowed to play with toys on our bedrooms cold hardwood floors, only on our beds. Mom screeched like a woman in labor if she discovered one Barbie shoe or Lego fallen to the floor. Nonni let me cut out snowflakes and paper dolls

from binder paper right on her living room rug. She showed me how to use her Electrolux vacuum later so I could clean up my own scraps.

On the other hand, Mom doused our kitchen and bathroom each day with Lysol. Once when a lice epidemic made everyone at Our Lady of Peace School fearful of tiny, wiggling bugs in their hair, she scrubbed our scalps with a slimy substance called “green soap.” Green soap stung my eyes and smelled like the doctor’s office. I tried to hide every time I saw my mother take out the flat brown bottle from the medicine chest. Nonni brought me Avon cologne with names like *Sweet Honesty*, *To a Wild Rose*, *Wishing*, and *Daisies Don’t Tell*. Once she gave me an Avon soap which looked and smelled exactly like a peach. It opened into two halves, revealing a smaller soap shaped like a peach pit. Nonni dusted her house with a bright yellow feather duster and let me polish her kitchen table with clean white rags and Lemon Pledge. However different my mother and her mother seemed, they did agree on one point: magic played a role in things.

Long before my grandmother got sick, long before we moved to a house built by a criminal, his misdeeds seeped into its dry plaster walls, I had, at times, a smiling mother. Though Italian, she had an Irish name, Kathleen, and her middle name, Joan, was the same as mine, our names linking us like matching bracelets. When I was very young, there were times when my mother went through long bouts of domestic creativity, happy to make “a little something out of nothing.” She sewed Halloween costumes on her black Singer machine: one year I was an orange gingham pumpkin, the outfit stuffed with crumpled pages of the *Herald-Examiner* to make it puffy. I wore green tights and my

sisters Girl Scout beret (turned backwards to hide the logo) for a full pumpkin effect.

Another year I was Mighty Mouse, complete with a scarlet satin cape.

On my fifth birthday, I sat at the head of our kitchen table, wearing a fluffy white dress printed with pink chrysanthemums, my hair in long dark curls. In front of me, a cake she spent all day baking: Humpty Dumpty, perched on a wall of wooden alphabet blocks. He looked exactly like the Humpty Dumpty in my Mother Goose book, down to his violet pants and bright yellow suspenders made from tinted frosting. My “birthday candle” burned next to the cake; this was a tall, fat pink candle with numbers from one to eighteen printed on it, with blue wax pictures of babies and children next to each number. My brother and sisters had these candles, too; every birthday, my mom would light the wick and the candle burned down through one more number. When I was eighteen, it would be burned all the way down, she told me, and I would be a grown-up, though sometimes I thought my life would blink out the very instant the candle used up every drop of the pale pink wax and its flame went out.

To this day, nobody in my family knows how Mom managed to construct a perfect, three-dimensional egg shape from her round and square cake pans. Humpty also defied all known laws of gravity by not tumbling from the alphabet block wall. Probably he was anchored there with royal icing, but at the time, I thought shed conjured up some sort of birthday magic. This astounding cake was recorded for all time on my father’s silver home movie camera. If the film could be threaded now onto the reels of an old projector, it would be brittle, browned with age, but in it my mother would be smiling.

Mom and Nonni made roasted bell peppers in our kitchen—a spacious 1960s kitchen with dark-veneered cabinets and avocado green appliances. These peppers were part of *antipasto* prepared for a large family gathering. They bore little resemblance to those jarred peppers in the store, flabby as tongues. Nonni and my mother cooked them only seasonally, in late summer or early fall. Nonni filled small produce bags—brown paper in those days, not plastic—with red peppers when they were stacked at Vons in a special bin above the green ones.

At home, my mother piled the peppers in a blue enamel colander, the round one she also used to drain spaghetti. The tap, turned on full, gave them a hard blast of cold water. Produce seemed to need more washing in those days; my mother complained especially that spinach was Alike the Sahara, sand clinging all the way down to the blush-pink base of the stems.

Nonni speared peppers, one at a time, with a regular kitchen fork. She turned the burner up high on the stove and moved the pepper from side to side until its bright skin grew blistered and charry black. As the pepper roasted, its incomparable fragrance rose in the kitchen and filled the house, sharp, earthy and pungent. Nonni kept it in the flame long enough to blister and darken the skin, but not break it. There was a reason the skin had to remain intact, to conserve the crimson pepper juices.

Next came the step where my mother always said, "I wish I had asbestos hands," because each roasted pepper had to be slipped off the fork and peeled over a bowl, carefully, thin red juice dripping down as the women stripped away scraps of blackened

skin. They opened up each pepper to the core also, removing the pale seeds, which they tossed into a wrinkled grocery sack.

Both women sliced peppers into ribbons on a pull-out cutting board, the kind built into a counter slot. Carefully, they placed each piece into a shallow Franciscanware relish dish with a border of apples and brown branches. Then the peppers were mixed with a marinade made from the conserved juice, olive oil from a tall metal can, and slices of fat, fresh garlic. I was eye-level with the result of this effort when my grandmother placed it on the table: layers of bright red inside a shiny, cream-colored bowl.

Pomegranate Ice

This is really easy and really good. It's also really messy to make. The first step is to get the pomegranate juice. You need a couple of pomegranates; peel them and take out the seeds. Put all the seeds in a bowl with a cup of water, and just a teeny tiny bit of lemon juice. Crush the seeds up with the back of a spoon. If you use a wooden spoon, it will stain the spoon

Now you pour the stuff from the bowl through a cheesecloth strainer into a pan. The cheesecloth will catch all the actual seeds and stuff, and let the juice through into the pan. You add 3 more cups of water to the pan, and three quarters of cup of sugar, and a pinch of salt; and you heat it until everything's dissolved, then you take it off the heat and let it cool. When it's cool, you just make ice cubes out of it using the regular trays from the fridge.

My Uncle Mike does the final step all by hand, but Nonni showed me a way that's faster. When the cubes have frozen you put them in a blender run it until they're all crushed and smooth, then you put it in a cup and eat it with a spoon.

Joanie McMillan

Chapter Two

Pomegranates

Los Angeles, 1966

I was seven years old when I first began to know that threads of mystery and sorcery bound my family together. I heard references to beginning when I was five and my grandmother told us about the North End flat she'd moved into with her family when she was my age. "My father was so happy to find a bigger place for all of us," Nonni said to my mother as we helped her unpack Avon perfume bottles and makeup from a carton, slipping them into white paper bags for Nonni's customers. "I even had my own small room, just the size of a big closet. My mother found some leftover wallpaper someplace, a pattern of pretty gardens and greenhouses, to cover the ugly walls, and an old down comforter she made a fresh new cover for, from a flowered sheet. I felt like a princess in my room, I really did. I didn't have to put up with sharing anything with my sisters, for once. But every morning when I woke up, I went to my father and told him, "I hate my room, Papa! I don't want to sleep there anymore!"

"But why, Mary?" he asked. He was so sweet and kind, always trying to really listen to his children, no matter how busy he was. Finally I let him know what was wrong. Almost every night I had a dream about a little girl, much younger than me. She'd stand by my bed, not saying a word. I never saw her in color, only black and white, like a photograph. She had long, light hair, a ribbon tying it up in a ponytail; she wore a

dark dress with a pinafore over it. Sometimes she'd push a chair up to the wall, saying she wanted to turn off the gaslight. But she could never reach it, and she'd start crying.

“When I finally told my father about the dream, he said I could stay in my sister Rose's room. Then he went down to the church and asked the priest to come over and sprinkle my old bedroom with holy water. After the priest left, my father locked the door to that room. Nobody was allowed to use it for anything but storage. Later, Rose told me the reason my father got the flat for such a cheap rent. A big family lived there before us. They gave that room to the smallest girl, just as my father had done for me. One night her mother tucked her daughter in, then blew out the gaslight, but forgot to close the jet all the way, though she shut the door tight. And that little girl died in her sleep.”

My grandmother's story frightened me more than anything I ever saw on *Creature Features*, and it was the reason I insisted on a nightlight in my bedroom from then on. Then, during one of those dry San Fernando Valley summer days that seem to extend forever, I learned about something that didn't involve ghosts at all.

That morning, before the sun lay a veil of heat over the house and yard, my mother and Nonni sat at our kitchen table, drinking coffee out of teacup and gossiping about relatives. Since our kitchen opened out into a large sunken den, which we called the family room, I could understand every word spoken in the kitchen if I happened to be playing close by. Unless, of course, those words were in Italian, which both my mother and grandmother spoke fluently. It was the language of secret subjects; if I ran through the house into a room full of relatives, sometimes they'd exchange glances, and the conversation would immediately turn from English to Italian, as if someone briskly threw

a switch. I knew then that forbidden things were being discussed, which of course made me listen harder, to try and discern a word or two.

Today, though, my mother and grandmother spoke English as they sipped their coffee. The dining area and family room were separated by a low partition; I couldn't see the kitchen table from where I sat, making bowls and cups out of Play-doh. A week before, my mother angrily snapped the round plastic covers onto my yellow Play-doh canisters and put them on the top shelf of her closet. I'd tricked my three-year-old sister Trish into eating red Play-doh, not out of any particular desire to torment her, but just to see what would happen. What happened was a sore butt, courtesy of Mom, and my Play-doh taken away for a week. I was back in Mom's good graces now, though, so I quietly cut flower shapes with a plastic knife, to stick on the bowls and cups.

I heard Mom and Nonni discussing Aunt Terry, who married Hank, my grandmother's younger brother. Aunt Terry was a perpetually maligned member of my extended family, probably because nobody knew what to make of her. Uncle Hank seemed smitten with her and called her "my little lotus blossom," but my mother and grandmother expressed endless bafflement over how Terry—whom they considered mousy and high-strung—managed to snag cheerful, easygoing Uncle Hank.

"For one thing, she can't cook worth a damn," said my mother, her spoon making delicate clicking sounds as she stirred her coffee.

"Kathleen, not everyone's born to be a good cook," said Nonni, "But it's true. Her eggplant parmesan—drowning in oil! And not even olive oil!"

“And the salt!” said my mother, “I thought I’d die the last time I ate there, if Terry’s decorating didn’t kill me first.”

Aunt Terry considered herself an artist, which put her in a serious category of suspicion the minute she married into my family. The fruits of her creativity encrusted the walls of her North Hollywood home like barnacles. Most conspicuous was the nude self-portrait Terry hung in the entry hall next to the front door. Painted in shades of light and dark blue, it depicted Terry as a Grecian goddess sitting on a marble bench among temple pillars, her hair upswept and bound with jeweled bands. The woman in the painting had embarrassingly large, sky-blue breasts, and her legs were discreetly crossed to show the mere suggestion of an indigo triangle. I didn’t do anything as blatant as point to “Aunt Terry’s naked picture” and laugh out loud, the way my brother and sisters did; its blue-toned nudity shocked me too much every time I saw it.

We visited Hank and Terry mostly in July and August. They had a pool so small that my father, who was from Mississippi, said it was like “swimmin’ in a goddamned ashtray.” A statue of Our Lady of Lourdes stood in a grotto over the pool, waterfalls of chlorinated water cascading down black lava rocks at her feet. In winter, Terry and Hank traveled to Hawaii, the sole subject of their interminable slide shows, through which my siblings and I fidgeted and whined as my parents drank glass after glass of Uncle Hank’s Mauna Loa Martinis. According to my mom, these were just like regular martinis, except for a chunk of pineapple in the cocktail glass instead of a green olive. After the slide show, Uncle Hank broke out his ukulele and Aunt Terry demonstrated hula for us, contorting her skinny body into the motions of The Hawaiian Wedding Dance.

Terry's kitchen had a dining area whose walls were completely paved in volcanic pebbles collected from beaches on the Big Island. She glued these one by one to the sheetrock, so that eating at her table was like having a meal inside a square cave. Her living room had gold-veined mirrored squares instead of wallpaper, so all her decorating horrors were reflected several times over, like a baroque vision of infinity: bulbous gilded lamps, their purple satin shades edged in beaded fringe, a silver lamé couch, and a giant, yawning clamshell with a delicate pink interior, the subject of endless dirty jokes by Hank's older brother, Primo.

Aunt Terry and Uncle Hank remained childless (another demerit against Terry; nobody considered that Uncle Hank might have had something to do with it). Their parental energies focused instead on their pet, the epitome of spoiled, ill-tempered doghood: a cranky black French poodle named Bambi.

"That goddamned dog," said my mother to my grandmother, "Nearly bit Joanie's hand off the last time we were over. I swear, Ma, they treat Bambi like a child."

"I know, Kathleen. It drives Primo crazy. He calls up Hank every Father's Day and asks him what Bambi gave him for a present," replied my grandmother.

Bambi had indeed tried to bite me the last time we were over at Terry and Hank's. They'd decided to treat us to a luau, against a backdrop of Don Ho music (Terry had a crush on Don Ho and called him "The Dean Martin of Hawaii"). In an attempt to replicate a Polynesian pig roast, Terry served a pork loin wrapped in leaves she picked from the banana plant in her front yard. But she cooked the pork in her oven ("At almost 500 degrees!" she told my mother) instead of a traditional underground pit, so the banana

leaves burned to a fragile black crust and the meat stayed raw and pink at the center. I heard my father whisper, “I’m gonna have a tapeworm eighteen miles long after this,” as Hank carefully carved semi-cooked slices from the edges and put them on our plates. Plus, Terry—not having access to taro roots for poi—resorted to a white-flour gravy which she dyed bright purple with food coloring, to imitate poi’s natural pale lavender.

I didn’t want to eat, and instead wandered over to where Bambi lay, sullen in her wicker dog bed lined with a flowered satin cushion. Usually I gave Bambi a wide berth, but boredom made me take a closer look at her. One of Bambi’s front paws dangled, like the hand of a spoiled lady, out of the basket. I had a small bottle of red nail polish in a yellow plastic purse, and decided to paint one or two of Bambi’s claws. It wasn’t a wholly original idea; I thought Bambi would be as placid as my neighbor Mrs. Ogden’s poodle, Suzette. Earlier in the week, Suzette sat, docile and patient, on Mrs. Ogden’s porch as I carefully applied red lacquer to each one of her front claws. Mrs. Ogden laughed and even snapped a picture of me as I played dog manicurist.

Bambi, however, was not amused. She exploded from her basket like a black comet, yapping and nipping at me. I screamed and ran into Terry’s living room, nearly toppling the giant clamshell from its koa wood pedestal. “That poor kid wailed like a banshee,” my mother told Nonni. “I thought Terry was going to have a stroke right in front of everyone. ‘Oh, poor Bambi! Joanie was teasing her!’ We got out of there as fast as we could.”

Nonni said, “I don’t know how Hank stands it. I remember when he brought Terry home to meet my father. Papa took one look at her, and called her *la matita*, the

pencil.” I’d walked into the kitchen by then, to see if there was any more Helms coffeecake on the table. The pink bakery box was empty, but Mom told me, “There’s pomegranates, if you want some.”

Pomegranates grew on shrubs next to my grandmother’s house. She pointed out their progress to me as they grew: first, the tightly shut flower, firm and bright orange, as if carved from wax. Days later, we found burst-open buds, their stamens dusted with yellow pollen. The flowers swelled at the base over several weeks, until pomegranates hung on the branches like maroon Christmas ornaments. They ripened in late autumn and my grandmother brought half a dozen to us every few days.

My sister Maryanne, older than me by five years, walked though the kitchen and grabbed a pomegranate from a cardboard box on the counter. She wore a green plaid shirt and white Bermuda shorts, her brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. “Give one to Joanie and then go out,” my mother told her. Pomegranates had to be eaten outside; their seeds left permanent stains on the white kitchen linoleum.

Maryanne and I opened the kitchen door and sat on the step. My sister left the door slightly ajar, which the adults didn’t notice as they continued their conversation. Maryanne tore at the peel on her pomegranate, but I put mine next to me on the step, so I could bend down and watch a line of ants disappear like a trickle of dark water into a crack near the house foundation.

“You know how she did it, don’t you?” I heard Nonni ask my mother.

“I always wondered,” Mom replied.

“Well,” said Nonni, “Mamma Nonna met Terry back in Boston, years ago, when you and I lived in Mamma Nonna’s house. Hank brought her over for dinner a few times.”

“Didn’t Mamma Nonna tell Terry to leave her house and never come back?” my mother asked.

I heard Nonni hesitate; then she said, “Yeah, but she had a couple of visits before that. She wouldn’t eat Mamma Nonna’s food at first, which of course was a mortal sin to the old lady. Terry whined that the dining room was too cold, even though Mamma Nonna said it was like *il forno* in there, hot as an oven. Terry ordered Hank to get her this and that from across the table. He was like a dog, fetching everything. When they left, Mamma Nonna poured herself a cup of coffee. *Forte e nero*, strong and black, she told me, to get the pounding headache out of her head.

“Mamma Nonna said to me, ‘Mary, your brother Hank, he’s so sweet. Gentle. But that wife of his—*cattiva*. Bad. Like a thorn stuck in a sock. You take off your shoe, peel off your sock, think you’ve gotten rid of the thorn, but it’s still there when you put the sock back on.’”

“She sure was right about that,” laughed my mother.

“But there’s more, Kathleen,” said my grandmother, “Mamma Nonna told me, ‘There’s a way to get a man and I think Terry knew it. I can tell. Look how he acts like *il cane*, running after a thrown stick. Calling her beautiful as Venus, for God’s sake. Well, there’s a way, and she used it. A woman like that asks the man she wants to come to her house. “Oh, I have this window with a broken shutter,” she tells him. Any small

repair like that. He fixes it, then the woman offers him something to eat. To go with it, a glass of wine, of course. A glass of wine and a bite to eat, waiting for him on her table. Only the woman invites the man over when it's her time of the month. And just before he visits, she puts a drop of her *sangue di mestruale* in a glass, then fills it up with red wine.”

“I can't believe she told you that, Ma,” said my mother.

“She did, Kathleen. She even reached down to her crotch when she said it!”

My mother and grandmother laughed; then Nonni said, “The old lady told me, ‘He'll drink it, not suspecting a thing. And then, he'll be after you night and day, as if he's dying of thirst and you're the water.’”

“What are they talking about?” I asked my sister. She'd extracted a handful of seeds from the pomegranate. “They're talking about period blood,” she said. I actually had no real idea what ‘period blood’ was—it was connected, for me, with bathrooms and a blue box my mother hid under the sink—but Maryanne and I both started smashing pomegranate seeds on the ground and screeching, “Look, it's period blood! Drink it, drink it, you're under my power now, you have to do everything I say!” until my mother yelled at us to stop. My sister stood up and said she was going to the Schmidt's house. The Schmidts lived two doors down: Brian Schmidt had a shelf of *Mad* magazines; my mother refused to buy *Mad* for us, so we generally went next door to read them. I watched my sister open the redwood gate separating the front yard from the back, and then picked up my pomegranate from the cement step.

There was an art to eating pomegranates which I perfected over years of Lost Angeles summers. First, I admired the dark red fruit, the way it fit perfectly in the cup of my two hands. It looked like a little red globe with no countries; one end was a small crown where the waxy pomegranate blossom used to be. I bit the rind next, just a little, anticipating its dry alum pucker. The bite left a perfectly crescent-shaped break into which I inserted a small finger and tore off a wide swath of peel, revealing the wine-colored seeds, tightly packed, like a round casket filled with dark, angular gems.

My mother always sent me outside to each pomegranate. I like the concrete step where I was sitting now, because I could see almost our whole back property from there. Our backyard and the field beyond it—my father always boasted about his three acres, the size of that field—had once been a walnut grove; old walnut trees, white-skinned with age, stood throughout our yard and dropped walnuts everywhere. We had a long concrete patio that bordered the entire backyard, and just beyond that, a wide lawn of knotty Bermuda grass, full of bare spots and gopher holes. At one of the lawn, two gnarled apricot trees—twin survivors of another vanished orchard—bloomed white every spring, then produced oval fruit—perfect, when unripe, for green-stained “apricot fights.” The apricots ripened over many weeks to a deep, blushed orange. I didn’t care as much about the apricots as I did about climbing the trees they grew on, bark tough and seamed with fissures out of which gold-colored sap oozed and congealed like amber.

We lived in a genuinely 1950s-style home, the layout square and spacious. Our house had flat white paint in the living room and den, and ornate wallpaper in my parents’ room, hunter green printed with silver roses, subtly iridescent; the room I shared

with my sisters had walls the color of Bazooka gum. My brother's room stood at the end of the hallway, cool and shadowy as a cave.

Our furniture came from far-flung places: my brother's wide bed had been my parents' old bed from their first house in Arleta. My sisters and I had matching dressers and headboards in a light-stained maple. All the children's beds were covered with sensible, acid-green wool blankets; I could feel the itch of my blanket through my sheet at night, maddening as nettles to my skin.

I had learned to memorize my address in kindergarten: 8404 Woodley Avenue, Sepulveda, California. Ours was a long, U-shaped, ranch-style home, painted 50s-kitchen yellow. Two fruitless mulberry trees grew in the front yard, the trees too tall to climb, their bark like the skin of a white elephant. Catbirds nested in those trees, stealth-attacking Nonni's gray tabby whenever he walked onto the lawn. My father kept that lawn as close-trimmed and deeply watered as something from a magazine, even though Woodley Avenue was a dirt throughway until I was six and there were no sidewalks; tumbleweeds and dust blew down the street in summer. My father built a low, open rail fence, whitewashed and cordoned off with low, square brick columns; our mailbox was on top of one of columns. Underneath the mailbox, a magenta climbing rose wound tenacious stems, thin as strings, into the rough brick crevices. Each rose had a crown of bright pollen-dusted stamens.

Mom trained that rose to grow beneath the mailbox; it was actually a wild rose, growing in the middle of Los Angeles, from the time when our street wasn't even there and fields stretched in every direction. It wasn't really a mystery that my mother could

take a forlorn rose and make it flourish. Roses, white and yellow, as well as a fat jade plant, grew in the coffin-sized rectangle of soil, marked-off by decorative arched bricks, in front of the long recessed porch. More roses grew next to my grandmother's house, a thorny forest of green canes and blooms.

A bird-of-paradise shaded my brother's bedroom window; Mom attacked the plant every spring with kitchen shears, stripping away brown leaves and stems dried to parchment. It rewarded her with blooms that seemed alive to me ever since she pointed to a spiked orange-and-purple flower and told me it was a bird. Because I was only five, I thought she meant it was real; I went out every morning to see if the bird might detach itself from the stem and fly. That was being a child: fruit that held rows of red jewels, birds the color of fire growing among dark, sword-shaped leaves,

Anisette Biscotti

You need about five and a half cups of flour to start with; mixed completely with a tablespoon of baking powder. Mix in two cups of white sugar. Then mix in two cups of almonds, chopped either coarse or fine. It doesn't matter which way.

Take a second bowl and mix up a cup of melted butter, a quarter-cup of anise seeds, and another quarter-cup of *anisette*, the best you can afford. Beat in six large eggs until the whole thing is yellow, no egg white showing at all. Now mix the dry and wet ingredients together. Use a small amount of water to moisten the dough if it looks too dry. Don't knead this dough at all.

Grease two flat baking sheets and make four loaves from the dough. The loaves should be small and oval, no more than a half-inch thick and two inches wide. You will have to shape them with your hands. Make sure the loaves are spaced well apart on the pans and bake them at 375 degrees for twenty minutes or so.

The loaves should be taken from the oven when they are a golden brown. Cool the loaves until they can be touched without burning your fingers, and cut each loaf on the diagonal into slices about half an inch thick. Don't turn the oven off, because things are not done yet.

Put them back in the oven and toast them for fifteen more minutes. Make sure to watch so the edges don't burn. Cool on wire racks and store in tins.

My mother made these every day in our bakery, but she didn't waste good *anisette* on her customers. She used vanilla instead. We always had *anisette* biscotti at home, though, in case of unexpected visitors.

Mamma Nonna

Chapter Three

I Due Principi

The Two Princes

Los Angeles, 1967

It was called *la babagna*, an innocuous and almost silly-sounding word, but its name hung like the shadow of a dark wing over the women in my family. *La babagna* was a catchall term my Italian relatives used for various patent medicines sold over the counter up until the 1920s at the neighborhood pharmacy. These medicines contained morphine or opium, usually in a sugar syrup or an alcohol base. *La babagna* referred specifically to the types of “soothing syrups” intended for babies made cranky by teething or fever. “Soothing syrups” were sold under various labels: Children’s Comfort, Dr. Kopp’s Baby Friend, Mrs. Winslow’s Soothing Syrup, Infant’s Quietness. Different names, with the common ingredient of opiates, marketed for families with small children.

An advertising postcard for Mrs. Winslow’s Soothing Syrup from the turn of the century shows a mother with luxurious unbound black hair lounging on a maroon velvet chaise. A fat baby lies next to her; mother and baby are dressed in linen gowns, and willow trees with feathery leaves stand in the background. Color drenches the postcard, bright and dreamlike.

Even my great-grandmother used morphine syrup to quiet her fretful babies. She was careful to administer the sweet, sleep-inducing drug in small doses. Still, it was said

with the typical vinegary family attitude that her third son, Jerry, perpetually affable and not too bright, had been made “simple” by Mama Nonna’s overuse of *la babagna*.

I overheard Nonni tell the story of *la babagna* as she did the dishes one night with my mother.

My father was on one of his many business trips to Bakersfield, where he was installing a refrigeration system in a new Von’s Market. Generally on such nights, Nonni came over with takeout tacos from a Mexican restaurant near our house. Tonight, though, my mother cooked a meal of rigatoni and meat sauce; its remnants stained the dishwasher with a scum of red foam.

Sitting at the kitchen table with a book was my favorite post-dinner occupation. Nobody seemed to notice and conversations flowed around me, as if I were a rock in a small stream. I turned the pages of my *Andersen’s Fairy Tales* to the story of the Snow Queen when I heard my grandmother tell my mother, “A woman came into Treasure Isle today with twin boys. Gail and the other clerks crowded around them—they were such fat, healthy babies! I couldn’t look at them without thinking of Mama Nonna’s story about the twins.” Nonni lifted a dish out of the water, scrubbed it with a sponge, and set it in the dishwasher rack. My mother insisted on dishes being thoroughly washed and scrubbed before going into the dishwasher.

“Thanks, Ma, I haven’t thought of that one in years,” said my mother, with some sharpness in her voice. She carefully soaped a drinking glass with a bottle brush, then put it in the rack and took a drag off her Salem cigarette, balanced precariously on the edge of an ashtray from the Sands Hotel in Vegas. Finally it was time to latch the door shut.

Mom and Nonni sat at the kitchen table to have a cup of tea; Nonni made tea for me also, in a blue mug.

Night pressed at the kitchen window like a veil of black fabric. I looked at my grandmother as she sighed heavily and removed her round gold clip earrings. The clips left deep, painful-looking indentations in her earlobes. “You weren’t any more than five or six years old,” she said to my mother, “It was autumn, cold out, and I think the trees were already bare. Mamma Nonna came in from a birth, a hard one, she told me. I was sitting in the kitchen at her table, mending some of your clothes. I had a little glass oil lamp burning in front of me, but no other light. I heard her come into the house by the front door, not the back. She walked into the kitchen and I stood up to leave. I never knew what to say to her, how to act when she was around. She asked me if Pietro was home, then told me to sit, sit down, and have a glass of *anissette* with her.”

Later in my life, I heard more details from my mother of what Mama Nonna really said when she motioned for Nonni to sit back down. “Pietro’s gone out? Ha, off to climb onto his *puttana* while I spend twelve hours helping a woman give birth. Let’s have a little something, since my useless *animale* of a husband won’t be home tonight.”

Usually Mama Nonna drank only wine, but tonight, her tongue wanted something sharper and stronger. The birth—a bloody, screaming nightmare—ended with Mama Nonna unlooping a tightly-wrapped cord from around the newborn baby’s neck. “It ended up fine, though,” she told Nonni, who quietly sewed a rip in a child’s apron. “The baby breathed and cried right away. The mother was very tired. I told her to drink some brandy, just a little, and sleep. They named the baby after Saint Teresa.”

Mama Nonna took a bottle off a top shelf as she talked, and poured two glasses of clear liquid into small crystal glasses, her best ones. This was *anissette*, a potent licorice-scented cordial. Mama Nonna set a glass in front of Nonni, who put down her sewing and took a careful sip—*anissette* was so strong it made her eyes water. She watched in shocked surprise as Mama Nonna drained her own glass in one quick gulp, then sat down at the table opposite Nonni and poured more *anissette* for herself.

Mama Nonna exhaled, a long, tired breath. “So, both our husbands have flown off,” she said softly to Nonni, who felt as if she were being slowly skewered to the chair by her mother-in-law’s unwavering eyes. “Mary,” said Mamma Nonna after a minute or two, “You tiptoe around my home, so quick and nervous, like a frightened mouse. You keep the room you share with Kathleen neat and tidy, everything in its correct place. Your life, you think it’s hard, no? Living under your mother-in-law’s roof, and your husband gone, except for the money and packages he sends.” The *anissette* began to loosen Mama Nonna’s tongue, though her speech remained as steady as her gaze.

It was true about the money and gifts for Kathleen. Once a month, a box arrived from California, containing dresses for Kathleen in silk and organdy, as well as an envelope of money with Mama Nonna’s name written on it in large black letters. Mama Nonna set aside a small portion of the money to give to Nonni.

“No need for her to go without,” mused my great-grandmother as she carefully stacked bills into separate piles. The rest of the money supported Mama Nonna’s own household, as pre-arranged with John, except for a sum paid to a photographer from time to time, to take portraits of pretty little Kathleen, with her pink cheeks and glossy sable

curls. These photographs were mailed to John, to show off to his friends in the film industry.

One portrait of my mother, taken when she was five, shows her in a cream-colored rabbit fur coat with a matching hat and muff. This coat, a gift from John like all my mother's expensive clothing, proved a puzzle for my grandmother: how to clean it? Kathleen, an energetic child, attracted dirt even when snow lay in crisp sheets on the frozen ground. Mama Nonna offered a solution: "Take uncooked *arborio* rice and grind it coarse with a mortar and pestle. Brush it into the fur, wait awhile, then shake all of it out. The rice takes the dirt with it and the fur becomes shiny again, as if the rabbit's still wearing it on his back."

In fact, Nonni had Kathleen's fur hat in her mending-basket—the lining was torn—but she didn't dare begin sewing again as Mama Nonna spoke. The *strega* reached behind her head and unpinned her hair, which cascaded below her waist like a fall of dark water. Long streaks of white gleamed in its rippling mass. "Ah, that's better," she said. Shadows curved under Mamma Nonna's eyes, lurked beneath the angular planes of her face.

Then she addressed Nonni in a voice low and yet piercing as a deeply held secret. "Let me tell you what can happen to a woman if the father of her children decides to abandon her and she has no family, no one to take her in, no money of her own. When hard work and exhaustion melt the last bit of steel in her spirit, leaving nothing to hold it up. When her voice wears down to a squeak as faint as a little creature just about to be

hooked by the cat's claws. I've seen it with *i miei occhi*, my own eyes." Mama Nonna lifted the cordial glass to her mouth and took a single taste of *anissette*.

"Her name was Teresa Giancotti, said my great-grandmother. Young, not even eighteen years old. It was around 1908, 1909, I think. I had been delivering babies five, six years. Started learning with an old woman in this very neighborhood, Signora Rubino. I did the ritual to break *il malocchio* for her. She had pain in her hands which made it hard for her to guide the baby safely from the mother's body. After my ritual, no pain at all. Signora Rubino paid me well, in gold coins, which I hid from Pietro and his thieving fingers.

"Signora Rubino and I became friends. One day she asked me if I might help her from time to time in her work as a midwife. It wasn't like now, my children old enough to care for themselves. I couldn't go with Signora Rubino as much as I might have liked. But people still came here, to this very door, as they do to this day, because they knew I had secret knowledge, which I took like a jewel from Grottaminarda, not knowing it had any value at all in America. And sometimes I could get away from Pietro and the children to help Signora Rubino. She told me to wash my hands and use only clean cloths near the laboring woman. She said it kept sickness away from both mother and baby.

"Teresa Giancotti was delivered of twin boys one evening in May, with Signora Rubino and I attending. *I due principi*, two fine little princes. An easy enough birth, despite twin occupants of the same room. Her husband, Umberto Giancotti, worked in the shipyards. They hadn't lived here long—a year, two years. Her parents lived in

Philadelphia, she said. Teresa and her husband lived in an upstairs flat, one bedroom, a sitting room, a tiny kitchen. Small, but sunny, and Teresa kept it spotless. A flowerpot or two at the window. Umberto was a handsome man, liked to wear a straw hat tilted to one side. I never trusted his eyes, though. His gaze wandered over women's bodies, even young girls barely out of childhood, slippery and cold as an eel.

“But Teresa—*una bella madre*. Long hair, longer even than mine was when I first came to this country. I combed it for her after she gave birth, took out the knots. ‘Make Umberto buy you another comb,’ I told her. She had a wooden one with broken teeth, but she deserved one made of gold. Twins, hard to care for, but she nursed them and they bloomed like roses. She knitted and sewed all their clothes. A seamstress, and a good one. She kept one shawl on a special shelf in her dress cupboard—blue as *la mare* in the afternoon, when the water's calm. Teresa told me how she loved the sea, had never even glimpsed the ocean before she moved to Boston. She worked the shawl in a wave pattern, on needles fine as wire. I admired it one day when I came by to see the babies. She told me she wore the shawl only to church, and then showed me bonnets she made for her sons. Linen, edged with lace, embroidered with vines in silver thread. Fit for two little emperors! ‘Teresa, did you make the lace yourself?’ I joked. She laughed, said no, she'd bought lengths of it at the drygoods store. ‘After all, I'm a mother now and I don't have time!’ A lovely girl, *robusta*.”

As if the description of sewing suddenly inspired Mama Nonna, she asked Nonni for a piece or two from her basket. “A little work with the hands is always good, but I need a bit more to see by,” she said, bringing a kerosene lamp to the table, carefully

lifting off the thin glass chimney, lighting the wick, then settling the chimney back in place. She began pinning a torn hem on a pink cotton dress.

“When the twins were three months old, Umberto the Eel slithered off. Who knows why? Another woman, most likely. Or perhaps he decided he didn’t care for two wailing babies disturbing his rest, or the way they distracted his young wife. Perhaps he was like a *bambino* himself, always needing Teresa’s attention.

“Teresa didn’t tell me directly about Umberto. Signora Rubino walked into my house one morning and said Umberto left suddenly, as if going to work. But in his pockets, almost every cent they had. Of course, no one ever saw him again. Men like Umberto slide away as they please, with no thought for what’s left behind.

“I thanked Signora Rubino for the news and walked down the street as fast as I could, after putting together a bundle for Teresa. Some bread, meat, a few things from the garden, a little money. She didn’t answer my knock at first, but I heard the babies fussing. I kept saying to that shut door, ‘*Teresa, vieni qui, vieni qui.*’ Finally she opened it just a little, and I pushed it open wider. Teresa let me sit down, then started sobbing out fragments of the story, like pieces of a shattered plate. She decided to take the babies out for an early morning walk, enjoy the fine weather. After she returned, a note pinned to the door. Umberto wrote it, told her he was leaving Boston forever. And nearly all their household money vanished with him. Barely a cent for food, or to pay rent on the flat.

“As Teresa talked, I rocked one baby. She nursed the other. When they fell asleep, we put them carefully in their cradle, wide enough to hold them both. At first,

Teresa refused to take the bundle I'd put together. I told her this was no time for pride. Then I asked her for her parents' address in Philadelphia. She said they were poor, couldn't send her any money at all. 'They can't do anything for you if you don't let them know what's happened.' I said, repeating an Italian proverb: 'Your own family loves you truly. The other people's love is like nothing.' Teresa smiled just a little—it was good to see a smile cross that worried face—then took a pencil out of a dresser drawer, scribbled an address on a paper scrap. Crooked writing, simple as a child's. The very next day, I told my son Albert to write a letter to Teresa's parents. He had a fine hand, could write well in both Italian and English. I took the letter to the post office myself.

"But even if that letter grew wings and flew fast as a bird to Teresa's parents, I knew help from them would take awhile. I visited Teresa again a day or two later, brought her coins, a plate of food. We considered what work she might do. Factory jobs, out of the question, the twins still too young, still nursing. Some women hired themselves out on washdays in the wealthier households. Toil from morning to night, scrubbing other people's filth from pile after pile of dirty clothes. But still, a decent woman would let Teresa bring her babies with her while they were still small. And her beautiful sewing! 'You can make enough money to feed yourself, keep a roof over your head,' I told her, even though my words must have sounded as unsure as I felt.

"And for a few weeks, that is what Teresa Giancotti did. I went to neighbors, told them about her. Two of them, ones with prosperous husbands and several children, hired her immediately to help with the laundry at first, as well as housecleaning, with promises of dressmaking if she proved to be a good worker. One family lived close enough for

Teresa to leave *i due principi* with me once or twice. She came over to nurse them every few hours, then went back to work. The other house, where she worked on Mondays, was a bit farther away. Teresa bundled the twins into an old black buggy, pushed them slowly down the street. Often she stopped by after working in that place, circles under her eyes, hands chapped and red. No word from her family, not yet. One evening she told me, 'The babies cry at night, so much. I lie down and they wake me, hour after hour, until dawn comes and I have to get up again.' Teresa whispered how she felt she walked in fog all the time, a dullness slowing her thoughts. It doesn't take long for such a blank dullness to settle in, after just a few days in a row of hard work and no sleep.

"I tried to help her, gave her coffee beans roasted dark. 'Make a cup or two, to lift that fog in the mornings,' I told her. A bit of fennel tea to soothe the babies. But the women she worked for had other remedies, much stronger. And she listened to them, not me.

"One night, I lay by myself in bed, a few hours before morning. Pietro gone as usual. I knew by then that I would sleep alone more often than not as a married woman. I rested easily, yet with my ears a bit open, like every mother, to hear my children if they cried out from a bad dream. And that is how I startled out of my own dream, when I heard a knocking, rapid and hard as a hammer, at my kitchen door.

"I pulled a dress on, straight over my nightgown, slid my feet into shoes, thoughts circling like a bat: who could it be? There were no women approaching a lying-in that month. No need for a lamp as I moved down the stairs and through the kitchen. I know my way though this house in the dark.

“Teresa must have stumbled like a blind woman through my garden. The hem of her dress caked with mud, leaves clinging to it. Next morning, I found a row of tomato plants broken, stems crushed, oozing their sap into the ground.

“I didn’t need to ask if anything was wrong. Her eyes, wide and shining, hair half pinned up, half wild around her shoulders. And the scent of sour milk on her, heavy and sharp. Her voice trembling, so faint, so thin with fear, I could barely make out the words. ‘*Signora Indrisano,*’ she whispered, using my formal name, ‘*I bambini. Per favore, Signora Indrisano.*’

“We left right away. The moon, almost full, with just a small bite of shadow out of it, lit our way. As we hurried down the street, she began to weep so loud I feared she’d wake the entire neighborhood. Up the narrow stairs to the flat, which smelled close and stale, though it seemed tidy as ever.

“I lit a candle stub in a tin holder. Brought it close to the twins’ cradle. The babies tucked in carefully, on their backs, under a summer coverlet Teresa spent her entire pregnancy embroidering. White thread on sun-bleached linen, the finest stitches, the most delicate patterns: wheat sheaves, grapes, full and ripe, slender olive branches. ‘Like the fields in *Italia*,’ Teresa laughed as her needle flashed in and out, drawing the threads tight, in those months before her children were born. And now her twin sons lay still, pale as that fine linen coverlet.”

Mama Nonna looked down at the dress she had left off repairing sometime during the story. She sipped her anisette until nothing remained in the glass. Nonni heard the

wind pick up outside the house, which creaked like an old wooden ship in Boston Harbor.

Then she asked, simply, "What happened?"

Mama Nonna sighed. "I touched them. Cold, their little bodies hard as wax. I know that coldness all too well. Eleven children of my own. Only six of them living. Go visit the cemetery sometime, see how many gravestones have the name 'Indrisano' on it, with a just a small gap of time between the dates of birth and death.

"Teresa begged me to do something, anything. I had told her, months ago, about some of the lyings-in, how Signora Rubino showed me a midwife's trick for a baby who wouldn't breathe. Blow deep into its mouth, gently flick the soles of the feet. But I knew there was nothing I could do. Nothing. Mother of God, my heart sorrowed to tell her. '*Sono morti*,' I told her. My voice as gentle as I could make it. '*Sono morti*, Teresa.' And she crumpled to the floor like a cloth doll.

"Then I began a terrible chore, to find out why the twins had died. They were always in the best of health. I didn't have to wait long for my answer. Teresa handed me a clear blue medicine bottle, empty, its label very familiar to me. Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup. Italians called it *la babagna*. I don't know what that word means, but I know what *la babagna* did. It made children sleep. I even used it myself from time to time when my own children were cutting their teeth, or when scarlet fever raged in my son Jerry when he was six years old. But I knew to give it drop by tiny drop, like all potent remedies. Some women even swallowed a bit of *la babagna* themselves. It made everything seem soft, melted sadness away, at least until the next dose.

“Teresa told me the babies fussed all day in the buggy, where she kept them as she did a large wash for the woman she worked for on Mondays. The woman brought her a bottle of *la babagna*—she had money, so she got it whenever she pleased from *la farmacia*—and told her to give some to the twins. ‘It doesn’t hurt children at all, and it works like magic,’ this woman told Teresa.

“Ah, yes, it certainly worked its magic, making the twins’ lives vanish that very evening. Teresa said the babies started crying again when she got home. Just a few drops of *la babagna* had worked so well a few hours before, and she craved one full night of sleep. The same woman who gave her *la babagna* wanted a new dress, asked for a fitting the next day. Teresa wanted to be well rested. And, since the woman had given her the bottle of *la babagna* to take home, Teresa gave her babies a spoonful or two each. The syrup tasted sweet and they took it easily. ‘I didn’t know how much,’ she sobbed. ‘The woman said it wouldn’t hurt them.’ I wondered if Teresa had taken some also. She told me she slept deeply, then woke after many hours, breasts full, bursting with milk her twins would never again drink.

“And then suddenly, I heard someone climbing the stairs, heavily, yet quickly. I knew immediately that someone had heard us. With no time to think about what I was doing, I slipped the medicine bottle into my dress pocket as a policeman walked straight into the flat.’

“He was tall, with light hair and blue eyes, but not a Northern Italian. Teresa sat up and went silent when she saw him. He said, ‘I watched both of you walking down the street. It’s late for women to be out. Heard someone crying.’

“I studied this young man just for a moment. I saw a touch of kindness in his face. Perhaps he didn’t think of us as dirty Italians, like so many outsiders in East Boston. Perhaps he grew up in this neighborhood, went to Italian grocery stores for treats as a child. But I knew the minute I told him the truth, Teresa would be taken off to prison. And no court would show her mercy: according to them, an Italian woman would never murder her children by accident.

“So I opened my mouth and lied in my best English. ‘I know this family, sir,’ I said to him. ‘The babies took sick a few days ago. We thought it was something mild. And yet now, you see, it was much worse than that. A quick pneumonia, perhaps. Many children die of this.’ The lie streamed from my mouth, smooth as a silk ribbon.

“He looked at the babies himself, said yes, they were dead, that he was very sorry, asked Teresa if he could help by contacting the local undertaker, Signore Tosca. She said, ‘*Si*.’ She knew not to utter one more word. And this young policeman left, believing me, telling us again how very sorry he was for her terrible loss.” Mama Nonna shook her head. “I paid Signore Tosca myself for a child’s coffin. The twins fit perfectly in it, side by side, as if in their cradle. I washed the babies myself, dressed them in identical little gowns.

“And then, a day or two after the funeral, I opened my kitchen door. I meant to bring Teresa some herbs for a tea, to help dry up her milk, a sad task. And I nearly fell over a large, soft parcel, wrapped in brown paper and rough string. I took it to this very table and cut the string with a knife.

“I pulled out a blue shawl, the color of the sea, and recognized it immediately as the one Teresa kept apart from all her other clothing, on its own shelf. And as I unfolded the shawl, an envelope fluttered out and fell to the floor. I opened it and saw the note, in handwriting simple and crooked as a child’s: *mille grazie, Signora Indrisano*. Thank you, a thousand times.

“When I ran to Teresa’s flat, I saw she had taken a few things, mostly clothes. I asked neighbors, day after day, if they’d seen her. Always the answer was no. I never knew what happened. Perhaps her parents finally came for her. I even considered if Umberto the Eel had wriggled his way home, taken Teresa away from Boston. Perhaps worse things happened, things I will not allow myself to think. But I do know this. That night, I learned my words had the power to change the direction of another person’s life. I lied to save Teresa because she had already lost everything precious to her. Mary, someday you will find yourself choosing between one lie and another when truth seems like the worst lie of all. You will keep silent about what you’ve done, slipping it quietly away as if into a deep pocket. Yet there will come a time when you can pull this secret from its hiding place and know it for what it is. And then it will lose its power over you.”

The two women sat in silence. Then Mamma Nonna said, “It’s late and I need to rest now. *Buona sera, mia figlia*.” And the *strega* walked out of the room; Nonni heard her ascend the stairs. Nonni put her sewing into her basket, brought it into her bedroom just off the kitchen. Kathleen slept in a child’s bed beneath the window; Nonni checked her, a little more carefully after listening to Mamma Nonna. She glanced out the window at the garden, tattered now because it was autumn, the very garden where Teresa

Giancotti stumbled, blind with tears, towards Mama Nonna's door. Then Nonni realized something different happened at the table tonight: Mama Nonna called her '*mia figlia*'—my daughter—for the first time. Not once had her mother-in-law ever used that phrase to address her, not even at Nonni's wedding, when John slipped a gold ring on her finger and kissed her in front of an altar made of cold white marble.

There is a final note to this tale, a connection between *i due principi* and a brief story my mother mentioned from time to time. Nonni stayed up late for months after my parents brought me home from St. Joseph's Hospital in Burbank, where I'd been born two months early. Colicky, jaundiced, almost too tender for this world, I fussed constantly, long after my brother and sister lay dreaming under scratchy green blankets, long after my father swallowed the last drop of liquor in his glass and fell into heavy sleep. My grandmother, her house only a few steps away from ours, heard me crying, saw my mother's shadow in the windows as she walked, frazzled and weary, carrying me from kitchen to living room, down hallways, and back again.

Perhaps Mama Nonna's story of Teresa Giancotti and her lost twin sons made my grandmother leave her bed, put on a robe and slippers, and open her front door. I was born in summer, so the field behind our house must have filled the air with a dry, grassy fragrance in those hours before dawn. Crossing the strip of lawn between her house and our porch, Nonni stepped inside our kitchen, night after night, and gently took me, a warm, wailing bundle, from my mother's arms. "Go to bed now, *Katarina*," she told my mother, using her Italian name from a far-off childhood. Then Nonni took me to the

living room, to sit and soothe me with her quiet voice as shadows settled around us, dark and thick as a heavy woolen shawl.

Strufoli

You need to start with a lot of flour if you're going to make a decent amount of *strufoli*. Probably you'll need two or three pounds, about half a gallon, and it has to be sifted or you'll have so many lumps you'll think you fell down the stairs! And you need to add a bit of salt, about a teaspoon.

Put the flour and salt on your the work board, in a big mound, and make a space in the middle of the mound. Put in a dozen eggs, one at a time, mixing them in with more and more of the flour. Also, add some vanilla extract, a little spoonful. Mix it all together to make nice dough; then just knead the dough! You'll know when it's done because your arms will feel like they're about to fall off.

This is the trick: Take a chunk of dough and roll it out like a thin breadstick. Then pinch off little pieces, and roll the pieces between your hands until they're round and smooth.

You need to fry these in hot Crisco, a little hotter than for *cannoli*, just deep enough that the *strufoli* can float without touching the bottom of the pan. They don't take too long to fry, no more than five minutes if there aren't too many in the pan at once. You'll have to put them on paper to drain after they're fried, of course.

The last part is the coating. You need to heat a quart of honey and a small handful of sugar in a pan until they're very runny, almost like water. Then just dip the fried *strufoli* in the honey to coat them completely. Then put the *strufoli* on a plate and sprinkle little colored sugar candies over them.

A nice dessert for the Christmas season. *Buon Natale!*

Anna Moschella

Chapter Four

Il Incantesimo D'Amore

A Love Spell

Los Angeles, 1967

Braids always crowned my Aunt Anna's small round head, one silver plait crossed neatly over the other and pinned into place with black hairpins. To me, Aunt Anna looked like a watercolor in soft gray and muted pastels. She wore dresses printed with blossoms in spring and sensible, dark dresses in winter, with woolen cardigans to match. Her cat's-eye reading glasses—shell pink, with rhinestones on their upturned rims—dangled from her neck on a thin chain. I made sure to be careful of those glasses whenever I hugged Aunt Anna, which I did as often as I could. Hugging her was like sinking into the comfort of a down pillow; she was short, round, and warm, the softest of all my aunts.

Aunt Anna was born in Boston on April 4, 1900, the Indrisano family's first daughter. By 1904, Anna had two sisters. In later years, my great-grandfather gave my great-grandmother jewelry whenever she produced a son: a double strand of pearls, a platinum filigree pendant, a flexible, solid gold snake, worn as a necklace, its head paved with diamonds, two icy green emeralds for eyes. Pietro greeted the births of his daughters with nothing but a curt, "What do you think you're doing, Maria, trying to

open a convent?" But two girls died of diphtheria at ages one and three, leaving only Anna.

Aunt Anna lived with my Uncle Mike near the end of Firmament Avenue in Van Nuys, two blocks from the 405 freeway. They owned a grocery store in Boston since the early years of their marriage in 1919. When they retired, they moved to California and bought a large ranch-style home on a cool, shaded lot. Uncle Mike turned the backyard into a green oasis, divided in half by a tall, dark hedge of Italian cypress. In front of the hedge, a close-cropped lawn where Uncle Mike set up *bocci* games in summer. Behind the hedge, a garden so lush that it felt like the incarnation of a dream I've had all my life: I slip through a gate in a wall or fence and discover flowers I'd planted and then forgot, only to find them again in full, rampant bloom.

Entering Uncle Mike's garden was like the stillpoint in those dreams when I push open the gate. The garden wasn't visible from the *bocci* lawn; I had to squeeze between the rough cypress trunks to enter that fragrant, sunlit heaven. Coaxed by the Los Angeles heat, Uncle Mike's vegetables grew to enormous size: staked tomato plants rose higher than my head, the tomatoes large as Christmas ornaments. My mother claimed Uncle Mike once grew a zucchini the size of a baseball bat, and his basil flourished in clusters big as wedding bouquets. I waited patiently beside Uncle Mike on hot summer mornings, the sharp scent of basil surrounding us like a pungent cloak as he picked green-skinned plums, placing each one in the chipped white enamel basin I held in my small hands.

Aunt Anna and Uncle Mike took one look at the kitchen in their new California home and declared it narrow as a coffin. Within six months, they renovated the garage,

not into a sewing room for Anna or a potting shed, but a kitchen for Uncle Mike. Uncle Mike installed a six-burner gas stove, a chest-style freezer (which held, among other things, Italian ices), and a refrigerator against one wall. He rinsed escarole and spinach in one side of a double sink, using the other side for washing up. Uncle Mike scrubbed stains from a long counter underneath the garage window and painted the surface white; it held an array of stock pots, knife blocks, and racks for marble and wooden rolling pins. Another man might have had a lathe or an iron vice on that counter; Uncle Mike had a shiny pasta maker, an espresso pot, and neat rows of herbs in glass jars, labeled with their Italian names. A pegboard on the wall held, not pliers and wrenches, but whisks, ladles, sieves, and saucepans in copper and stainless steel. My uncle outlined them on the pegboard in black Magic Marker, "To put each one back in its home," he said.

In the center of the garage stood an enormous butcher-block table. Uncle Mike had the top made by his friend Angelo, whose specialty was wooden truck beds. "This thing's the size of a goddamned Cadillac, Mike," Angelo yelled over the pounding of hammers as he helped Uncle Mike put table legs on the butcher block. They placed a dark slab of gray-veined marble at one end of the table. Uncle Mike rolled out pastries there, especially thin circles of dough for *cannoli* shells; he told me Aunt Anna liked *cannoli* best of all.

Angelo helped Uncle Mike wire overhead lamps in place above the table and counter. Then Uncle Mike disappeared each afternoon into his garage-turned-kitchen, emerging in the evening with a rich, ricotta-layered lasagne in a Pyrex baking dish, or

thin slices of veal *scallopine* arranged on a china platter. Aunt Anna said with pride, “All I ever need to do at my own stove is put on the teakettle.”

My family ate summer meals with Aunt Anna and Uncle Mike in a screened porch off the garage-kitchen. The porch was nearly filled with a long table, which they loaded with plate after plate of food: seafood risotto made salty and black by the addition of squid ink; pasta in every shape and size, each with its own type of sauce; lobsters split and stuffed with garlic, lemon juice, and breadcrumbs, then baked. After one such dinner, Mike served a simple fruit cup for dessert. “To make the mouth fresh,” he explained in his shy, soft voice. In my gold-rimmed dessert glass, among slices of fresh peaches and melon, were the first wild strawberries I’d ever tasted, sweet and tart at the same time.

A few weeks before Christmas, Aunt Anna visited to help my mother and Nonni make two of the most important holiday recipes, *strufoli* and *cristine*. My mother never hesitated to tell me that “Your great-grandmother tucked the recipes for *strufoli* and *cristine* in her blouse before she left the family bakery in Grottaminarda to board her ship to New York. She kept them in her jewelry box underneath her gold bracelets. Anna didn’t get the recipes until the Christmas after she married Mike.” My mother pronounced the cooking of *strufoli* and *cristine* “a major production,” and it was. The process took two days, starting around ten a.m. and sometimes finishing well after midnight.

I knew the day had arrived for making *strufoli* and *cristine* when my mother woke my sister Maryanne and me early on a weekday morning. She pushed me towards our

table, telling me, “Get that horror of a cloth off it, for Christ’s sake,” and handed me a clean one made of yellow plaid vinyl. I pushed all the dining chairs into one corner, to give our kitchen and dining room (which were one large, open area) more space for the women to work.

Meanwhile, I heard my mother groaning, as if in agony. She backed into our kitchen, holding up one end of a pine board which was almost as long as a door; my sister supported the other end. My mother announced, “*Santo pazienza*, someday this board’s going to break my back,” as they wrestled it into the room and slid it on the table. Years ago, my father nailed the board together, sanding the pale wood to a satiny finish. The board stood propped against a wall in our garage, waiting for Aunt Anna’s yearly pastry-day visits.

Aunt Anna walked into our kitchen, greeting us with her cheerful, “How are you, deah?” She said “deah” because of her Boston accent. Nonni usually came over a short while later, dressed in a cotton shift. Then the kitchen filled with bustling activity.

“Get three—no, four—bags of flour from the pantry, Joanie,” my mother said to me; I brought these to Aunt Anna, who stood at the table, rolling up her sleeves. Nonni looked in the cupboard for our powdered sugar shaker, declaring it “a sight” when she found it, with its dented top and bent handle.

“We won’t need that until tomorrow, Ma,” said my mother, but my grandmother put it on the counter anyway.

The women's cooking styles reflected their personalities. Bossy and brusque, my mother grumbled as she hustled her electric deep fryer from a cupboard underneath the stove.

"It weighs a ton," she said as she attached the cord. Though she was deferential to her mother and Aunt Anna, my mother never missed an opportunity to hint that she alone knew the right way to do everything.

"We cooked *strufoli* in lard in Mamma Nonna's house and they turned out light as a feather," mused Nonni as she plugged in our Corningware coffee pot.

"Well, Crisco's a lot better for you and it doesn't come from a pig," my mother said as she handed my sister and me our aprons and two wooden spoons.

"Scrape those cans clean, would ya?" she said, hovering over us as we scooped shortening into the deep fryer.

Meanwhile, my grandmother made coffee for the women.

"Thank you, deah, you always know just how much sugar and milk I take," said Aunt Anna as my grandmother set a cup down next to her. They chatted, half in English, and half in soft, graceful Italian.

"So what's Mike cooking for you these days, Anna?" asked Nonni.

"Ah, last night, he made something he could have served to *Jesu Cristo* in heaven, a roasted chicken with *limone e rosemarino, buona cucina*," said Anna, at which my grandmother christened Mike "*uno marito caro*," a dear husband.

"Maryanne, get over to the table and watch Anna," said my mother as Nonni brought her coffee, black with sugar. My sister was expected to learn each step carefully

in order to learn the pastry-making skills essential to her future as a good Italian housewife.

At ten years of age, I didn't care much about being anyone's wife someday, but I stayed at the kitchen table, too, with my toy rolling pin and a set of battered tin cookie cutters. Aunt Anna dumped bag after bag of flour onto the pine board, measured salt in her hand, then mixed the salt and flour together. I took the empty flour bags to the trash; when I did that, she always said, "Thank you, deah."

"Now, look, we make all of this flour into Mount Vesuvius," Aunt Anna explained as she mounded all of it into a cone, "And now we make a crater." She rounded a well in the center of the flour mountain. "Here's the lava," she chuckled as she broke what looked to me like a dozen eggs into the well, blending them with a fork. Then Aunt Anna collapsed Mount Vesuvius bit by bit, gently drawing flour with her fingers into the eggs, until a yellow ball of dough formed in her hands. She kneaded it for exactly eight minutes, telling us as she worked that "This recipe is the same as for pasta dough, and you have to knead it just as much, until your arms feel like they're going to drop off."

As Anna worked the dough, she told us how she made pasta with Mamma Nonna the old-fashioned way. "We rolled it out and cut it on a board just like this one," she said. "But the kitchen was a little small, and we didn't have room to dry the pasta on racks. So my mother made me rub flour into old bedsheets and drape them over every kitchen chair, the way children make a tent to hide in. We hung the pasta strands right over the sheets. The flour kept the pasta from sticking to the cloth."

My sister and I both laughed at the idea of kitchen chairs wearing long fringes of spaghetti, like hair, and I thought about asking my mother to make pasta the old-fashioned way sometime. She seemed cranky enough, though and I knew not to ask as she turned the dial up on the deep fryer, to melt the Crisco. The shortening became hot enough to “burn everything to ashes,” she’d told us, so I usually stayed across the room from the fryer’s sinister presence.

Aunt Anna divided the fully kneaded dough into four pieces. She rolled them into a long rope. “About the diameter of a wedding ring,” she said. Warning us to watch our fingers, she then cut each rope into quarter-inch pieces. Now I was allowed to help with the next step, if I washed and dried my hands. We picked up each piece and rolled it lightly between our palms, placing each one carefully on the pine board so they didn’t touch each other. “Otherwise, they’ll join up into one big ball of dough again,” said Aunt Anna. The rounded pieces of dough looked like an army lined up in perfect formation on our kitchen table. These were *strufoli*, ready to be fried.

My mother and grandmother picked up a few *strufoli* at a time and slipped them into the deep fryer; their bare hands almost touched the melted shortening. The *strufoli* sank beneath the surface for a moment, then puffed and rose, hissing, to the top of the fryer. My mother turned each *strufoli* with a spatula; my grandmother scooped them out with a perforated spoon when they became golden brown. She drained them on paper towels while Anna dumped another white mountain of flour on the table.

After a long day of cooking, the women filled nearly a dozen huge Christmas tins, the kind most people use for popcorn, with *strufoli*, sealing the lids tight. Nonni and

Aunt Anna took a few tins home with them; my mother stored the rest on empty shelves in her cool, dark linen cabinets. Whenever company called from December through January, she performed the finishing step. My mother took out her best platter from her Desert Rose dish set and put it on the counter. Then she heated a cup or two of honey in a saucepan until the honey became thin as water. She dipped each *strufoli* in the warm honey, piling them one by one on the platter until they looked like a gold hill. Then she sprinkled tiny, multicolored candies over them, the same kind she used on cookies and cakes. Finally, we were allowed to eat as much *strufoli* as we liked, our mouths and fingers drenched with sticky sweetness.

My mother dubbed the making of *cristine* “a royal pain in the ass.” I felt tension in the house until Aunt Anna arrived on the second day of cooking; she wore calmness like perfume. *Cristine* started out exactly like *strufoli*, except the dough was rolled thin, like pie crust, and cut into strips with a crimped pastry cutter. Anna looped each strip into a bow, simple as one a child might tie on a package. She told us to pinch the center of each *cristine* hard; otherwise, they untied as they cooked, which made my grandmother and Anna shake with laughter.

“Oh, God,” said Nonni, “It looks like an octopus trying to get out of a tank!” But my mother cursed in grim Italian under her breath, fishing the untied *cristine* out of the fryer with tongs.

Cristine could only be made a few at a time, since they were delicate, puffing to fragile, twisted shapes in the fryer. After draining them, my mother sprinkled each one with powdered sugar before packing them in shallow cookie tins.

That's how my holidays started, with sweet fried pasta dough and Aunt Anna's stories about growing up in the house of a *strega*, how her only friend in the world was Rosario Tosca, the undertaker's daughter, and *il incantesimo d'amore*, the love spell Aunt Anna used one warm June night in 1917 to bring Uncle Mike to her, binding them together for the rest of their lives.

"My mother had a difficult life, to say the least," Aunt Anna told us. "For as long as I could remember, my father never stayed home. He came in from work, dressed in a nice suit, went God knows where, leaving her with all the work in the house. There were five brothers, and me. She dealt with it as best she could, but finally she had enough, I guess."

Mamma Nonna's patience ran out one night after a supper in which three-year-old Roland threw two china plates full of food, one after the other, to the floor, and Jerry, age five, cried without stopping. Mamma Nonna stood up and shouted, "I've had enough of doing all this by myself." She left the kitchen with Jerry, whose fever she discovered by putting a cool hand on his hot forehead. Once they got to his bedroom, he vomited his dinner all over Mamma Nonna's shoes. After cleaning up and tucking him in bed, she returned to the kitchen and brought her fist down hard onto the table, rattling dishes and silverware.

"There's too much work for one woman to do," she yelled, "And no help, no help at all. I'm a servant in my own home and I'm not living in *purgatorio* anymore." Then she turned to nine-year-old Anna, who sat, eyes wide with fright, in a kitchen chair. Words fell out of Mamma Nonna's mouth which made Anna sob. No longer would her

mother braid Anna's hair in the mornings, pinning the braids into place with bone hairpins, or help Anna decide on the right dress for school: there would be no more school at all. "You can read and write, and that's more than enough for any girl to know," said Mamma Nonna, "I need extra hands around this house, and God isn't going to grow me another pair."

It didn't matter how much Anna begged her mother to let her finish the last few months of the lessons she loved. Anna even thought about grabbing her blue school satchel from behind her bedroom door and running fast down the street to school. But she feared her mother's penetrating glance, her scolding's sharp blade. Mamma Nonna never needed to raise her hand to anyone: a few barbed words, a single, prolonged stare, were enough to subdue any adult, much less a recalcitrant child. When Anna's friend Rosario Tosca came the next morning to walk with Anna to school, Mamma Nonna told Rosario curtly, "She's not going back."

"That ended my school days forever," Aunt Anna told us, a note of sadness in her voice. She kneaded a ball of *strufoli* dough in her hands, over and over, a motion she said she could practically do in her sleep. "I kept some books under my bed and tried to read at night. But you know how it is. I left a lot of it aside. Oh, I love to read now. There's lots of time. Back then, though, it took so long to do everything, and I was worn out."

Anna woke at dawn every day, dressed, and swathed herself in one of Mamma Nonna's white aprons, which her mother had cut down for her. She smoothed the brown blanket and linen sheets on her iron bedstead, then walked downstairs to the kitchen.

Small and thin, she stood next to her mother at the coal stove, carefully putting loaves in the bake oven, stirring sauce to keep it from scorching, turning sausage with a steel fork in a heavy black pan, dropping potato and onion slices into a layer of sizzling olive oil. She wiped her brother Jerry's perpetually running nose, rushed to fetch Roland whenever he lifted the latch on the front gate and escaped onto Barnes Avenue. Whenever she sat down for a moment, Mamma Nonna plunked a knitting basket in Anna's lap.

"I knitted two pairs of socks for the boys in one day," Aunt Anna said, "The wool was always gray and rough, but also warm. And no missing pairs, either. Everything the same color."

In summer, Mamma Nonna sent Anna out to the garden with a bushel basket, to pick tomatoes and zucchini. "My mother grew tomatoes almost as lovely as Mike's," Aunt Anna sighed as she rolled pieces of dough between her palms. "But the canning—nothing but sweat and heat. Sometimes my mother let Rosario Tosca come over to help. That was almost the only time I ever got to talk to another girl my age."

The Tosca family lived in a tall, slate-gray house next door. Signore Tosca, the undertaker for most of the Italians in the neighborhood, enjoyed prosperity, but not a large family: Rosario was an only child. When the Toscas moved in, Mamma Nonna refused to visit at first, muttering, "Mother of God, we live next door to death." Signora Tosca caught Mamma Nonna in broad daylight, trying to scatter a handful of salt on their front porch. Instead of reprimanding her, Signora Tosca invited Mamma Nonna in for a cup of tea and some *biscotti*. Mamma Nonna quietly brushed salt from her hands and

entered the front door like an empress. She visited as often as possible from then on, relishing the gossip in the undertaker's house.

"I've heard everything now, everything," Mamma Nonna declared one evening at dinner. "Signora Tosca told me a rich couple had a little daughter who died. She was so beloved to them that they asked for her to be embalmed, dressed in her nightgown, her favorite doll tucked in her arms. They paid a huge sum to have her put in a glass case and kept the child in the living room, like something in *il museo*! Signora Tosca said her husband heard it from a maid in that very household. She used soft rags to polish the glass case. Sometimes the cat curled up on it, and the maid had to shoo it off." Horrified, Anna raced from the table and ran upstairs to her room. No amount of coaxing would bring her out for the rest of the night.

"I lay with the covers over my head until morning," Aunt Anna said. "It was hard enough to deal with my mother, always talking about *il malocchio*, the evil eye. But then the little girl in her glass box! I think my mother forgot I was just a child." But Rosario Tosca made Anna laugh as they canned tomatoes, among hot glass jars and boiling kettles.

"I remember Rosario," my grandmother said to Aunt Anna as she picked *strufoli* up a few at a time to bring them to the fryer, "She used to carve silly faces on the tomatoes before she put them in the pot to scald off the skins. She married a banker, had what—eight, nine, children? And she'd been the only daughter. Remember that head of hair—so long it almost reached her knees? It took forever to brush and put up."

Aunt Anna shook her head, smiling, “And her secret for it was castor oil! I came over one day to bring Signora Tosca a few jars of tomatoes, and there was Rosario, sitting in the kitchen by the stove, castor oil soaking into her black hair!”

“I keep it on for an hour, then wash it out with white soap,” she laughed, “And don’t you dare tell a soul, Anna, or I’ll put castor oil in your water glass.”

My mother, dropping *strufoli* in the fryer, said, “Aunt Anna, didn’t you do all the laundry, too?”

“Oh, God, yes, deah, and I hated that job most,” she replied. By age twelve, Anna took on the wash for the entire Indrisano family: her own, and that of Pietro, Mamma Nonna, and her brothers. Reeking socks, stained shirts, heavy dresses, trousers, underwear: Anna carried load after load, every Monday, into the dark basement on Barnes Avenue, after spending the previous day sorting and scrubbing stains with a bar of naptha soap.

As Anna talked, I remembered something from one of my schoolbooks, about all the tools a woman needed to do laundry before there were washing machines. The book said that women needed two or three pails, a smooth stick for stirring clothes while they boiled in a big copper pot, baskets to hold the clothes, a whole pile of wooden clothespins, washboards, and a dozen irons, the kind you heated on top of the stove.

Anna described most of those things in detail; she said she kept everything stored on deep shelves in the basement. She shaved Octagon soap into a mixing bowl, using a steel grater, and made sure she had enough of Mrs. Stewart’s Bluing, which she added to rinse water to whiten clothes. As Anna grated soap, she noted how much the picture of

Mrs. Stewart on the bluing bottle resembled Mamma Nonna. It stared at her, grim and unsmiling, as she filled washtubs from buckets.

My great-grandfather never spared a penny on household conveniences if Mamma Nonna insisted, so a Pearl laundry stove stood on a low brick hearth in the basement corner. Low and squat, the Pearl stove had a wide, long top for a copper wash boiler, and shelves to heat flatirons. Coal-fired, the stove quickly heated the basement as Anna rested washboards against the inside edges of galvanized washtubs.

“Scrubbing all those things on the washboard took hours,” Aunt Anna told us, “My father was a butcher, so there were his aprons, full of stains. And if you’ll excuse me, deah, the worst part was dealing with the things we used once a month.” I didn’t know what Aunt Anna meant; later, after we’d gone to bed, my sister told me she was talking about menstrual rags, that the women folded up and pinned them right into their underwear.

Anna soaked her mother’s bloody rags (and, as she grew older, her own) in salt and cold water; the water turned pink as she worked. Mamma Nonna told her the blood was *sangue potente* and not to be feared, but Aunt Anna said, “I felt sick to be around so much of it.” She plunged each cloth into hot, sudsy water, rubbed the rags hard on a washboard, dropped them one by one in rinse water, then into the copper wash boiler. “No matter how much I rinsed, the rags gave off an odor when they boiled,” Aunt Anna said. She lifted the rags from the boiler with a long wooden paddle, and flopped them into the second rinsing tub, to which she had already added enough bluing to tinge the

water a pale aqua. Anna ran each cloth through the wringer, then hung them up on a clothesline Mamma Nonna strung across the basement.

“No need for the men in this house to see such things,” she told Anna.

Anna boiled and scrubbed laundry all day. She dragged load after load up four flights of stairs to the spacious attic at the very top of the house. Clotheslines ran the length of the room in winter, to dry clothes out of the rain and snow. Another clothesline hooked to a pulley at the window and ran across the yard to another pulley, sunk into the rough bark of an elm tree. Anna used this clothesline in fine weather, especially for the heaviest clothes and for white shirts, so they would dry in the sun. There were a few clotheslines in the basement, too, to use in winter when the furnace was on, though it was more cramped.

“How long did it take the clothes to dry?” asked my sister. She was helping my grandmother put *strufoli* into a tall silver Christmas tin.

Nonni said, “It took all day, and sometimes more.”

Aunt Anna agreed. “And then afterwards, there’d be the ironing!” She groaned, remembering how Mamma Nonna asked her to sprinkle all the clothes to be ironed with a whisk broom dipped in water. Anna folded the sprinkled clothes and set them in laundry baskets, which she lugged back down to the basement.

“Thank God for the Maytag man these days,” said my mother. She’d finished the last batch of *strufoli* and now leaned against the kitchen counter, one leg resting against the bottom cabinet, a lit cigarette in her hand.

Aunt Anna told us that she set flatirons on the Pearl stove to heat, and then prepared starch. “And you know, it didn’t come out of a spray can like now,” she said. “I used starch, dry, from a box. I had to mix it first with cold water to make a paste, then added more water so it looked like a thin white soup, then I’d simmer it. That was called a boiled starch. My father liked his shirts that way. I dipped them in the hot starch—how it burned my fingers!—and then rubbed the shirt down with a clean cloth to get the extra off. I’d wait a little, then run a flatiron over it. You had to hold the flatiron with a padded holder. Now, that was work.”

“Did you ever make a coffee starch, Anna?” asked my grandmother. Aunt Anna was kneading a second batch of dough.

“Ah, yes, coffee starch. Mamma Nonna liked that for her black dresses. You put fresh coffee into the boiled starch. I used spermaceti when Mamma Nonna got it from the pharmacy, just a little to melt in. It made the iron stick less on the fabric. Eventually you couldn’t buy spermaceti anymore and I used beeswax instead. Adding the coffee made a good, dark starch.”

“It sounds like fun,” I said to Aunt Anna as I rolled out scraps of dough and sprinkled flour on them. She glanced down at me, stopped kneading for a moment.

“Mary, deah, would you bring me some of that coffee, speaking of which. I think I’m going to rest for a minute.” My grandmother set a china cup in front of her.

“I’ll take this over,” she said to Aunt Anna, and stood in front of the pastry board.

My sister and I watched Aunt Anna sip her coffee. “Mamma Nonna didn’t mean to be cruel about it all,” she said. “She had more work than I did. Cooking for a big

household, managing the money. Shopping. I took over most of the household errands when I was sixteen. She planted the backyard garden herself. So much to do. But she was used to it and I wasn't. One day, there was more laundry than usual. I don't know why—maybe the beds had been stripped. Mamma Nonna always wanted the house clean. She said, 'Nobody's going to claim that the Indrisanos live like *i porci*.' I cried when I saw the mountains of laundry I had to do that day. My mother tried to be kind, brought me tea in the basement. Helped me scrub when she had a minute, but she had her hands full. Carpets to take out into the yard and beat. Ashes to scrape from the stove. We sat down together for lunch. She seemed quiet, maybe even a little sad, told me, 'Anna, I would say I am sorry. But I'm not. This is how life is. Life is *dura*, hard. And you must be strong to it.'

"I picked up my laundry basket and took it to the attic at the top of the house. Those baskets, so heavy, full of wet clothes. Like carrying stones. It was a sunny day, springtime. I was twelve, almost thirteen, by then. My friend Rosario had come by the evening before to show off a velvet cape her mother bought her somewhere uptown. It was lovely, emerald green with a deep hood. Trimmed with black ribbon. I was at the age when a girl starts to want pretty things. And I had nothing like that. I took the wash to the attic, started hanging clothes up. All those shirts, my father's, flapping on the line, like sails catching the wind. He went out whenever he liked, left my mother and me to run the house and raise his sons by ourselves. But if things weren't exactly to his liking, he became *un diavolo*, a devil, as my mother called him. Sometimes he'd make me do his shirts over in the middle of the week, as if I were a maid and not his daughter.

“After I finished hanging up my father’s shirts, I thought about the other clothes I would have to bring up to the attic that day, piles of them waiting down in the basement. I knew right then that my life would be like this forever. Up and down stairs, always something else to clean, always one more thing to fetch. I walked over to another window and cranked it open. I sat down on the sill, looked out at the street. Children coming home from school. Clattering down the wooden sidewalk, laughing, playing. I stared at my hands, already chapped and reddened as an old washerwoman’s. I looked down. Four stories. I knew I’d work that day until I was exhausted, and the same the next day, every day like beads on a cheap necklace, each one as drab as the next.

“For a long time, I’d been hoping my mother might let me go back to school. But when she said that day about life being *dura*, I knew I would never have a childhood again. It had vanished and I was on my way to becoming a grown woman. And I thought of the women around me, houses crowded with children, some of the husbands kind, but so many of them brutal.”

Aunt Anna finished her coffee and looked down into her cup, swirling the dark dregs. “I decided what to do. I climbed up on that sill and crouched down. For a long time I stayed there. It’s like what children do when they pretend to be birds. They climb to a high place and sit there. But I wasn’t pretending anything. I looked down at the sidewalk, so far below me. I wanted to throw myself out that window. And the only thing that kept me from doing it was the thought that I might not die.”

“My God, Anna,” said Nonni. She’d stopped kneading dough as Aunt Anna talked. Nonni sat on a chair now, too, slowly cleaning her hands with a dishcloth printed

with yellow chickens. I heard Aunt Anna's cup make a little click as she settled it on the flowered saucer.

"I grew to be a woman that way, always at my mother's side, doing everything she did and more," she said. "That's the way we lived. And I never believed anything would be different." Anna stood up, brushing off her apron before she resumed working *strufoli* dough. "A little more kneading," she said, "To get it just right."

Cannoli

First you have to make the shells. Start with a couple of cups of flour, maybe a little less, a little salt, less than a teaspoon, and a good spoon of sugar. Mix it together with a good dash of cinnamon for a nice flavor. That's the dry part.

The wet part starts with an egg and a quarter stick of butter. I do this on a board, put the dry part on the board, make a little space in the middle, and put the egg in the space. I break up the butter into little bits and put that in the space, too. Mix in the dry part a little at a time.

When most of the dry part is mixed in, start adding some wine. I like to use Marsala, but some of my relatives turn up their noses at anything *Siciliano*. You don't need much, just enough to make the dough nice and soft, then you knead it until it's smooth. When you're there, just cover it and do something else for a while.

When you're rolling out the shells you'll want to work with part of the dough at a time. Roll it out very, very thin, until you can see the rolling board through the dough. Then cut out the shells. I use a coffee can, but that makes pretty big *cannoli*. You can use a cookie cutter, but you need a round one. Just cut the dough into circles.

You need to wrap the circles around a *cannoli* tube. I have a trick: I keep the tubes in the oven, with the heat off, before I use them; this makes it easier to get the shells off the tubes once they're fried. Also, I grease the tubes before I use them. Then just wrap the circles around the tubes, and glue them in place with a little beaten egg yolk.

Frying the shells is easy, just use lots of shortening and get it pretty hot. It's hard to explain how hot, and anyway the way I tell is to fry up little bits of left-over dough. The shells should fry up pretty quickly, just a few minutes, but make sure not to put too many in the pan at a time.

When they come out, put them on a towel and let them cool, then pull out the tube. If you have any trouble getting the tube out, try putting a little ice on the tube, but be very careful not to get the shell wet!

The filling is a lot easier than the shells. You need a lot of ricotta, a couple of pounds, and a couple of cups of sugar. Mix this up, and add some cinnamon, a lot of vanilla extract, and a handful of chocolate chips, the little ones if you can find them—or sometimes I break up the big ones. I have trouble finding citron these days, but that's nice to add, and also lemon peel, I almost always put in lemon peel; whatever you put in, make sure it's chopped up very fine.

That's pretty much it for the filling. When it's time to serve the *cannoli*, you fill the tubes with the ricotta mixture, push the ends into a little plate of crushed pistachios, and sprinkle on the powdered sugar. Enjoy!

Anna Moschella

Chapter Five

Dolce

Boston, 1917

Mamma Nonna took a long, hard look at Anna on her daughter's seventeenth birthday. Small, delicate, sweet, like a sparrow. Hair brown as a sparrow's, too, and thick. Pleased to receive a few pretty gifts: a beaded jet purse from her father. A black straw hat with a cluster of artificial red roses. The best kid gloves, also in black. From Rosario Tosca, a cameo attached to a pink ribbon.

"A bit of fashion's a good thing, after all," thought Mamma Nonna as she watched her daughter slip the cameo around her neck. "She's decent looking, all right, but too soft." Anna cried over sad stories her mother told her, about women who died in childbirth, or stillborn babies. When Signora Tosca came over for a bite to eat, Anna left the room so as not to hear a single word about a cheap neighbor who skimped on funeral flowers for his own mother, or how natural the Zannotti's seven-year-old son looked in his coffin, surrounded by Jordan almonds to sweeten his way to heaven. Anna looked on, uncomprehending, as her brother John grew more handsome over the years and started talking about neighborhood girls. She shook her head in horror when news reached the Indrisano house about a man who deserted his wife in the middle of the night, not understanding how such a thing might happen.

Mamma Nonna pondered her daughter and came to a decision, not without a hint of sadness.

“She can’t do what I do,” she thought, knowing Anna could never become a *strega*, would never learn the charms and incantations a mother recited to her daughter at midnight on Christmas Eve, to impart the power to remove *il malocchio*. Mamma Nonna knew her daughter would forever flee in horror from the things she had to hear every day: women wishing to rid themselves of a pregnancy, eight children already half-starved at home, other women who desired to have just one child, a woman whose belly swelled, not with a baby, but with a tumor, her pain almost beyond endurance. Mamma Nonna watched Anna carefully as she ate a bite of rum cake and decided, once and for all, on the best alternative. She put on her coat and hat the following morning, and set about finding Anna a suitable young man.

It took Mamma Nonna only a week or so to hear about the new grocery store opened up just two streets away by Signora Moschella and her sons, Carmine and Mike, emigrants from Naples. She didn’t generally do the grocery shopping—that had become Anna’s job—and Anna always went up the street to Olimpio’s Market. But Mamma Nonna’s quest for a son-in-law brought her to this new store, with its bright canvas awning, striped white, green, and red, and a window display of fancy biscuit tins. The store had a wooden sign over the door, with the name “Vesuvius” on it and a painting of a volcano erupting, not lava, but bread loaves.

“This must have been a small bakery or something,” she thought as she pushed the door open. That was true—according to another woman standing in line, the

Moschella brothers bought the old Vesuvius bakery, defunct for over a decade, when the family wanted to get the building off their hands.

“The brothers got it for next to nothing,” said the woman. “Signora Moschella found the old bakery sign in a back room and liked it enough to hang it back up. Says it reminds her of *Napoli*. She’s a widow, and those sons treat her like a queen. They turned the storerooms over the old bakery into a flat. She’s a decent lady, always with a kind word for everyone.”

“And her sons? Decent, too?” asked Mamma Nonna. She saw one of them behind the counter—a tall young man who addressed everyone in soft Italian, and seemed calm, despite the long line of customers in his store.

“That’s the younger one, Mike,” said the woman. “Carmines goes out and gets all the produce. Signora Moschella works here, too. And can you believe this? Mike made all the things in the deli case. He cooks almost as good as a woman. His mother taught him.” Mamma Nonna saw stuffed mushrooms in the glass case, cured olives, bright red peppers marinated in olive oil and vinegar, and a pan of spaghetti sauce. She made a mental note to take some of the sauce home and try it in secret.

“*Buon giorno, Signora*, what can I do for you today?” Mike asked Mamma Nonna when it was her turn to set her grocery list on the counter. Mamma Nonna ordered a few things: yeast, cornmeal for *polenta*, flour, sugar, a small paper carton of sauce. Stealthy as a hawk, she watched Mike weigh things (to make sure he didn’t cheat his customers), stuck her finger in the cornmeal he gave her and tasted it (to make sure he didn’t sell stale merchandise), and listened to him talk to the women in the store.

“He doesn’t flirt with everything in a dress, thank God,” she thought. “He’s polite. Gentle. Keeps a clean place. His hair’s a little thin on top, but hair doesn’t matter much on a man. Look how he takes the feather duster from his back pocket, flicks off dust you can’t even see from the counter.” She took her groceries from Mike with a nod, her face still as a pool of water, and trudged back up the street to Barnes Avenue. She heated the sauce, filled with finely-chopped onions and roasted red and green peppers, in a little black pan on the stove. After a few bites, Mamma Nonna felt sure she was on the right track.

“Take this list and go straight down two streets to the new store. What’s the name—Vesuvius,” Mamma Nonna said to Anna a few weeks later, just at the end of May.

Anna, tying on her hat in the hallway, turned to her mother. “But we’ve been going to Olimpio’s Grocery since I can remember.”

Mamma Nonna shoved a list in her daughter’s hand. “I’ve been to the new store a few times. They have the best there,” she told Anna, who shook her head, but still headed off down the street, her market basket in the crook of her arm.

Anna didn’t need to look hard for the store, its bright awning snapping in the breeze. What surprised her was the group of women in front of the store—old, young, all chatting. “What do they have here that everyone wants so much?” she asked herself.

The truth was that every Italian mother in East Boston began to send their eligible daughters down to Vesuvius with grocery lists. But Anna only wondered if there was

some special bread, or maybe a good imported cheese, that the women came down the street to buy.

The store was warm and crowded. The young man at the counter filled orders; a beaming woman in a bright red apron ladled *peperone con acete*, peppers marinated in vinegar, into little cups for people to sample.

“My son Mike here, he makes all this!” she said in a loud, cheerful voice. Anna looked at her list, surprised to see that Mamma Nonna had written *peperone con acete* there, with a note: *Taste first before buying to see if it’s all right*. “I guess my mother’s sick of cooking this herself,” Anna thought.

When Anna stepped up to the counter, Mike turned towards her, wiping his hands on his apron, smiling.

“*Signorina*, what may I get you today?” Anna, who learned long ago to be businesslike with merchants, read off her list, finishing it with a request for the vinegar peppers.

“My mother said I need to taste them first, though.” Signora Moschella immediately bustled over to the counter.

“I taught Mike to cook this when he was only seven years old!” she said as she handed her a white cup of peppers as if it were a communion chalice, and a small spoon.

Anna tasted. The peppers were good, not too much vinegar, not drowned to death in oil.

“What do you think?” asked Signora Moschella.

“Fine,” said Anna, hesitating a little. Her mother’s vinegar peppers had much more spice in them. Then she blurted out, “But I think they need just a bit of something. Black pepper, perhaps.”

The tall young man, now weighing out a measure of flour on the scale, turned around and looked straight at her. Anna felt her face grow hot, as if she’d swallowed an entire spoonful of pepper.

“I’ve made a terrible mistake,” she thought, wondering how fast she could get out of the store before Mike yelled at her. He took another cup from his mother and tasted the peppers himself.

Then, instead of scolding her for being insolent, he said “*Signorina*, you’re right. A little bit would help this out.” When he totaled up Anna’s groceries, he put a paper twist filled with the best black pepper he had in stock on top of her basket. “No charge,” he told her.

All through May, Mamma Nonna suddenly needed so many groceries that Anna thought her mother had become pregnant. But Mamma Nonna’s belly didn’t grow, and so Anna went down the street twice a week, pondering what the reason might be for filling the larder so full.

The first week of June brought hot, muggy weather; people sat on porches, greeting her with “*Buon giorno, Signorina Indrisano*,” as she passed. Mike knew her name now, too; he greeted her every time she walked over the store’s threshold. For couple of weeks now, he also had small dishes waiting for her, things he made to sell.

“Because you improved the *peperone con acete* so well,” he told Anna. She tasted *bracirole*, flank steak rolled up in pine nuts and marinated in tomato sauce. “The people, they can buy it here, then take it home and stick in a pan on their stoves. Maybe that will make suppertime easier for a tired *signora*,” said Mike. One afternoon, when there were only a few customers in the store, Mike handed her a plate of *manicotti*.

“Surely you’re not selling these, too,” Anna exclaimed. “They don’t keep well in this weather.”

“I’m not,” said Mike, “It’s too hot right now in the flat to cook. My mother said the heat makes her faint. So I’m cooking our meals down here. I just made these, *mangia*.”

Anna came home from Vesuvius that afternoon and put the groceries away. Then she climbed the stairs to her room. For weeks now, she felt more and more eager to go down to the grocery store and talk to Mike. But she couldn’t tell whether his careful smiles and shy offerings of food had anything more to with polite friendliness. “Maybe he just thinks I’m *magra*, skinny as a skeleton,” she thought sadly. And yet, even though his shop was filled with loud young women, he handed only quiet Anna plates of food to taste.

One night, when heat lightning flashed far up in the sky and mugginess hung over Boston like a damp, hot blanket, Anna decided to muster up her courage and go next door when her chores were done, to talk with her friend Rosario. Rosario seemed to know a bit more about the world and especially about the ways of shy men. “I have to tell

someone, at any rate,” thought Anna. Before she’d left today, Mike brought out a dozen anise cookies, pressed into star shapes with a special iron.

“Take some home to your mother and brothers, too, *Signorina* Indrisano,” he’d told her as she bit into a flat, sweet wafer.

Anna knocked on the Tosca’s kitchen door. Rosario answered it, delighted to see her hard-working friend.

“Come sit on the front porch, Anna,” she said, “My mother made lemonade. It’s hotter than the devil tonight, don’t you think?” The girls sat in wicker chairs behind glass panes; the front porch was almost like another room, with ferns in pots and a large engraving of the Sacred Heart, which Anna glanced at as she talked. In the picture, a surprisingly calm Jesus pointed to his flame-crowned heart filled with daggers. Anna felt as if her own heart was a long-shut box of secrets, now gently pried open by Rosario’s questions.

“Mike Moschella, eh?” chuckled Rosario. “I wondered about that myself. Did you notice he’s trying to grow a mustache, by the way? And remember a few Fridays ago, when we walked down to Vesuvius together? I had something to get for my father—what was it? Crackers? Pickles? Mike ran up to the front to help us; he nearly knocked Carmine into the cracker barrel.”

Anna replied, “I know, I remember, but that doesn’t mean anything. Maybe he was just thinking about all the money he was about to make for Mama Moschella.”

“Well, does he do anything else? Tell me how he acts around you,” asked Rosario.

“He gives me food whenever I come into the store! Not the things on my list—food he’s cooked himself. A bite of meat sauce, *bistecca*, eggplant parmesan. He asks me what I think, does it need more salt, a bit more spice?”

“He wants to spice you up, the *ruffinano*,” laughed Rosario, relieved to see Anna break into a smile. “Does he do anything more than just try to make you fat?”

Anna had to chuckle a little then at the thought of Mike plumping her up like a Christmas goose. “Well, the other day, he hoisted one of those big wooden crates filled with mason jars right over his head. He said he was strong enough to lift two crates at a time.”

“He’s gone *pazzo*, Anna! He’s like that bird, *il pavone*, the one who shows off his nice feathers to make the girl bird pay attention to him! He’s cooking for you and letting you know about his nice strong arms.”

Both girls laughed. Anna sipped her lemonade, warm now in the glass.

“Rosario, I’m not sure,” she said, “I think he cares for me, but I’m not certain at all.” The girls sat in silence for a moment. Then Anna stood up to go. Rosario hugged her.

“*Cara*, don’t worry your heart over Mike. Just keep taking your grocery lists to him and let him feed you. And what will happen is bound to happen, that’s all.” She added a little joke. “Maybe you can ask your *strega*-mama to put *un’ incantesimo* on him. *Un’ incantesimo d’amore*.”

“My mother doesn’t know a thing about it, and I don’t dare tell her,” said Anna. “She’d forbid me to shop at that store ever again. I have to go now, Rosario. She expects

me back home.” Anna thanked her friend and walked down the porch steps, passing through the side alley to her unlocked kitchen door.

Anna paused on the path of white crushed shells her father made when he bought the house. A half-moon showed over the house’s peaked roof. She slipped through the garden, silent as a shadow. Her mother’s blue-glazed statue of the Madonna glowed in the faint moonlight like a small spirit. Beside the kitchen door, a rosebush filled with blooms plush as red velvet. Mamma Nonna had planted that rosebush a few weeks after she married Pietro; now it loomed, a spiked black giant on a wooden trellis. Anna had extracted its thick, hooked thorns many times from her brothers’ fingers.

Anna knew her mother didn’t approve of *incantesimi d’amore*, love spells, and often refused to help anyone she felt had *malata d’amore*, love sickness. A

“*Malata d’amore*,” she’d sigh. “Makes the entire world insane. It clouds up your head, tosses everything around like leaves in a hurricane. If I gave some woman a charm to appease her love sickness, she’ll get the man she yearns for night and day. *Malata d’amore* makes her see him only as a prince, at first. But what if he turns out to be *un diavolo*, like Pietro? Better that the man and woman follow the paths to each other’s hearts, as if taking an easy stroll towards each other. Not too fast, not too slow.” Anna reached out her hand to pull her skirt from where it caught on the rosebush. She heard the cloth tear. “Wonderful, a rip to mend, on top of everything else,” she thought. A few petals showered down, shaken from their stems when she’d freed her skirt. They smelled lemony and sweet; Anna gathered up a few from the ground.

“I don’t want to go inside, not yet,” she thought. No lights shone in the house; perhaps everyone had fallen asleep early because of the heat. Anna held the rose petals in her hand and followed the white shell path back to the front of the house.

She knew her mother helped many people. She’d also heard the words “witch” and “sorcery” behind her back sometimes when she walked down the street with Mamma Nonna, though the voices seemed more filled with awe than hatred. Anna knew no charms herself other than the few things she’d observed in the kitchen on Barnes Avenue. “*Un’ incantesimo d’amore*,” she thought. “Maybe it’s worth a try.”

Anna dropped the first rose petal on the wooden sidewalk, then another, leaving a trail behind her, petals red as spilled wine. She stopped when she reached the Madonna statue.

“Dear Lady,” she thought, “My mother comes and speaks to you every day. She has better words than I do. I don’t have the same kind of words she uses. I have only the thing I need to ask you: make him walk this path to my house. Let me know if his intentions are good, or at least if he has any intentions at all.” Anna waited, half-expecting Mike to immediately round the corner, but then, a little afraid of strange shapes in the night garden, she opened the kitchen door and went inside her dark house.

Two days later, a breeze came up, dispelling the heat. Anna held a grocery list in her hand as she walked to Vesuvius; when she pushed the door open, the store seemed empty. Then Mike came out of the back room, a wooden crate of peaches in his hands.

“Ah, *buon giorno, Signorina*.”

Anna smiled at him, then said, “Where’s your mustache?”

Mike looked down at the ground, embarrassed. He didn't tell her that his brother Carmine teased him about it that morning.

"You're going to look like a pirate and scare off Anna Indrisano, Mike." Mike blushed, went up to his bedroom, shaved off his mustache, then came down with the shaving basin, to fling the dregs at his brother. They ran down the stairs, half-cursing each other, half-laughing, to open up Vesuvius for the day.

Mike took a few peaches from the crate. "It's a good thing you walked in when you did, *Signorina*. I expect a few customers might come in this afternoon, and I'm not ready. There's something I'd like to make today—*pesca al vino*. Peaches in red wine. Ever had it?"

Anna shook her head. "No, my mother doesn't make desserts like that. She was a baker in Italy, so we have pastries that tower over everybody's head."

Mike chuckled. "Well, this is simple. Cut the peaches up, soak them in the best red wine you can find." He put a cutting board on the counter and opened one ripe peach with a silver paring knife. "The slices should be thin, but not too much. Ah, see, I'm not very good at this." The soft peach fell apart in his big hands. He looked shyly at Anna. "Maybe today I need a helper."

Anna took the paring knife from Mike's hand.

"Wait a minute, *Signorina*, you'll ruin your dress," said Mike. He went to the back of the store and came out with his mother's vast red apron. "It's a little big, but it'll do." She took it from him and wrapped it twice around her, tying the strings tight.

Anna pared one peach and spread the slices out on the cutting board, like a fan.

“*Perfetto!*” said Mike. He picked the slices up as she worked and dropped them in a glass bowl. The delicate scent of peaches rose around them. Mike opened a green bottle of wine and poured enough over the peaches to barely cover them. “It has to all marinate, so we wait now, just a little while, *Signorina*.” He handed her a wet rag to clean off her hands. Mike kept talking.

“In fact, I have a bit of *pesca al vino* here. I made it this morning, to see if Carmine bought ripe peaches instead of sour ones.” He took a Mason jar from behind the counter; yellow peaches swam in clear red liquid. “Try just a little. You always tell me exactly what you think, *Signorina*.” Anna took a spoon and lifted part of a peach slice from the jar. A perfume filled her mouth, the flavors of peach and red wine perfectly married.

“Oh,” she said, “It’s good. *Dolce*.”

Mike smiled. “*Si, dolce. Dolce, come uno bacio, no?*”

Sweet. Sweet as a kiss.

The first Saturday in July, Mike woke before dawn and went downstairs to the store. He lit a lamp and opened the store’s big icebox. The night before, he’d mixed mascarpone and ricotta cheese together with a teaspoon or two of sugar, and sprinkled in the chopped citron he’d gone uptown to find. Mike grated chocolate into the mixture, and added a bit of lemon zest. He kept the filling in a covered bowl at the back of the icebox, to let it cool and thicken overnight.

Now Mike mixed a simple dough: eggs, flour, a splash of Marsala wine. He placed the dough on a marble slab, then rolled the dough out, over and over until he could see the gray veins in the marble through it. Mike cut circles from the dough and wrapped them around steel tubes. He opened the coal cookstove, the one he planned to replace with a new gas stove soon. He blew the embers to life, tossed more coal inside, then put a big saucepan of lard on top to melt.

Mike set each tube in the hot fat, to fry into shells for *cannoli*. Fragile, the first few shells broke apart, and Mike set those aside. For two weeks, he'd give broken pieces sprinkled with powdered sugar free to children who came into his store. These *cannoli* had to be perfect, not a single blister crushed on the delicate shells. Finally Mike set two *cannoli* on a flowered plate rimmed with gold. He garnished one with sweet chocolate and shaved citron, the other with bitter chocolate and a delicate twist of lemon peel. Then he went upstairs to change into his best suit, brushed his hair, put on his hat, and covered the plate of *cannoli* first with a tent of parchment paper, and then with a lace cloth his mother had washed and ironed especially for today. He placed the cannoli in a plain white box and picked up a bottle of *grappa*; he'd spent an entire weekend searching all over Boston for the best of the clear, strong brandy.

Mike had sent Carmine up the street yesterday with a calling card on which Mike requested, in his most formal Italian, an audience with Pietro and Maria Indrisano.

Anna's parents sat in identical chairs made of dark, polished wood, waiting for Mike to enter their parlor. The young man arrived on time, just as the brass clock on the mantel chimed two soft notes. After exchanging greetings and small talk about the

weather, he respectfully offered Pietro the bottle of *grappa*, and Mamma Nonna the *cannoli* as he asked for permission to court their daughter. And Mamma Nonna, after taking the sweet *cannoli* from the plate and handing her husband the one with a touch of bitter lemon, gave her consent, solemnly, but with a hint of surprise in her voice, as if she'd known nothing at all about the matter.

Pane Degli Angeli

First off, for this recipe you have to be absolutely sure that everything you use is clean, that there's no oil or grease at all—or the cake will fall flat. You need the whites from a dozen eggs, that's the backbone of the cake: put them in a bowl with just a little water, some lemon juice—not too much—and a little spoon of vanilla. Oh, and you'll need some cream of tartar, too. Now you whip the mixture pretty well. In the old days we had to do this by hand, with a whisk. That was harder work than you could ever believe, and if you didn't do it just right, the egg whites would lose air and just become a big mess. Now we can use electric mixers, and it's a lot easier.

Before the whites are really whipped, when they start to look foamy, add sugar, a little at a time, beating the eggs some more after each addition. You won't use a cup of sugar for this whole step, and at the end the whites will look glossy, but when you pull the beater out of the bowl the little egg white mountains shouldn't quite stand up, they should still sag a little.

Now comes the delicate part. You need a cup of flour, a little less sugar, and salt—just a bit in the palm of your hand, not too much. Sift the flour and sugar and salt together several times, and make absolutely sure there aren't any lumps of any kind in the mixture. Sift a little of the dry mixture over egg whites, and gently mix them in. Sift a little more, mix a little more, sift more, mix more, always using a light touch. Add all the dry mixture this way, but don't do it too slowly, you don't want to mix the egg whites any more than you absolutely have to. Now, you're almost ready to bake. Put the batter

in an ungreased pan and bake at 350 degrees. The old toothpick trick will tell you when it's done. It usually takes a bit more than half an hour. When it's done, prop up the pan upside-down while the cake is cooling.

To decorate, melt good, dark chocolate and drizzle over the cake, using an espresso spoon. You can crush Jordan almonds with a rolling pin and sprinkle the top of the cake, too, on top of the chocolate, or just on the plain cake. It's good the next day with your morning coffee, too!

Anna Moschella

Chapter Six

Pane Degli Angeli

Angel's Bread

Boston, 1925

When Anna's bleeding didn't come for two months in a row, she went to her mother, who sat at the kitchen table slicing tops of a dozen green bell peppers Mike brought her that morning.

"Ah, that Mike! We'll never starve to death as long as he's around. These are good peppers. I'll stuff some tonight, then cook a batch with sausage for breakfast tomorrow," Mamma Nonna said when Anna walked into the room.

"Mother, something has happened," said Anna. She pulled out a chair and sat down. The smell of raw peppers enhanced the queasiness that tossed in her belly all morning like a small, sour ocean.

Mamma Nonna held a pepper in one hand and a knife in the other for a few moments after Anna told her that she was pregnant. She stared at her daughter, then said, "Mother of God! Finally? Are you sure?"

"Mother, I haven't bled since July. I'm a little over two months along."

"Well, it certainly took long enough. But it's not like you and my son-in-law weren't working hard at it these past few years. It's like they say, '*Lu surci ci dici all'nuci, "Dunami tempo che ti spertusso."*' "

Anna opened her eyes wide, shocked and speechless, then said, “Mother, do you know that means, ‘As the mouse said to the nut, “Give me time and I’ll open you?” ’ ”

“*Si*, Anna,” said Mamma Nonna, “And you two squirrels have been busy storing up a *bambino* for the winter. If you haven’t bled since July, the baby will be born in April. A *primavera, bene!* I’ll start sewing the minute I get these peppers into the oven.”

By the time Anna’s belly had risen to a small firm mound and she began to wear her biggest dresses, Mamma Nonna completed three elaborate baby gowns, lawn overlaid with expensive lace, festooned with silk bows and embroidery in gold and silver thread.

“Look! Fit for the Pope,” she’d crow when she brought another gown up to Anna and Mike’s flat. One night, Anna unwrapped the gowns from their blue tissue-paper wrapping and shook her head at the weight of the glittering cloth with their elaborate cutwork hems, then smiled.

“She’ll have a stroke the first time the Pope makes *piscio* on one of these,” she said to Mike as she sat down and picked up the plain baby shirt she’d been stitching.

“Your mother showed me the christening gown she’s working on,” said Mike. “It’s so long I’m scared the *bambino* might get lost in it. We won’t find him again until he’s thirty.”

Mike and Anna had begun to refer to the baby as “him,” because Mamma Nonna claimed she could tell the sex of the child by the way Anna’s body shaped itself to the budding pregnancy.

“Ladies to the front, gentlemen to the rear,” she told Anna. “Just like on a trolley. When I was pregnant with you, my belly always stuck out like one of those melons your

husband sells. But with the boys, I had a smaller belly and I didn't need a cushion to be comfortable on any chair. By the time I was three months along, I had a natural one, just like you, Anna."

Mike chuckled when Anna fretted about this at dinnertime. "You don't have a cushion back there, Anna. Your mother just thinks she knows everything."

Anna dished up a helping of string beans. "I knew she'd boss me around when I was going to have a baby, but I didn't realize just how much. Today she came and asked me if I craved any particular thing, so she could stock up on it."

"Well, that's nice of her, Anna, don't you think? Unless she wasn't going over to Vesuvius to get whatever it was," said Mike.

"No, I'm sure she wanted to talk to your mother for three hours, like she usually does," said Anna. "But she said the reason she wanted to stock up is because she told me that if I have a craving and touch myself anywhere on my body before I satisfy the craving, the baby will have a birthmark on the same place. My mother told me, 'Anna, I delivered a baby just a few weeks ago and I know that mother loved apples. Well, I know where the hell she was scratching herself when she was hungry for them, because the baby was born with a big apple-shaped spot on his little *culo*.'"

Mike picked up a serving bowl half-full of *gnocchi* and spooned some onto his plate.

"Anna, don't worry. Next week we open the new grocery store, and just before the baby's born, the flat over the store will be ready. And then we only have to hear about someone's *culo* when we invite your mother over to visit."

Six months before their marriage, Mike pulled three muslin pouches of money from underneath his mattress, cash he'd saved since the day he came to America. He used the money to purchase a small brick building in the North End. The building included a store with an upstairs flat, similar to Vesuvius, but in worse repair.

"Anna, she's like a lady with a beautiful face and ugly clothes," he told Anna when he took her to see it. "I have friends who looked it over. The building is sound. All it needs is a little work. And see, in a short while, we can live right over the store. Carmine wants to run Vesuvius, it's time for me to get out from under his feet."

The "little work" turned into nearly a year of tearing out old counters, replastering, replacing the front window glass, and putting up new pine shelving on the walls. Anna's brothers worked with Mike to sweep up dust and dirt in the store and plug up mouseholes in the storeroom. Sometimes Anna and Mamma Nonna took the ferry over from East Boston to the North End so they could climb the ten creaking stairs to the upstairs flat and scrub grimy floors and cupboards.

"My first sight of the North End was that goddammed graveyard, Copp Hill," said Mamma Nonna as she squeezed a rag over a bucket of soapy water, "A million tombstones all crammed into one tiny place. Your father took me through there on our way to go visit some cousin of his. I thought a corpse might reach up and grab me with its bony hand. I think that place brought more bad fortune to my marriage. But here, Anna, you're cleaning out all the bad, the grime and filth."

Mike made sure to go up and down the streets and make friends with the other merchants. "Spread the word," he told them. "We open in August." He already knew

one merchant well, Signore Rossetti, who owned the flower shop across the narrow street. Vincenzo Rossetti was his brother's friend and sometimes joined Mike and Carmine for a card game and a glass or two of wine on Saturday evenings while Mama Moschella gossiped with Fortunata Rossetti, Vincenzo's wife.

Mamma Nonna approved of the way she could see Rossetti's Flower Shop across the street, with its buckets of roses and daisies flanking the entrance. "Your eyes will always see his flowers, so your business will bloom, too." She suggested that the lettering on the storefront window—"Anna and Mike's Fine Groceries"—should be painted in shining gold letters. "Two layers of gold," she insisted. "So you'll have enough gold coming in, always."

"Mother, money isn't really in gold anymore," said Anna. The two women stood behind the new counter Mike had installed the week before and lacquered to a hard shine. The women slowly polished the slick wood with clean rags.

"Anna, do you take me for *un'imbecille*? I know very well that money isn't in gold. But you have to think of gold anyway. Each night before you go to bed, imagine it pouring in the door and piling up. It's true, Anna, it works."

The thought of Mike buried in a big pile of gold coins made Anna smile; she said, "*Grazie*, Mother," as she moved her polishing rag in steady circles.

The day Anna and Mike's Fine Groceries opened. Mike installed a string of bells on the front door, which he'd painted a deep red. He rolled out a striped green and white awning every morning, and fastened it tight to the poles, against the cold, hard breeze that blew hard in the afternoons down the narrow brick alleyways.

“These things make it look cheerful,” he said to Anna, “And the red door, that’s also to make your mother happy. She said red keeps away the *malocchio*, which she’s sure will come my way, because of all the envy in the neighborhood over my prosperity.”

Anna sorted bills and coins to put in the heavy cash register. She pushed her new glasses up on the bridge of her nose, and took time to look at the clearly-defined names on the tins of cookies and crackers across the store. Weeks ago, when Mike taught her how to enter figures in the big blue ledger, she looked up and told him that the letters and numbers all melted together into blots on the page.

“Didn’t you know you needed reading glasses until now, Anna?” he said, gently.

“No, because I had to leave school when I was a little girl. I used to read whatever books I could by the light of the gas lamp in the hall. But my mother always blew it out, saying, ‘This thing could set the house on fire any minute.’ Then we had light bulbs eventually, but my father had us use them only and then.”

“I know, he still makes your mother light kerosene lamps late at night. He says he’s not used to the way electricity just comes through into the bulb. ‘There has to be some sorcery in it,’ I heard him say out loud once when he was in the bathroom, flicking the light on and off.”

Anna laughed; then Mike said, “I know a good eye doctor. He’s not Italian, but he comes into Vesuvius all the time. He says we carry the best *pancetta* in three counties, and he tells me his wife fries up a whole batch of it for his breakfast. His belly sure looks like a side of *pancetta*. He’s a nice man and I know he’ll give me a pair of the best glasses for you.”

Two days later, Anna and Mike traveled by streetcar to an office in Beacon Hill, where she was fitted with a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles. The doctor said she needed glasses to both see and read better.

"I look like an owl," she said when the doctor handed her a mirror. "This round face and now these things, like two windows, one on each side of my nose." But the sight of the world in clear focus amazed Anna. On the ride home, she tugged on Mike's sleeve and said, "Mike, you see those trees in Boston Common? That big dark row of them? They have leaves, Mike. I can see all of them. I can see the lines in the bark."

Mike kissed her on the cheek. "They make you look wise, Anna. Like a scholar." He'd recently helped her get a library card and liked to hear her read to him from the stack of books she checked out every week. For the rest of their lives together, he called her "*mia studiosa*" every time she got a new pair of glasses, from steel-rimmed spectacles to tortoiseshell ovals to the pink cat's-eye glasses, dusted with rhinestones, that she wore in old age.

Every morning at five-thirty a.m., Mike switched off the brass alarm clock on the nightstand next to their bed. Anna and Mike dressed and ate breakfast before leaving the house to catch the streetcar to the ferry dock. Anna insisted on sitting at the very edge of the ferry deck, even though the wind unloosed strands of her black hair from its tight, braided bun. "I can tuck those back again," she told Mike, "The wind and the sea air wake me up better than that black coffee you want so many cups of in the morning."

After a few days of working in the new store, Mike and Anna agreed on a routine: Mike would go over to Faneuil Hall, where produce merchants set up stands every

morning, and choose fruit and vegetables to sell every day. Anna would take a short streetcar ride to Anna and Mike's Fine Groceries and open up. She unlocked the front door, rolled the awning out, and changed the window display once a week.

"You have so many customers already," commented Signore Rossetti one morning when Anna crossed the street to buy a bunch of sunflowers to put in a vase between pyramids of Soapine bars, each label printed with a man scrubbing a round white patch into a smiling whale. "They come here, too. My wife keeps telling me that soon I'll be able to get her a fur coat and diamonds, we're making so much money because of your store."

Anna thought of how many foxes it would take to swaddle Fortunata in fur, then said, "I think it's because of Mike's food. He has big jars of olives in brine behind the counter, in case we run out. We'll probably cook more things when the flat over the store's ready."

"How's that going?" asked Signore Rossetti.

"Oh, it's still a real mess up there. Three bedrooms, though they're small, and a big sitting area. We have one table and chair up there, and the stove works, but we've been too tired to start making it a place to live. We put on a pot of coffee and balance the ledger there, that's all."

"*Si*, everything in its time. *Buon giorno, Signora*," said Signore Rossetti. Anna thanked him and crossed the street. The sunflowers glowed in the morning fog.

Soon, Anna and Mike began to know their customers better, their likes and dislikes, even their personal tribulations. "My children, they don't want to eat anything I

make,” said one woman, whom Anna and Mike privately dubbed “*L’Avara*,” the miser, because she always looked deep into her black leather coin purse and sighed when the cash register showed the total sale. “They want the sweetest fruit, cookies, all the things I can’t afford. One day we’ll be on the street with the ragpickers if they keep asking.” Anna noticed that *L’Avara* wore a diamond ring and gold bracelets on her hand when she gave her the money. *L’Avara* counted her change twice before snapping the leather purse shut with a tight click.

One customer in particular caught Anna’s eye, a tall, thin man who wore fine gray suits. “He’s not a merchant,” she thought. The only men she had ever seen wear a suit like that was Signore Tosca, the undertaker in East Boston, or men who worked behind the brass grilles in the bank where she and Mike deposited money every Friday.

The man came in every day, usually after noon. He’d buy small things—a few crackers, a pear, a wedge of cheese. He smiled at Anna as she wrapped his purchases in paper and tied them with string, and always thanked her politely.

“He has a gold pocketwatch,” she told Mike. “Sometimes he takes it out to check the time before he leaves the store.”

“Obviously, he has money. We’ll find out what he does, Anna. Everyone tells us their business here.”

One morning, Anna came out of the storeroom when she heard the bells on the door give their brisk chime. The tall man walked over to the counter and said, “*Buon giorno*, Signora. May I set up an account in your fine store, *per piacere*? You’ll do that

for an honest Italian, won't you, with this business of yours that seems to be making such good *soldi*?"

He smiled and spoke in a soft voice, like a father talking to a child. Mike said, "Certainly. We have many people on credit right now." He pulled out a smaller version of the accounting ledger and opened it on the counter. "Please, your name?"

"Signore Novelli," said the man. He watched as Mike entered his name in the ledger, then said, "I'll take two pounds of olives, some of that fine Romano, and two cartons of roasted peppers." Mike and Anna wrapped the purchases, and Anna entered the sale into the credit ledger. The man thanked them and left.

"He has beautiful manners," Anna thought. "His mother must have taught him well."

The next morning, Anna felt sick to her stomach on the ferry ride, so much that Mike delayed his morning trip to Faneuil Hall. There was a cot in the upstairs flat, next to a pile of flour sacks, and Mike helped her onto it. He settled two gray blankets over her. "I'm sorry if these are scratchy," he said. Anna hated the feeling of wool next to her skin. "I'll start up the stove and get some water on for tea. Maybe it's true what we've been thinking, Anna."

"It's too early to tell, Mike. My mother always says to wait two months, even more," said Anna. The tiredness that lived with her every day made her close her eyes and fall asleep as Mike put water in the kettle and lit the stove. He went downstairs and opened up the shop door. The glass square at the top showed a little dirt, and Mike wiped at it with a cloth. Then he saw Signore Rossetti on his way across the street.

“I’ve been out of sugar for three days,” he told Mike. “Fortunata puts a mountain of it in her coffee. She tells me, ‘You go to Anna and Mike’s and get that good granulated sugar. That stuff in loaves is like chopping up a brick.’ And then I forget it, and she makes the windows shake with her yelling. ‘My coffee’s sour as a lemon, Vincenzo, and it’s your fault!’”

Mike chuckled as he measured sugar into a small cloth sack. Signore Rossetti counted out coins, then said, “That Fortunata. She’s going to get me in trouble if she doesn’t learn to shut up. You know the tall fellow, Signore Novelli? He comes into the store once in awhile, gets a rose out of the front display, and tears the stem short so he can put the flower in the buttonhole of his suit. Well, my wife decided she was sick of him doing that. One day she bellowed at him that she wasn’t giving away charity. I’m afraid with her big mouth, I’m going to end up fertilizing my own flowers one of these days.”

“You mean he takes without paying?” said Mike.

“*Si, Miguel*. I have to let him. He’s not the owner of this neighborhood the way you and I own our businesses, but there are ways in which you have to let him own you, *capisce*? I’d rather miss a flower or two than show him my displeasure.”

Signore Rossetti left just as Anna came down the stairs, sleepy-eyed, saying, “Mike, *caro*, the kettle’s boiled over.” Mike took Anna by the hand and sat her down on a stool behind the counter.

“Anna, you know that man, the one you say is always nice to you, Signore Novelli?”

He thought of the times when Signore Novelli had chatted with Anna about the weather or how lucky she and her husband were to enjoy such good business. “Anna, I found out just now, he’s someone you have to be careful of. He’s a man I have to wait on myself. When he comes in the store, you go put a few things on the back shelf. If he talks to you, tell him just a minute, please, my husband will get you whatever you need. And let me take care of his account, too. Do you understand, Anna?”

“What’s the matter with him, Mike?” she asked.

“He...has a bad temper, Anna, that’s all. He hasn’t shown it yet, but I don’t want you to have to deal with it. You’ve had to hear so many crabby customers complain about their sufferings, and I don’t want you to have to deal with one more.”

Anna thought about the women who came in to tell her about the corns on their feet or their varicose veins, made worse by walking to shops all day, and agreed to let him wait on Signore Novelli. She went back upstairs and sat on the cot while Mike poured hot water into a chipped brown teapot. Eventually the tea and a small slice of bread leveled the nausea and she went downstairs to fill a jar with hard bright candies. She never spoke to Signore Novelli again, though he came in often.

Despite Mamma Nonna’s protests, Anna continued to ride the ferry with her husband even after she knew for certain that a baby was on its way. “I’m a wife now, Mother, and I don’t want Mike to handle the store all by himself. The fresh air on the ferry ride’s good for the baby. I can take a nap whenever I need to. Mike’s bought a feather comforter for the cot upstairs, to keep me warm when I rest.” Despite her

mother's sour mutterings in Italian, Anna bade her goodbye every morning and walked out the front door with Mike.

The truth was, Anna didn't relish the idea of hanging around the Barnes Avenue house all day.

"She talks about the baby as if it's the Christ Child coming to earth again," she told Mike one morning when he arrived with big bags of fruit from the Faneuil Hall market. "She's already planning the christening feast. I guess she wants to rig up some kind of tent in the backyard and put tables under it so we can invite every relative from here to New York."

"As long as she buys everything from here or Vesuvius, that'll be good for us, too, Anna," said Mike. He put on a white apron and raised little puffs of dust as he briskly swept the floorboards.

By late October, the tiredness and nausea left, and Anna felt full of energy. She worried that her ever-more-obvious pregnancy might shock some of the customers, but Anna received nothing but congratulations, demands for updates on her health, and advice from the women who frequented the store. Even *L' Avara* shared her wisdom.

"Make sure when the baby's born that you swaddle his legs good and straight," she told Anna. "That way he'll have strong legs, not bowlegged like my Paolo. He's got legs so bent you could drive a horse cart between them."

The weather grew colder week by week and Anna stopped sitting on the deck ferry. They kept the upstairs stove going all day now, for the times when Mike urged her to lie down. One evening, they stayed a bit late, enjoying the warmth of the stove before

venturing out into the chill. Anna bit into a slice of bread Mike had toasted for her and covered with butter. Mike wrote in the store ledger, crossing out numbers and adding in more. He had the smaller credit ledger on the floor by his feet.

“I want to make loaves of *pannetone* each week, to sell here,” he told Anna. “It always sold great at the old store, especially over the holidays. But my mother wants me to bake the same amount for Vesuvius. It’s okay, it’s just that I don’t want to skimp on ingredients, and I wouldn’t think of charging my own mother and brother for them. And I want to get some oranges, too. A bunch of them in the store window, maybe with a bright cloth in the background, would draw the customers in.”

“You could ask some of the people to pay up their credit accounts, Mike,” Anna said.

“I did. Almost everyone’s come in to settle,” he told her. When he rose to pour himself another cup of coffee from the speckled blue pot, Anna picked the credit ledger up on the floor to see if he’d missed anything.

“Mike,” she said. “What is this? This man, Signore Novelli, the one you told me never to talk to. He’s in here four, five times a week, sometimes more. His account is six pages long! And all these things—the most expensive things we carry. He took three rounds of those dry figs, the ones you send to Italy for. He looks like a rich man, why hasn’t he paid us a penny, ever?” She sat up on the cot.

“It’s for a good reason, Anna. I’ve been thinking of a way to ask him. These people—the type of person he is, he has to be asked a certain way. I don’t want him to never come back here.”

“Mike, you have to ask him. He’s robbing us. If you had half the money he owes you, you wouldn’t have to be trying to figure out how to buy ingredients for *pannetone*. You told me when we were looking through the Sears Catalog for a buggy that we had to get the less expensive one. We could have the better one if he paid up, the kind with netting you pull down so the baby can sleep outside in the afternoon.”

Mike practiced his speech to Signore Novelli that night at Anna’s insistence, using her as a stand-in for the tall man.

“Signore, you know how much we enjoy your company here at the store. You select such fine things. You are a man with good taste and obviously enjoy all that you buy. It is getting on to the holidays now and I would like to carry some special things here I am sure would please you. And my wife here, she is carrying a child and we must get things ready for the new one. So, *per piacere*, Signore, your credit is good here always at our store, but we respectfully ask that you pay your bill as soon as possible.” He made his speech with his head a bit bowed and in his most gentle voice.

“Mike, I’m sure it was just a mistake anyway. He looks like he has a lot more on his mind than settling his bill with us,” Anna said, “I’ll bet he pays all he owes and more if you ask him like that.”

Signore Novelli walked in the next afternoon; slipping silently over the store’s threshold. He set a bottle of *grappa* on the counter, but instead of entering the purchase into the credit ledger, Mike gave his well-rehearsed speech, with Anna standing next to him. He felt big beads of sweat gather on his forehead as he spoke.

The tall man stood with his hands on the *grappa*. He stared directly at Mike with eyes black as the ink marks in the ledger. Then he smiled, showing his straight teeth.

“Why of course, Signore Moschella. How could I have been so terribly forgetful? It must be my age, working on me already. I’ll take care of it first thing tomorrow morning. If you’ll beg me the indulgence of including this good *grappa* on my account, I’ll drink tonight to your health and that of your lovely wife and the child yet to come.”

“*Grazie*, Signore. And of course I’ll include the *grappa* with the total you owe,” said Mike. He wrote slowly in the ledger as the man strode out. Anna put her arms around her husband. Perspiration soaked the back of his shirt. *I guess he must be more afraid of speaking up than I knew*, she thought.

Mike and Anna closed the store fifteen minutes early. Happy to know he would have extra money soon, Mike stopped at the confectioner’s for two pounds of good imported chocolates. He walked into Signore Rossetti’s for chrysanthemums, one bunch for Mamma Nonna and one for Anna. “We’ll order that buggy from Sears, too,” he told Anna on the ferry ride home, his arms full of radiant white flowers. “You can have the one you want.”

Mamma Nonna delighted with the flowers invited Anna and Mike to eat supper downstairs. “See, I’ve been baking all day. Practicing for the baptism dinner.”

“That’s months away, Mother,” said Anna. She helped her mother cut lasagne into squares.

“It doesn’t matter. This old stove’s like a half-dead dragon, with a big belly that won’t heat up. I haven’t made *pane degli angeli* in it for years. And we need lots of that for the christening meal.”

Four loaves of *pane degli angeli* stood on the sideboard, tall cakes made with simple ingredients: white flour, sugar, vanilla, egg whites whipped to a snowy froth. Two cakes were drizzled with thin chocolate ribbons; two had rough crowns of crushed Jordan almonds. They ate *pane degli angeli* for dessert; Mike opened one of the chocolate boxes, too. When Anna reached across the table for a third piece of chocolate. Mamma Nonna glared at her.

“You eat enough of that and my grandchild’s going to look like a gypsy,” she said.

Anna bit into the chocolate anyway. “But it’s one of my cravings, Mother.” She scratched her nose.

Mike finished a slice of cake. “Anna ate a lot of that fried escarole tonight, Mamma Nonna. Do you think we’ll have a *bambino verde* in April?” Mamma Nonna gestured as if to smack Mike, but she smiled all the same.

The next morning, Mamma Nonna met Anna and Mike on their way out the door. “Take this,” she said, handing Anna *pane degli angeli* wrapped in a white cloth. “Sell it in your store or whatever you like. It doesn’t keep, and Pietro won’t eat it. Says the sweetness rots his teeth. Not like he has many left to rot.”

Anna carried the cake in the big straw bag she used to carry things for the store. She kissed Mike goodbye at the dock and he walked off towards Faneuil Hall,

shouldering the muslin sack he used for produce. After the streetcar ride, Anna walked to the store and unlocked it. She went upstairs for a clean plate, then unwrapped the *pane degli angeli* and cut it into wedges with Mike's thinnest serrated knife. "Ten cents a slice might be good," she thought. "Five cents for the kids coming in from school in the afternoon." She reached up to push back a stray hair and smeared crumbs from the *pane degli angeli* onto her glasses. Sighing, she picked up a rag to clean her hands. She slipped her glasses off and polished the lenses on her skirt. *These things are more trouble than they're worth half the time*, she thought.

A knock at the door made her look up, but the figure at its small glass window was blurred. "I've locked Mike out again," she thought. Once when he was late getting back from Faneuil Hall, she went upstairs to take what she thought was going to be a short rest on the cot. She ended up falling asleep for an hour and Mike, who'd forgotten his own keys, had to jimmy the storeroom window open like a burglar.

Anna slipped her glasses on as she started to walk out from behind the counter, but stopped, frozen in her tracks when she saw that the man at the door wasn't Mike, and he was rapping on the door's glass window not with his fist, but with the butt of a small black gun.

"Mother of God, I'm going to be robbed," she thought. The man had already thrown his body against the door, breaking the old lock. He shoved the gun into a holster strapped to his shoulder, underneath his jacket. Anna tried to think of what her husband told her to do if they were robbed: *don't scream, don't run, just open the till and give them everything. Don't do anything foolish, they just want money.*

The man strode to the counter. He put one hand on his hip, keeping his coarse woolen jacket open enough to show the gun, dark and heavy in its holster. The man wore a white shirt, brown pants, a cap on his head. Young enough to be one of Anna's brothers, but his face was set in grim, angry lines.

"Signora Moschella?" he asked, his voice level and cold.

Anna managed a faint, "*Si, signore.*" She felt the baby inside her give three hard thumps.

The man continued in the same level voice. "Your husband's Mike Moschella. He owns this here store. We know your husband gets off the ferry with you every morning and goes to Faneuil Hall to get produce. He crosses the Watertown Bridge on foot to get there. Every day at seven o'clock in the morning he does this. And if you ever tell my boss to pay up on his bill, your husband ain't crossing that bridge no more."

He stared at Anna, then said, louder, "*Capisce*, you stupid bitch? That baby of yours, he won't have no fuckin' father." The man reached a finger over the counter and poked Anna hard in the belly. She felt the sharp curve of his fingernail stab her through the front of her dress. Hot liquid began to trickle down her legs.

My water just broke, she thought, but she managed out a soft, shaking, "*Si. Capisce, Signore.*"

"*Bene,*" said the man. He closed his jacket and grabbed three slices of *pane degli angeli*, stuffing one in his mouth before he slammed the shop door behind him. The bells above the doorway dropped to the ground with a thin metallic clang.

Anna's legs gave way and she lowered herself to the ground behind the counter.

Parched inside from fear, she couldn't cry. The baby moved, over and over. Anna smelled a sharp odor and realized her skirt wasn't wet with birth fluid; it clung to her legs sodden and cold, soaked with her own urine. She picked herself up and ran to the door, keys shaking as she managed to push the lock back in place and secure it; she ran back to the counter and hid behind it. Her breath came in short, shallow rasps.

A few minutes later, the sound of the opening door made her scream and stand straight up like a jack-in-the box from behind the counter. Mike stood at the threshold, one hand clutching a full muslin sack.

"Anna, my God, what's wrong?" he said. She walked from behind the counter; when Mike caught full sight of his wife, wet dress clinging to her legs, hair disarrayed, face a deadly white, he dropped the muslin sack onto the sidewalk. Apples rolled out of it, down the street and into the gutter.

"I must have slept," Anna thought; she had opened her eyes to find herself lying on the upstairs cot. She sat up and realized that she wasn't wearing much under the down comforter. Her dress and undergarments were draped over the backs of two chairs and dripped water on the floor. Fortunata Rossetti stood at the stove, stirring something in a small pot. She glanced over at her.

"No, Anna, you just lie there like *una regina*, you've had a shock. Mike says you fell down like a bag of flour, right onto the floor. I'm making some broth for you.

Vincenzo closed up his shop for the afternoon and he's gone on the ferry to East Boston, to fetch your mother. Mike's downstairs, waiting for them."

"Could you please go get him, Fortunata? And would you hand me my glasses, too?"

Fortunata rested her spoon on a saucer and gave Anna her glasses, which were on the table. The stairs shook as Fortunata walked down, yelling, "Hey, Mike, your little dreamer just woke up! Come feed her some broth while I wait for Mamma Nonna."

Mike walked into the flat. He knelt down on the cot next to Anna and put his arms around her, feather comforter and all. Anna began to cry.

"Oh, Mike, what are we going to do? You've put every penny you have into this store. But we can't keep working here. We can't live here. That man, he would have killed me, even with the baby. I know it."

"Shush, Anna," said Mike. He touched her hair, stroked away the path of tears on her cheeks. "It's going to be all right. Signore Rossetti, he told me he had the same problem, a year ago. The man came, made his threats, and went away. And Signore Novelli, nowadays he just takes a flower or two from their shop, every now and then. He never comes inside, he doesn't bother anybody. His concerns are with different men, men with much more money than we have. He just wants us to show him we have *rispetto* for him, Anna. We can't let anyone scare us to the point where we run away. That's what Signore Rossetti says, and he's been on this street for years."

“But why didn’t you tell me, Mike? Did you have these kind of people come to you over at Vesuvius? I’ve never even heard my father talk about men like Signore Novelli, and he’s had his butcher shop since before I was born.”

“Anna, no, these kind of men, they were more in places like New York before now. Signore Rossetti said it’s only been in the last couple of years that they’ve been so serious about paying their special visits, and more on this side of Boston than where we live. And some businesses they leave alone. There was no way to tell what was coming.”

Before Anna could reply, she heard her mother slam the downstairs door and shout, “*Santo pazienza*, those *animales* threatening my daughter and her husband. And her with my grandchild inside her! If I ever see that *bastardo* on the street, I’ll kick his backside from here to Faneuil Hall! I will!” Mamma Nonna bellowed all the way up the stairs and into the flat. She pulled off her coat; Anna saw that her mother wore a flowered housedress and an apron, as if she’d rushed right from her kitchen.

“Anna, you look all right. Let me listen to the baby.” Mamma Nonna pulled the comforter away from Anna’s belly. She pressed her ear her daughter’s stomach, her cheek cold and dry.

“I hear him, jumping around like a rabbit. See, Anna, here’s a clean dress, some stockings. You drink down some of that good broth, and then we’ll get you dressed. We’ll lock this place up, take the ferry home for the day.” Mamma Nonna pulled clothing from a canvas bag as she talked.

“She grabbed a summer dress and winter stockings, and that ugly gray wool underwear she knitted for me that I don’t ever put on,” thought Anna. Mike handed her a cup of broth; when Anna finished it, her mother and Mike went downstairs as Anna dressed.

Anna sat between Mamma Nonna and Mike on the ferry ride back to East Boston; she wore Mike’s heavy gray coat. When they reached Barnes Avenue, Mamma Nonna said, “Anna, you’re to get in bed and rest there. No work for a week, at least. We don’t know if that *bastardo* will come back yet. I’ve already told Ruggerio that he can go to the store with Mike.”

“But Jerry’s like a little child in his mind, Mother, and he’s so gentle,” said Anna, using Ruggerio’s nickname.

“I know. He’s David trapped in Goliath’s body, though, and nobody would think twice about threatening Mike with Jerry around. And Jerry works hard, he learns fast.”

Mike and Anna excused themselves from eating dinner with the rest of the family and climbed the stairs to their flat. “It’s like ice in here,” said Anna. She turned up the radiator, then went into the bedroom and took a blue flannel nightgown from the dresser. As she slipped off the itchy woolen underwear, she looked down at her belly and saw the tiny crescent moon of a bruise, left when the man with the gun poked her with his sharp fingernail.

“I wonder if the baby’s going to have a little birthmark on his stomach,” she thought. “Sometimes my mother’s right about things.” If she closed her eyes, she could still see the man’s face, and wondered if she’d see it in nightmares tonight.

She buttoned her nightgown and slid between the cold sheets. Mike called out to her from the kitchen. “I’ll heat up just a little bit of this lentil soup, Anna. I don’t know about you, but that guy drove all my hunger away.”

“Mike, would you please come here, just for a minute?”

Mike walked into the bedroom. Anna smiled to see that he wore her pink gingham apron, the one with green roosters embroidered on the pockets. She smiled. “That looks better on you than it does on me,” she said.

“Most of mine seem to be in the laundry basket. Just don’t tell Mamma Nonna I’ve got this on. She’ll sew me a dozen, just to be funny.”

Anna sat up. “Mike, you didn’t answer my question,” she said.

“What question, *cara*?”

“Why didn’t you tell me about Signore Novelli?”

Mike looked down at the floor. He wiped his hands slowly on the apron.

“Anna, I don’t know. I don’t know why. Maybe I thought it was only my own business. As the man of the house, you know? I guess I wanted to maybe keep you from it somehow, too. Because I didn’t want to scare you, Anna.”

Anna looked at her husband; the silence felt thick, like something she could take a knife and cut through. Finally she said, “Mike, that’s the problem, don’t you see? You didn’t tell so I wouldn’t be afraid. And yet, see how it turned out.”

Mike took off the apron and sat down next to her on the bed. "Anna, I'm sorry. Anna, I can't tell you anything more than that, how sorry I am."

"Yes, you can," she said. "You can promise me something. For as long as we live, you can never keep things from me again. Even if you think it's too little for me to know, even if you think it might scare me. Because my father lies to my mother all the time, and I know it. He says he's going off to play cards with his friends, and everyone gossips that he's out for the night, to be with women. My mother's talked about it for years. And it hurts her, Mike. I don't know what hurts her more, the other women or the lies he tells."

"Anna, do you think I would ever do what your father does? Sneaking around, like some rat in the wall of a house?"

"But that's how these things start, don't you see? A little lie here and there, you don't think it will hurt anyone, but they add up. More and more lies, like pins you stick into a pincushion, until one day you can't see the pincushion anymore. And I don't want to be married like that."

Mike glanced at Anna, and noticed she hadn't taken her hair out of its disheveled braid. "Anna, scoot up," he said.

He pulled the black ribbon from the end of the braid, undid it, and started combing the tangles out with his fingers. He was down to the last knot when he spoke again.

"Anna, you know my father died in Italy, and I don't remember him much. But I do have one picture of him in my mind, a pretty clear one. I saw him from the window of

our house, way off in the distance, coming home from the fields. And as he got closer, my mother let me run out to him. He had this big handful of cornflowers for her. He must have picked them on the way home. They were so blue, and I said, '*Papa, i fiori, come il cielo.*' He told me he'd reached up and picked little pieces out of the blue sky for my mother. Then he took my hand and we walked along together. I asked him why he was giving flowers from the sky to her and he said, 'Because, *Miguelino*, you have to take care of the people you love, even if you have to climb all the way to heaven.' And I guess maybe I took him at his word all my life, and sometimes too much." Mike gathered Anna's hair up and tied it back with the ribbon in a lopsided bow. She turned and faced him.

"I won't keep things from you again, Anna. I promise," he said

"*Grazie*, Mike. It means something to me."

"I know, Anna. And now what I think we should do is this: I'll heat up that soup, and then we need to go to bed. It's been about the longest day of both our lives, don't you think?" Anna nodded; he kissed her on the forehead and settled the blankets over her as she lay down on her side. Then he walked back into the kitchen and began to whistle a soft, almost imperceptible tune.

Anna's brother Jerry excitedly went to Faneuil Hall with Mike every morning after that. They opened up the store late, but Mike's customers understood.

"Why do we go a different way to Faneuil Hall and back every morning? Every morning? Every morning, Mike?" asked Jerry. The lingering result of his scarlet fever

as a child, aside from the fact that he seemed much younger than age sixteen, was a tendency to repeat the ends of his sentences.

“Because I like to be different all the time, Jerry,” said Mike. He kept a watchful eye out for strangers. He carried a pocketknife now, too, though he knew it probably wouldn’t be much protection. Carmine wouldn’t let him take a meat cleaver from his kitchen at Vesuvius Grocery Store.

“I can just see that thing slipping out of your produce sack and cutting off your *pene*, Mike. Then, no more nieces and nephews for me.”

By the time Anna insisted on going back to work with Mike, Jerry had learned how to polish the store’s wooden countertops, make a pyramid of cans in the display window, and weigh out candies for the schoolchildren who came in. “They’re good, they’re good, they’re good,” he’d say to them.

“I really think well of your brother,” said Mike to Anna one afternoon when they sent Jerry off with his pay, which he liked to spend on pulp magazines of detective stories. He had a stack of them in the upstairs flat, and sometimes described a story or two enthusiastically to Mike and Anna, as if the criminals and police in the tales were real. “But the way he repeats himself drives me a little crazy. He’s *come una pappagello*.”

“He is a bit like a parrot,” said Anna, “But he likes working here. He says he gives some of his money to Mamma Nonna, and he likes all those coins jingling in his pocket.”

Jerry had been told to let Mike and Anna know if he saw a tall, thin man in a dark suit enter the store, and to tell them quietly, not shout it out. Signore Novelli hadn't shown up since the other man had threatened Anna. It wasn't until Anna had grown full in the belly, at the end of February, when Jerry stood behind her as she helped Mike stack a few empty cartons, their backs to the door.

"Anna, he's here. He's here. He's here," Jerry whispered. She whipped around to see Signore Novelli admiring her window display of brightly printed calendars, all at half price. He smiled at her, then strode into the store and told her he wanted three calendars. He pointed out which ones and Jerry took them to the counter, where Mike entered them into the credit ledger. Signore Novelli made infrequent visits from then on and Mike always kept a careful tally of his purchases.

"Why do you keep doing that if he's never going to pay?" Anna asked Mike.

"I don't know. Maybe one day he'll straighten out. Then I can tell him to go to hell, I guess, without getting thrown off the Watertown Bridge some morning."

Anna rubbed the small of her back and watched Jerry climb the stairs to the flat. There was no question of ever turning the upstairs rooms into a real home, despite its space and all the work they'd done. "Can't we just fix it up and sleep here sometimes?" she asked Mike. "I doubt anyone would bother us now that we've shown our respect to Signore Novelli, and we'd be out from under my mother's thumb."

"I'd be too afraid, Anna, and I think you would be, too," said Mike. "I'd never be able to sleep for fear of one of Signore Novelli's men making an unexpected visit, and not for some figs. At least with our flat at your mother's, we have all your brothers and

your father there if someone shows up. I don't think the danger really passes, Anna, ever."

So the flat became a place where Anna and Mike balanced the accounts, and Jerry's detective magazines soon filled a long shelf near the stove. He liked to lie down on the cot and read them as his sister and her husband closed the store for the day, his big hands turning the thick, coarse pages.

Tea and Broken Cakes

Nonni has this ready for me on rainy days when I come home from school. It's not really a recipe, but it's something I eat a lot. Nonni buys broken cookies half-off at the bakery and brings them home in a big white paper bag; that's the "broken cakes" part. Then she makes tea in her teapot. It's gray-blue and shiny, and she puts a thing like two potholders over it to keep it warm. When she gets out the tea, she sometimes says, "Let's pour some hot water over the old bag." Mom laughs whenever she says that.

I get a whole plateful of broken cakes, and a cup with more milk in it than tea. Nonni says I have to be more grownup to have a full cup of tea for myself.

Joanie McMillan

Chapter Seven

Dress-Up

Rain swept over the San Fernando Valley in winter, long sheets of rain from a dense gray sky. The streets flooded; Haskell Avenue turned into a small lake, white foam churning at its black edges. At the base of the Sepulveda Dam, grassland lay drenched in shallow, shiny puddles. Household rules grew slack on those days. My brother David set up Legos in his room, elaborate GI Joe warscapes. Sometimes I'd join him, but eventually I grew bored with building the same gas station over and over out of white and red Lego blocks. David didn't seem to care whether I was in his room or not, anyway.

In the afternoons, my mother let Maryanne and me play in her bedroom. It was decidedly her room, even though my father slept on the left side of the bed. His clothing occupied a meager quarter of their spacious closet; the rest held my mother's dresses and coats, rows of shoes, and hatboxes on a top shelf. Usually off-limits, on rainy days the bedroom turned into an oasis of color and spangles, for we were allowed to ransack certain drawers in her blond maple dresser.

One drawer was entirely crammed with letters and cards, some dating so far back that the handwriting looped, thin and webby, over paper gone translucent with age. Another held the dress Mom wore when she met Dad; she never unfolded the wool sheath—a sullen, muddy brown—from its plastic bag. Behind the dress, wrapped in blue tissue, her pennant from Immaculate Heart College. Mom finished two years there, then

left to marry my father. The pennant was purple, dark as a bruise, and creased, its white letters cracked.

Another drawer held a bag of gloves in every length, color, and size. I especially liked trying on two different colors of opera gloves, dusty rose on one arm, emerald green on the other. Mom let us open her jewelry box and play with costume jewelry if we were very careful; she had Austrian crystal necklaces, the iridescent beads faceted like rosary beads, a stylized zebra pin made from ribbons of sterling silver and black enamel, an Emmons sunburst brooch paved with rhinestones. We gathered these in printed cotton handkerchiefs and gauze scarves, pretending to be old women from the mountains, coming down into the village square to sell our treasures.

One day, when it had rained for two days without letup, my sisters and I spent almost an hour in Mom's room. She had porcelain Dresden figures on her dresser, a ballerina, and a woman with a Marie Antoinette hairstyle, perpetually looking at herself in a mirror. Each figure had a ruffled porcelain skirt which looked exactly like cloth, and I surreptitiously picked at the stiff, fragile layers. Then I looked underneath the satin skirt of Mom's saint statue, the Infant of Prague. He looked just like a little king, with a crown and a heavy yellow-and-white robe trimmed with brocade. The Infant of Prague wasn't naked underneath; he wore a painted white gown.

I heard my sister Maryanne say, "Hey, look at all this." She had opened a drawer which my mother generally kept locked.

"Wow!" I said as my sister took out length after length of scarves, like a magician in a TV show.

“Look at all this underwear!” said my sister. She held up a black bra, each cup a deep, delicate scoop of lace. I reached my hand into the drawer’s mass of color and softness, and drew out gossamer crimson panties, a sheer teal slip. My sister pulled out more bras: hot flamingo, watered silk in lavender and cream. We both started laughing; I put one of the bras on over my clothes. It stuck out like two turquoise hills on my flat chest.

“Whose are these, anyway?” I asked my sister as we draped scarves over our heads, blew on them to make them float up. I didn’t think they were Mom’s; they seemed too small. Mom wore big white bras and cotton panties so huge that we called them “parachutes.” Sometimes we held them over our heads and jumped off the laundry-folding counter, shouting “Look out below!”

I didn’t think they were my grandmother’s things, either, even though she wore elaborate, brightly patterned underclothes which we saw every time we went to a department store changing room with her. One time, when my mother, grandmother, two sisters, and me were all crowded into one big mirrored dressing room, I heard my mother say, “Oh, for God’s sake, Ma. I can’t believe you wear those things at your age.”

There stood my grandmother, in a leopard-skin print slip with a matching bra underneath. She had the slip pulled up a little as she tugged at her girdle, which reined in her stout figure

“Well, I happen to like these things, Kathleen,” she replied. I noticed that her girdle was a leopard print also.

Just as I mused that there wasn't any reason for my grandmother to have underwear at my mother's house, I heard Mom yell out, "God damn it!" as she barged into the room, my grandmother following her.

"Kathleen, they had no idea what those were all about," said my grandmother as Mom yanked the bra off me.

"Well, they sure as hell know now," said Mom. "You kids leave this alone, you hear? Jesus, I can't have a goddamned thing to myself. I told you girls what you can play with and what you can't."

Mom piled underwear in the center of the bed and my grandmother helped her fold them. I brought Nonni something I'd found in the drawer with the letters; she chuckled as she scrutinized it. "Is that you, Nonni?" I asked her.

The girl in the sepia picture looked like a china doll version of Nonni, with a smooth, unwrinkled complexion and bobbed hair. She wore knickers and a pale jacket.

"Oh, yes, that's me, honey. I look like a golf caddy, but it was just the style back then."

My mother smiled in spite of her anger. Then she said, "Oh, I've got something in the top drawer there, Ma. Take it out. It's yours, anyway."

"I can't believe you still have this," said my grandmother. She'd pulled a flat square box from the drawer. "This is from when I was not quite older than you, Maryanne."

Nonni opened the compact; it held miniature pans of makeup: waxy rose lip color, cake mascara, grayed with age, and a square covered with a piece of white velvet embroidered with a swan.

“What’s that?” I asked, pointing at the velvet.

“It’s rice powder,” said my grandmother “That’s what made my face so pale in the photograph. This is from—what?—the 20s.” She dabbed a little on my nose and on my sister’s hand.

“That smells old,” said my sister. She sat on the bed, watching my mother put the underwear back in the drawer. My grandmother settled into the red armchair by the bed.

“God, you’d wonder why so many people would come into a gift store when it’s raining like this,” she said. “I never sat down once today. Anyway, that’s a compact I had as a young woman. A birthday gift when I turned twenty. And I gave it to your mom when she was sixteen. We didn’t have a lot of money to get makeup, and she wanted some of her own.”

My mother finished folding the bright underwear, and meticulously stacked it in her dresser drawer. I climbed into my grandmother’s lap and she started stroking my hair. Nonni always smelled of Hawaiian White Ginger, a fragrance she sold for Avon. My sister, bored with dress-up, took off jangly bracelets and handed them to my mother. Mom put them in her jewelry box, then picked up a couple of bras from the floor and put them in the drawer also.

“He sure got me some beautiful things,” she said to my grandmother.

“Oh, yes, he didn’t spare a penny on you, Kathleen. It was sure nice of him, taking you to all those stores, all over Beverly Hills, just to buy you underwear.”

“I guess you could say that was nice of him,” said my mother. She picked up a pile of towels and facecloths from the floor.

“Who are you talking about?” asked my sister. She opened the bottles of perfume on my mother’s vanity table, one after another, sniffing them and spritzing a little on her wrists.

“Your grandfather, of course. My dad,” said my mother as she folded towels.

“Your grandfather didn’t see your mom for many years,” said my grandmother. “I almost gave up on him ever being in touch with her again! Then, when she turned sixteen, we moved out here. Your grandfather asked to see Kathleen again. His secretary always called to arrange the visits. We lived in Coldwater Canyon, with all the cats.”

I heard that story many times, how my grandmother and mother drove all the way to California by themselves, and how small the house was in Coldwater Canyon. My grandmother fed every feral cat in the neighborhood until there were dozens at her doorstep every morning.

“I had to stop feeding them,” she said. “It was getting out of hand.”

My grandfather John, well-established in his career as a bit actor and a stunt man in Hollywood, saw my mother again for the first time in fourteen years shortly after their move to Coldwater Canyon. My mother was well on her way to developing what she called, with rueful pride, her “Sophia Loren” figure: full breasts, wide hips.

“John started asking to let her come over on weekends,” said my grandmother. I lay with my head pressed to her chest; her voice resonated in my ear.

My mother stayed uncharacteristically quiet as my grandmother described the overnights.

“It started when you were what—sixteen?—and you got to go over there almost until the time you got married!” she smiled. “His secretary told me he took you everywhere—Saks, I Magnin, Bullocks Wilshire. You used to show me all the pretty things in those beautiful bags. That’s when you asked me for the compact. You said your grandfather told you he wanted you to look like a lady. I thought that was so funny! I didn’t have enough money right then to get you some makeup, so I gave you that old compact of mine.”

I didn’t like all the talk about my grandfather. We called him “Grandpa-in-Hollywood,” to distinguish him from our dad’s father, whom we called “Grandpa-in-Mississippi.” “Grandpa-in-Hollywood” lived in a white house, far up on a hill, and his living room had strange paintings in it: a bullfighter sticking a bull with a sword, dead-looking flowers in a lime-green vase. When he came to see us, his visits were coordinated with times when my grandmother was at work.

“I don’t want to hurt Nonni’s feelings, honey,” my mother told me once when I asked her why my grandmother wasn’t eating with us one night; my grandfather sat at the table with us.

Nobody reacted to this, least of all my grandfather, who rarely talked, although he stared at people so much that it unnerved me. He was tall, broad-shouldered, with big hands, dark brown eyes, and black hair he combed smoothly into shiny waves.

My grandmother didn't seem to hate my grandfather; at least I thought that. On one of the many hot summer nights when nobody could sleep, my mother let me run over to Nonni's house, since her lights were on and her front door was open.

"Look, it's your grandfather on television!" she said when I walked in. I watched in amazement as a tiny silver image of my grandfather, in a 1940s trench coat and fedora, walked across the screen.

"It's one of those gangster movies he's always in," she said as I went straight for the cupboard where she kept cookies. I did know that my grandfather had been a dancing and singing gangster in the movie *Guys and Dolls*, but I was embarrassed every time it showed on television. For one thing, he wore a violet suit. I also couldn't believe that the same man on the screen was the silent, withdrawn grandfather who sat at our dining table once in awhile and ate steaks my father barbecued for him.

"Your father bought you *underwear*?" asked my sister, as if it suddenly dawned on her that fathers didn't usually buy daughters underwear. Our father, in fact, didn't even venture into stores to buy us clothes at all; our trips with him were limited to the hardware store and the Green Thumb nursery, and sometimes the sporting goods aisle at Fedco.

My mother finished folding towels and started on facecloths. "Yes, he did. He said he wanted me to look beautiful." Irritation clouded her voice as it rose. "And you

know what? I don't want either of you girls touching that stuff again, or opening that drawer. There are some things you don't go near in this house. That drawer is one of them."

And the drawer stayed locked after that, even though I checked many times, and my mother never again mentioned her overnight visits with her father, Neither did my grandmother, who never saw anything wrong with her ex-husband buying my mother sexy underwear at a department store lingerie counter. It was something my mother used to say about Nonni when I complained about anything: "Look at your grandmother. She only sees the good side of everything. Do you ever hear her complain? No? That's because she doesn't." And so all I knew was that, long after she married and raised a family, my mother hoarded a secret cache of bright silk and lace, shut in a drawer which no one was allowed to open.

Minestrone

This looks pretty complicated, but it's really three pretty simple parts that you put together at the end.

The first part is the one that take the longest. Start with a pound of beans, and soak them in water overnight. The water should be about room temperature, just put the beans in a bowl and cover them with water from the tap. The next day add a bunch of soup bones—have the butcher break them open for you. Put the bones in a pot with the beans and just enough water to mostly cover both, and boil it all. When the pot starts to boil you should reduce the heat as far as you can and still have the pot bubbling. Then just leave it while you make everything else. It'll be done when the beans are soft.

The second part is a bunch of vegetables. You need equal amounts of onions, carrots and celery. Some people add leeks, but I like it simpler. Chop up the vegetables into pieces about the size of your fingernail, then cook them with a little oil, just until they're getting soft. Then add a pound can of tomatoes—crush the tomatoes first—and cook it all until it's almost dried out.

The third part is pretty quick. Take a frying pan, put in a nice amount of olive oil, a handful of chopped parsley, a clove or two of fresh garlic that you've completely smashed under the side of a knife, and a small handful of basil. All you have to do now is cook it all—oil, parsley, garlic and basil—until it has turned a nice, bright green.

Now you put it all together. When the beans are soft, pull out the bones and pick off the meat. Put half of the beans through a food mill, or crush them through a sieve,

and then put the mashed beans back with the rest of the beans and the meat. You can throw away the bones, or give them to your dog.

Mix in the cooked vegetables and heat the mixture until it boils. Reduce the heat again, and let it cook gently for a while. Now you can add any “hard” vegetables you want—potatoes, string beans, turnips, anything like that. Wait a few minutes, so these new additions can start to cook, and then add some “soft” vegetables—zucchini, squash, cabbage. A lot of people will add some leftover cooked pasta at this point. Continue cooking it until everything is done, then stir in the oil-parsley-garlic-basil sauce.

That’s minestrone the way I learned to make it. It’s a great way to use up odds and ends in the kitchen, and in the winter it keeps a soul warm.

Mary Vardaro (Nonni)

Chapter Eight

La Principessa Rossa

The Red Princess

Boston, 1939

I dropped my purse on the streetcar that morning and everything scattered, every which way. Coins rolled down the aisle, a lipstick fell from its gold case and smeared Pink Cameo all over the tip of a woman's heavy brown shoe. I handed the woman my handkerchief as I apologized.

"Cantcha be more careful, lady?" she bellowed. She had a voice to match her body, thick and coarse. Black hair sprouted on her chin in a thin beard, and her hair lay on her head like greasy fur. Kathleen smiled as she walked slowly down the streetcar aisle, holding onto the rails, retrieving things people held out to her: my compact, spilling out powder, the mirror broken, a handful of change, and something I always carry, a flat case made of engraved silver, with a glass-covered oval inside for a photograph.

"What a sweet girl," I heard people say, "Helpful." Kathleen sat down next to me and placed everything carefully inside my purse.

"Let's check my picture," Kathleen said. She opened the silver case to make sure the glass hadn't cracked.

"Looks like it's fine, Ma." Kathleen shut the purse, then shoved right across me to get to the window. I don't know what interested her so much: winter everywhere, the

sky so grayish-white it made me shiver just to look at it. Bare trees, white patches of snow that turned almost as brown as dirt by the roadside. Like a patchwork quilt made of gray, black, brown, and white squares, a quilt you couldn't get warmth from at all.

"I want to go home. When are we going to get home, Ma?" Kathleen started to fidget, and I told her to get a book to read from her satchel.

"But it makes my stomach sick to read on the streetcar. You know that, Ma." Still, she unbuckled the satchel and took out her fourth-grade reader, *Stories from Many Lands*.

"Ma, read to me. Will you read to me, and can I have some of those candies?" she asked. I thought of refusing; she'd already gobbled handfuls of sweets downtown, before we walked into Jordan Marsh to get a new pair of winter boots. Then she'd thrown a tantrum right in the store when I told her the bright red boots she wanted, the ones with gold buckles and a cluster of bells on each cuff, weren't practical for winter. She turned red as those boots and screamed as I paid for the sturdy black ones I knew would last longer.

"I won't wear them, ever!" she yelled, "I'm gonna write to Daddy and tell him you won't buy me what I want!" I grabbed her hand and half-dragged her through the store. The women behind the counter shook their heads.

"Spoiled. Disgusting." I heard one of them say as I headed for the door. Yet the minute Kathleen got on the streetcar, she was a different child, chatting to everyone, charming as Shirley Temple while she gathered up the things from my purse. My

daughter's like a storm one minute, a calm sky the next. There's never any different type of weather.

Kathleen opened her school reader, then shut it. "I get carsick, Ma. Streetcar-sick. We're still a million miles away from the house, too." She handed her book to me and unclasped my purse. "I know you've got lemon drops in here."

"Honey, I don't want that to spill out again," I told her, but she'd already begun to root through it. I tugged at the purse just as she pulled the picture frame out; I nearly dropped the purse again. Kathleen pressed the latch to make the frame open; the sight of her picture soothed her.

"I was a pretty little girl," she said. "Nobody was prettier than me. That's what my daddy said to Mamma Nonna."

I could just imagine my mother-in-law, sitting with Kathleen at the kitchen table, pouring her hot chocolate and telling her story after story of her wonderful father, the actor, the one who sent money every month to buy the best dresses, the most toys, enough picture books to fill a whole shelf.

"I'm the richest girl in the whole school. I'm a princess in this picture, and I think I'm a princess really," said my daughter as she traced the oval glass over her portrait.

The photograph, taken when my daughter was two, really did make her look like a princess, down to the tinsel-and-rhinestone crown she'd pulled out of the photographer's prop box and put on her head. She screamed when I tried to take it off her. I'd spent almost an hour ironing every ruffle in the new red dress I'd bought for the picture. I dipped that dress in hot starch, wrung it out, and ironed it until every pleat and inch of

lace lay smooth. Now Kathleen lay on the floor, pounding her feet and filling the dress with wrinkles.

The photographer said, "Leave it on her. She's so little, she doesn't understand." Kathleen calmed down after she understood she could still have the crown. The photographer posed her in front of a black velvet backdrop and she smiled again and again, with far more patience than any two-year-old I'd ever seen. The photographer's secretary called me a few weeks later and said, "The pictures've come out so adorable we want to enlarge one and put it in the window of the studio. We're going to hand-color it and we'll do the others at a discount for you."

When we went back to the portrait studio, she jumped up and down, pointing and saying, "Look, me! Look, me!" at the huge photograph in the shop window. It showed Kathleen in her sparkling crown and red dress, smiling directly at the camera. Now my daughter's nine years old, but still wanting everyone to look at her. Every morning before school she asks me to brush her curls smooth. "Make them perfect," she says. Sometimes I listen to her as she looks at the clothes in her closet and dresser: "A coat with a real mink collar. These gloves are so pretty. I have fifteen hair ribbons, all made of satin." And I wonder what I am supposed to feel: grateful that my absent husband sends money for these things, or troubled because my daughter seems to love only the prettiest, the brightest, the best. She told me the other day to throw out her oldest doll, a rag baby I sewed myself when I was pregnant.

"*Katarina*, that doll was around before you were born," I told her as she headed for the trash can in our bedroom. I took the doll from her hands, remembered how I

sewed its clumsy body, embroidering blue eyes and a rosebud mouth on its round head.

“I made it for you, *cara*.”

“I don’t care. It’s ugly and I don’t want it anymore,” she said, “And there’s no room in my doll hutch for it anymore.” Then she was off again in another direction, because Mamma Nonna called out for her to come set the dinner table. I took the rag baby and put it far back in the closet, on a top shelf.

The streetcar stopped to let off passengers. Kathleen closed the picture frame and slipped it back in my purse. “My daddy has the big picture of this. I know he looks at it every day,” she said.

It was the last thing we ever did as a couple, John and I, picking up Kathleen’s photographs. We took a trolley downtown; I held Kathleen on my lap. Anyone looking at us would have seen a handsome father in a fine wool coat, a mother in black cashmere, an expensive fur hat on her head. The chubby two-year-old girl bundled in warm clothes against the cold.

Nobody would have guessed that a trunk lay in the center of our bed at home, that I helped my husband pack his best shirts, pants, ties, nested gold and silver cufflinks in pouches, polished his best shoes for him and slipped them into shoe bags. I did all this even though tears came to my eyes. John had a contract as a stunt man with Paramount Studios; he’d taken a train out to Hollywood in August and stayed away a month. Now, in November, he said it was time for him to start his job there, to make money and buy the nicest house he could find for us.

“It will take a few months, Mary,” he said to me. “Maybe six, nine months. But I’ll send for you the minute I have the house. You and Kathleen can take the train out, I’ll get a suite car for the both of you. In the meantime, I’ll send you money, and I’ll come see you at Christmas. And you’ll be comfortable in my mother’s house. Mamma Nonna takes care of everyone, and you won’t have to lift a finger there.”

John helped me set up my room at Mamma Nonna’s, large, just off the kitchen, walls painted fresh and white, one deep closet and a view of the back yard. It held only things from the kitchen and garden for years before I lived there: I used to enter it only to get a clean dishtowel from the closet, or help Mamma Nonna stack up towers of jars after she picked her garden clean at summer’s end

“Look how nice I’ve made it for you, Mary. You’ll be happy here,” she told me the day I brought my first trunk of clothes to her house. Mamma Nonna threw the door of the room open, beaming as if there was a pile of gold inside for me.

Kathleen ran inside the empty room, twirling across the bare wood floor as Mamma Nonna opened the closet to show me the shelves John and Pietro had put inside.

“Plenty of space for everything,” she said. The room had been emptied of mops, brooms, pails, and canned goods; it seemed twice as big, and our voices and footsteps made hollow echoes. White muslin curtains hung at the window, freshly starched and tied back with red ribbons. Mamma Nonna kept talking,

“Warm in winter, too, the warmest room in the house. A radiator there by the closet, and of course you get the heat from the kitchen stove, you’ll never grow cold here.” In a few days, John and his brothers set up two beds in the room: a large one for

me, and a little one right under the window for Kathleen. Anna and Mike brought down a rug from the flat. Mike slid a tallboy against the wall; he'd given the old dresser a new coat of varnish. I saw that the rug was one Anna had finished braiding just a few weeks ago.

"Anna, you don't have to give me this. Kathleen's just going to get it dirty," I said as she rolled it out. The colors were so bright: red, green, turquoise blue, interspersed with gray and black strips from Mike's old jackets and trousers.

"Oh, Mary, take it," said Mike. "Anna braids a full rug every couple of months. She won't let me sell them in the store; she gives them away to people. Everyone in Boston's going to have one of Anna's rugs soon, the way she hands them out."

The night John left and for months afterward, I refused Mike and Anna's invitations to come up to their flat for supper. Oh, later, I could: Mike taught me how to make stuffed peppers, and I helped Anna mend clothes while we talked. Once in awhile, we even had time to do some embroidery together—Anna showed me how to do couching and cutwork.

But before that, I couldn't stand to see them together, the way Mike treated Anna so nice, never once casting a glance at another woman and even pitching in around the house, scrubbing floors and singing opera at the top of his lungs. When their boys were old enough, he gave each of them a scrub brush to help out. Their bedroom was directly above mine, too. The first night I slept in my room, it took hours to settle Kathleen; she was fretful and fell asleep with tears still wet on her cheeks. I put on my nightgown and lay down on my own bed. I heard Anna and Mike walking upstairs. A little while later, I

heard Anna's soft voice and then Mike's deeper one; I knew what sound would happen next: their bedsprings creaking, over and over.

That was the last thing I wanted to hear; I pulled the pillow over my ears and thought of the way my husband held me close at the train station, but only kissed my cheek. In his hand, a large brown envelope with a cream-colored folder in it marked *Frederick Keck, Photographer* in gold script on the front. Inside the folder, a medium-sized portrait of our daughter, Kathleen, in her crown and red dress. John smiled when I handed it to him on the train platform. "La Principessa Rossa," he said as he kissed Kathleen. He mounted the stairs, then turned and waved at us, his eyes dry as stones, the envelope tucked under his arm.

"Daddy go?" said Kathleen. She squirmed in my arms, almost too heavy to carry. I looked and looked at the train to see if I could catch a glimpse of my husband in a window, but I could only see the shadows of the passengers, like silhouettes torn from black paper. Kathleen and I took a trolley home. She slept in my arms and I cried, head down, my tears leaving spots on her pink coat. I thought it would be forever, waiting six months, nine months, for my husband to send a telegram saying he'd bought our house, that at last, it was time to pack our own train trunk.

I resolved to be a good wife, to wait patiently and say my rosary at night, a blue crystal rosary that had been one of my mother's few treasures. I made myself think of each day slipping by like a bead on that rosary. But it wasn't six months. It wasn't nine months. I waited, living in Mamma Nonna's house as Kathleen grew taller, lost her baby teeth, went to kindergarten and was scolded by the teacher for speaking Italian, not

English, in the classroom. I waited while Kathleen learned to write, while Anna gave birth to a second son, a baby she'd prayed for during years and years of nearly giving up all hope of having a brother for Sam. I knitted a small white sweater for Anna and Mike's new baby, and a dozen sturdy wool soakers. The day after my father-in-law died, I helped Mamma Nonna fold her flowered dresses and put them in trunks with lavender sachets. We ironed black dresses and she took them upstairs to hang them in her closet. I learned dozens of recipes from Mike, went to Mass every Sunday with the whole family, sat at the kitchen table helping Kathleen and Mamma Nonna's youngest sons with their homework, doing all those things and more as seven long years passed by.

The streetcar lurched to a halt on Barnes Avenue, a few blocks away from Mamma Nonna's house. Kathleen nearly knocked me over as she scrambled to get out the door and onto the sidewalk. She carried the box with her new boots, proud, as if she'd never had that tantrum in the store.

"It's starting to snow, Ma," she said. I wrapped my wool scarf around my head. The flakes drifted down, dry and fat. Kathleen stopped to catch one on her tongue.

"*Katarina*, let's go," I said. "It's getting dark, and Mamma Nonna probably has dinner waiting."

"I hope she's not cooking a cow head." My daughter slipped her hand into mine, Weeks ago, Kathleen came home from school to a warm kitchen full of rich fragrance. Wondering what was for dinner, she opened the oven to see a whole calf's head staring out at her as it roasted in a big pan. Mike had brought it home for Mamma Nonna; she

thought it a fine thing to feast on. Kathleen slammed the oven door shut and ran into our room, refusing to come out for dinner. Mamma Nonna brought her some toast on a plate, but Kathleen wouldn't touch it.

"It's just like that thing with the eels," Mamma Nonna told me later. Last Christmas Eve, Mamma Nonna had put on her heavy coat and warm gloves to travel to the fish market, carrying home a huge basket with a white paper bundle inside, filled with fresh eels. This was for the traditional Christmas Eve dinner: seven different types of fish in a tomato-based stew. It was the first dish I'd ever eaten in Mamma Nonna's house, on a Christmas Eve just after I met John. Kathleen stood at the table, watching Mamma Nonna unwrap the paper to reveal live, wriggling black eels.

"She's cooking snakes! She's cooking snakes! Mamma Nonna's cooking snakes!" Kathleen screamed all the way down the basement stairs, where she hid until Mike and Anna coaxed her out by telling her that she could open the Christmas present they'd given her. That brought my daughter out into the parlor, where she tore the silver paper off the box and took out a china doll in a plaid silk dress and a green velvet hat.

But tonight, Mamma Nonna wasn't cooking snakes, or a cow's head; a pot of minestrone sent out white clouds as we walked into the kitchen. Mamma Nonna stirred the pot and greeted us as we came in.

My life in Mamma Nonna's house had never been terrible: John was right; I barely had to lift a finger. But I started feeling like a pampered cat on a velvet cushion, and guilty that my mother-in-law worked so hard, particularly in the years before her husband died. Always the same thing back then: Pietro walked into the house through

the front door; he carried a grocery sack with the apron he'd worn that day in his butcher shop. He'd go downstairs to the basement himself, to soak the apron in cold water. Upstairs to their bedroom, where he changed into clean clothes, and we'd all sit together for dinner. Pietro was such a silent man, gruff when spoken to, except when he was around his grandchildren. He'd pinch their cheeks "to make roses," slip them peppermints, even read to them from their picture books in slow, halting English if he happened to stay home that night. He rarely spoke to me, and never about his son John; I felt I couldn't talk to my in-laws about him, either. This was my only home now: both my parents dead, my sister Rose married, with a son and daughter of her own. My brothers Hank, Primo, and Nicky working long hours, so they couldn't make more than brief visits.

I didn't even ask to start doing household chores; I went up to the attic, opened one of my boxes, and took out two aprons. I tied one around my waist, and took the other back to my dresser. I walked into the kitchen; Mamma Nonna stood at the table, chopping carrots. She didn't say a word while I fetched a paring knife from the drawer and took a couple of carrots from her. She just moved aside at the wide cutting board and made room for me.

John wrote to us once a month, always enclosing a fat envelope of money, some for his mother, and some for Kathleen and me. "My son keeps us alive," Mamma Nonna said almost every time she opened the envelope. "People are dying in the streets because of the damn Depression. But we don't have to starve."

The letters John sent were always exciting, with news about all the stars he'd met. Gary Cooper, Rita Hayworth, even Mae West. Mamma Nonna had no idea who any of these people were; she'd never been to a movie, and had no interest in going. "A waste of money," she told her sons when they asked for a few coins to see films, but she gave the dimes out anyway.

The envelopes also contained a smaller envelope for me, with a private note. "I love you," said the first one. "I think of you all the time, Mary," said the second note. Later notes said that he was busy night and day, working his way up from doing stunts for the movies to maybe some real acting roles, couldn't make it home that Christmas, the Depression was making it hard to buy a home. "I have a room in a boarding house," said one note. Always same the return address: a post office box in Los Angeles. Every couple of months, a phone call, but only for a few minutes—the long-distance cost so much, he said. When his father died, he called and talked to his mother for an hour, sent her extra money in the envelopes every month after that, and a wreath of white silk roses to put on his father's grave. He was working on his first speaking part in a movie, couldn't get out to the East Coast. And no one said a word against John for missing his father's funeral.

"*Katarina*, how was the streetcar ride?" Mike said as he walked into the kitchen with Anna. Mike and Anna joined us for dinner that night, something they rarely did, because they closed their store in the North End at six.

"It started to snow, Uncle Mike," said Kathleen. "Is that why you came home early today?"

“I smelled Mamma Nonna’s nice hot soup all the way across the harbor,” said Mike. “Mike Junior told us to come home and have supper with you.”

“But he’s only three and he can’t talk that good, Uncle Mike.”

“Oh, I know when he’s hungry, all right,” said Mike. Mike and Anna took Mike Junior with them to the store; the older boy, Sam, was far ahead of Kathleen in school, but Mamma Nonna still kept an eye on him and made sure his homework was done before his parents came home. Sometimes Sam read his essays out loud to me, asking for my opinion in the same soft voice his father used. Sometimes I took Sam and Kathleen to a soda fountain at the drugstore a few blocks away; just this week, we’d gone there, even though the weather had turned cold. I wanted to treat Sam for getting all As on his report card, and I knew he liked hot fudge sundaes, even though he was getting more and more grown-up every day.

A man I’d never seen before worked behind the counter, a short, stocky man with thin, bright hair the color of clean straw. He had an unusual name embroidered on his apron: *Casimir*. “Like cashmere,” I thought. He smiled at me when we placed our orders.

Sam asked me if he could look at the candies in their big glass jars over on the far side of the store. I said yes; immediately Kathleen jumped up, too.

“It’s okay, Auntie Mary,” he said. “I have a lot of dimes. Papa gave them to me for helping him clean up the store last weekend.” He took Kathleen by the hand. I smiled at them; Kathleen was always so calm around both Sam and Mike.

Casimir came over to the table and put a cup of hot black coffee in front of me, then a small pitcher of cream and a saucer of lump sugar.

“Oh, but I didn’t order coffee,” I said. I only had enough in my purse to pay for the sundaes.

“Oh the house, ma’am. No charge.”

I sipped my coffee. Casimir did a little work near me, on his side of the counter, stacking glass dishes and putting away clean spoons.

“They seem like good kids, those two,” he said. “Are they brother and sister?”

“No, they’re cousins,” I said. I’d reached into my handbag as he talked, rummaging to find a tissue so I could blot my lipstick; I’d left a deep red stain on the cup rim. “But we all live together. My husband’s been gone for years now and I live in his mother’s household, with other family.”

I didn’t think about what I’d said at all until Casimir crossed the store to ring up the candies Kathleen and Sam had picked out. I blotted my lipstick and was about to say something to him when my daughter dumped a handful of licorice babies all over the counter. I rose to help them, but Sam said, “Here, Kathleen, let’s put these back in the bag.” He turned to me and said, “Auntie Mary, can I sit at the counter for my sundae?”

“I want to sit with Sam,” Kathleen said. Casimir looked over at me; he had two hot fudge sundaes in his hands. I nodded and the children sat down in front of them on tall metal stools. I watched Kathleen carefully; she gobbled her sundae, while Sam took small, polite bites.

“Slow down, little one, that’s not the last sundae on earth,” Casimir said to Kathleen. She looked up at him and kept shoveling the ice cream into her mouth. Sam handed her a napkin.

Casimir brought over the coffee pot for a warm-up

“They can get pretty rambunctious,” he said as he poured, then wiped up a tiny drop of spilled coffee. “I know. I’ve got three daughters. The youngest two just eleven months apart, like twins. I don’t know what I’d do without the oldest girl. Olga. She takes care of the other kids until I get home. Braids their hair mornings, gets their lunch pails filled.

“That must take a lot of work off your wife’s hands,” I said.

Casimir stood up and tucked the rag in his back pocket.

“My wife’s gone, too. She died three years ago. Influenza,” he said. He grew silent, then took the cream from the table. “Let me get you a little more of this,” he said. He crossed back to the counter.

I looked at my hands in their brown leather gloves. Casimir stacked a few dishes, then said to Kathleen, “Wow, you ate that dish clean. Maybe I can hire you to clean up all my dishes.” She laughed and poured a handful of licorice babies into her hands.

“He can’t see my wedding ring,” I thought. “That’s why he’s talking to me. He thinks I’m a widow. I need to pull my gloves off, or tell him somehow that I’m married.” But I couldn’t bring myself to do this, even when he came back to my table and said that his littlest girl would love another child to play with sometime, that his name was Casimir Krakowski and he lived in Orient Heights. I smiled at him, and, after a minute, I said I

would think about it. “What harm could letting our daughters play in the park do?” I thought. I paid for the sundaes, even though I didn’t want to leave so quickly, but Kathleen was starting to act cranky, telling Sam in a loud voice that he couldn’t have any of her candies.

Sam took Kathleen by the hand as we walked back to the house. “Let’s run, let’s run,” she said. They ran awkwardly, Sam making his legs go everywhere, like a rag doll.

“You stop it,” she screeched, “You’re being a big dummy!” I feared she was about to have a fit, but she began to laugh instead.

As I ate dinner with the family, I watched a falling white curtain of snow outside the kitchen window. I thought about Casimir the way a person thinks about a small, wrong thing they’ve done, not a mortal sin, just a slightly bad thing. I’d looked into the bathroom mirror before I took the children to the soda fountain and thought to myself that I was only twenty-nine, that my figure was as slim as it was before I had Kathleen, and perhaps that day I should wear a bit of makeup. So I put on rouge and powder, a touch of red lipstick.

I wondered for years if my not telling Casimir that I was married was the sin that made everything go wrong after that, even though I knew nobody would have told John anyway. The telephone in the parlor rang as Anna and I helped Mamma Nonna stack dishes on the drainboard. Mike ran to answer it.

“No, no, Mamma Nonna, I’ve got it,” he said. I heard him say, “Hello?” and then “Hey, John, *come stai?* I haven’t talked to you in forever. What? This connection’s terrible. Okay, it’s a little better, that’s good. You need to talk to Mary? Right now?”

I was at Mike's side immediately. The parlor felt chilly, so I kept the door open.

Mike handed the phone to me.

"Mary," John said, his voice level and hard. His next words spilled into my ear, cold and harsh. And the little spell I was under, the one of being talked to by a kind man because I looked pretty and young, and the other one, that my husband would one day send for Kathleen and me to join him in California, broke the way my compact mirror shattered that day, into a thousand fragments.

Vinegar Pie

You need three eggs for this, three whites and three yolks. The yolks are for the filling. You beat the yolks with a cup of sugar, and a tiny bit of salt, in the top of a double boiler; then you slowly add boiling water, just a little bit at a time, while you stir the yolks. Be careful with this, if you add the water too quickly you'll ruin the filling. And don't add too much water, you'll probably want a bit less than a pint. Now, mix a quarter-cup each of cider vinegar, cornstarch, and cold water, and mix this combination in with the yolks in the double boiler. Cook this mixture over boiling water until it's thick and smooth, no more than fifteen minutes. When the yolks are done, stir in a teaspoon of lemon extract, and when it's all smooth and nice, pour it into the pie shell.

The egg whites (remember them?) are for the topping. It's just a simple meringue. Whip the whites with a quarter teaspoon each of cream of tartar and salt, and a half teaspoon of vanilla extract. When they're all getting pretty well done (but not stiff!) start adding sugar, just a little at a time. You'll probably want more than a quarter cup of sugar, but a half cup is probably too much. So now you're ready: Cover the pie filling with the meringue, spreading it all over the top so it reaches the pie crust all around the edge, sealing the pie. If the oven is set to 350 degrees, the pie should take about 12 to 15 minutes to bake.

You'll know it's done when the tips of the topping are turning a beautiful golden brown.

My mother made this when there wasn't a lot of money. Sometimes she left the meringue out if we couldn't afford an egg or two; it's still good that way. No matter how poor we were, she always made sure we had something sweet.

Mary Vardaro (Nonni)

Chapter Nine

Bath Vinegar

My room at Mamma Nonna's house was soon cleared out. Rose came over nearly every day to help me pack clothes. As we folded dresses and put them in a cardboard box, Rose held one up.

"Mary, for God's sake. You run around in rags. Look at the waist on this thing, the seams all strained and just ready to split." I didn't want to tell her she had my favorite dress in her hands, long-sleeved, the cotton so old, so soft, something to wear when I had a few minutes to myself and wanted to stretch out on my bed to read a book. I liked the dress print, one I couldn't find again in any fabric, faded forget-me-nots on a pale green background.

"This one's bound for the dustbin," Rose said as she shoved the dress into a paper bag we used for garbage. I made up my mind to sneak the dress out of the bag after she left; I'd wash it and hang it up to dry somewhere, out of Rose's sight.

That was the problem with Rose: she lived up to her name in every way. Sweet at times, but I knew since we were small that she was the thorn in my side too.

"You know what, Mary? Let me tell you, we need to go shopping." Rose's voice cut through my thoughts. "Let's go downtown and buy you some new things. That always cheers me up. I've got plenty of cash; Joe gives me whatever I want."

I crossed the room to my almost-empty closet, took out my beige coat, my brown felt hat; Rose took off the pin I'd fastened to the coat's lapel, a little cluster of cherries in shiny red enamel.

"Mary, these colors," Rose said. "This tacky pin, and those scarves of yours—look at this one, purple with sequins and pink fringe! What are you, some kind of big tropical bird?"

I shrugged my shoulders as I put on the coat. That was what my grief did: it made me hollow inside during the day, like a pan boiled dry on the stove. At night, it was as if that pan filled up again and overflowed; hot tears spilled out of my eyes and soaked the pillow. I didn't feel like telling Rose that the last thing I wanted to do was shop; I just followed her, the way I did when we were children.

On the streetcar, Rose chatted, mostly about her marriage. I kept wondering if she remembered that my husband had asked me for a divorce just three months ago; Rose kept sprinkling little phrases into the conversation, like "Well, you know how it is when you've been married a long time," but I didn't tell her to stop. I just stared out the window at the dirty snow and the flat, cold faces of buildings.

"Don't you dare pick one thing out, Mary," she said when we pushed open the doors of Jordan Marsh and went inside. "You have no sense of style. I don't blame you, living in a crazy old woman's house, with that dimwit Anna upstairs. I swear to God, doesn't Mike get sick of Anna sometimes? Well, I bet he's like old Pietro was, God rest his soul, with some pretty girl uptown."

I stopped in the middle of the aisle Rose was browsing as she talked. For a moment, I thought of walking straight out the door and down the street, away from Rose. I thought of the way Anna cared for Kathleen in the crazy days after John asked me for a divorce, how she made up a little game for my daughter, something about how Kathleen was a baby bird who had to fly upstairs for a few days to visit her cousin birds. I hated what Rose said about Mike, his eyes so brimful of love for Anna that I hoped there would never be room in them for another woman. I jumped when Rose spoke again. She carried a huge armload of clothes, the hangers banging together like flat bones.

“Try these on, all of them. Good for church and everywhere else. Sturdy as iron; they’ll last you a hundred years!”

I stood in the dressing room and slipped on white blouses, heavy skirts in navy blue and brown. I buttoned a wool dress dyed such a dark shade of green that it looked nearly black. Drab things, clothes for someone in mourning, but I let my sister buy all of them.

Rose even picked out my makeup. She hovered over the salesclerk at the cosmetics counter, a sweet-faced young woman with a cap of silky copper hair. The salesclerk glanced warily at Rose every few minutes, but she still smoothed dots of foundation on my hands to check the shades, patted my nose with a soft pink puff, suggested a bit of eyeliner, a touch of deep red lipstick.

“You want to make her look like a porcelain doll, missy?” Rose snapped, her voice so loud that other women at the counter turned and looked at us. “Here, this lipstick, the pink one, and this compact—her skin’s too fair to wear anything but rice

powder.” I felt my cheeks grow hot as the salesgirl silently handed Rose the makeup; then my sister said, “Oh, Mary, look at those bath salts, all on sale! Get one for yourself; there’s nothing like a hot bath to make you forget all your troubles.”

She pointed to a big wicker cart full of sparkling, jewel-colored glass jars. I walked over and grabbed a jar, which I carried to the counter. The salesgirl rang up the little boxes of pale makeup; she turned the jar of bath salts around to check the price tag. On the jar, a label with gold letters spelling out the fragrance in a curly script: *Tea Rose*. A thought flitted into my mind, one which I just as quickly brushed aside: I’d never escape Rose, not even in the bathroom. But I put that idea aside: she was all I had now. I let my sister open the store’s wide glass doors for me and I walked down the street a few steps behind her, heavy bags swinging from my hands, my breath thin and white in the winter air.

One week before I finally moved into Rose’s house, I discovered that I had Mamma Nonna’s house to myself. Usually there was someone home, but today, my mother-in-law was at a birthing, all the children—including my daughter—were at school; Mike and Anna were at their store. I had no errands to run, at least no urgent ones, and so I decided to do something luxurious: take a hot bath in the middle of the day.

When I was little, my mother always kept an oval bar of lilac-scented soap, just for herself, in a soapdish shaped like a swan. She bought the soap from the local pharmacy a bar at a time; sometimes she brought the soap into my bath and washed me

with it, the lather smelling like a handful of flowers. I tried to find the same soap when I grew up, but the woman at the pharmacy said they didn't stock it anymore.

I had a small bathroom which I shared with Kathleen, just off our room; it had only enough space for a toilet, sink, and an old clawfoot tub. The bathroom had walls of varnished wood; I'd tried to make things lighter by sewing muslin curtains for the window and hanging up an old ad for Shalimar perfume, but I couldn't bring the bathroom much further away from what it really was: a dark hole. Still, it was one place I could shut the door and have a few minutes to myself, though more often than not, Kathleen would stand on the other side, asking me when I was getting out.

I drew the curtain over the window and ran the bathwater, sprinkling bath salts into it as the tub filled. They melted and trailed pink threads through the water, coloring it just a little.

As I lowered myself into the tub, I thought of all the women I knew and how they loved baths. A few times a year, when I visited Anna's flat, I'd notice a Mason jar on the sideboard, filled with lavender stems soaking in cider vinegar. In summer, Anna collected petals from the rosebush by the kitchen door and put them up in vinegar, too. When I first saw her doing that, I wondered if it was for some new recipe of Mike's.

"No, I put this in my bathwater, about half a cup," Anna told me, "It doesn't cost much and it keeps my skin soft." She said that Mike liked to use a little in a footbath after a hard day at work. I told her how the vinegar in big jar reminded me of the way my mother would bring home cider vinegar, to make into vinegar pie. It tasted sweet and tart

at the same time; my mother said that you had to use the right kind of vinegar to make it turn out right.

Even Mamma Nonna had her own time to use the upstairs bathtub, from nine to ten every night, an hour she fiercely guarded. The house could fall down outside her bathroom door, and she'd still lie in her tub, soaking and reading the Italian newspaper. She made something she called "*bagno di sante*" every few months with rosemary from her garden and citrus peels she dried, then ground into a powder with Epsom salts in her stone mortar. She kept the mixture in a gold canister on a shelf above her bathroom sink, beside a carved wooden bowl holding her collection of ivory and tortoiseshell hair combs.

Steam curled around me as I lay in the fragrant water. It had been four months since John had asked me for a divorce; nearly every minute of those four months had felt like a dream I'd had once of walking on the ocean floor, the sea around me clear, green, and thick, a thickness I could barely push through. I'd woken from that dream with sore muscles in my back and neck, the way they felt now, every day.

I lay in the tub until the water lost its heat, and then got out and toweled off. I hung the towel on the brass hook behind the door, then took out a tin of dusting powder from the metal cabinet over the kitchen sink. The sweet smell of honeysuckle drifted in the warm air as I shook the dusting powder into my palm. I thought of the last time I'd been able to take a leisurely bath, when I visited the soda fountain with Sam and Kathleen, the day I met Casimir Krakowski. I knew that meeting Casimir had nothing to

do with John asking me for a divorce, but I still had never gone back to the soda fountain. In fact, I avoided it, walking blocks out of my way sometimes.

I stroked the powder over my skin; my wedding ring's solitary diamond caught the light and sparkled through its layer of white talc.

Rose kept pestering me about wearing my ring; she declared that my marriage was over and it was wrong to keep "sporting it." Finally, I mustered up the courage to tell her that I didn't want to take off my ring until the divorce decree came through. My sister stared at me as if I'd suddenly sprouted an extra head, but she said nothing more. I felt grateful for her silence; I was sick of hearing about the money my ring would fetch, if only I'd march down to the jeweler's with her and sell it.

"Not everything has a price, Rose," I told her when I felt so pushed to the wall by her nagging that I finally lashed out, after I found her fingering my topaz earrings and my peach-and-white cameo, which I'd hidden in a shoebox at the back of my closet. But my sister didn't understand my need to hold onto a few good things, despite the fact that I was poorer now. Rose measured love in dollars and cents; if her husband Joe didn't spend enough on a Christmas or birthday gift for her, she practically blistered his ears letting him know it. I tried to remind myself that Rose did those things because we had been so poor growing up; she said that she always knew when our mother and father were afraid they would run out of money for food or the rent, even though they tried to keep their fear from us.

"They never said anything, but Mama would start looking through coat pockets for coins," she said. "Sometimes I still see her in my mind, frowning as she dug her

hands through pocket after pocket—remember, Mary? All those feelings rush back if I think of that, how scared I was that we wouldn't have anything on the table that night.”

I slipped on a clean bra and panties, then wriggled into the beige girdle Mamma Nonna claimed I didn't need; she called corsets and girdles “the torture of the Devil himself.” I found myself crossing to my closet; I choose a soft camel-colored blouse, the very last of the nice silk blouses I wore when John and I had lived together. I found a black cashmere sweater that hadn't been packed away yet. I zipped up one of my new black skirts, a pair of clean black knit hose, and my winter shoes. I fluffed my hair, limp from the bath, and combed it. I put on two layers of my new pink lipstick, rouged my cheeks, and powdered my flushed skin. I went to my shoebox of jewelry and took out my topaz earrings; they glowed, warm amber against my earlobes.

Then I went back into the bathroom, stoppered the sink and wet my hands under the faucet. I soaped my left hand and pulled at my wedding ring. It stuck and turned the skin of my finger white, then red; I used more soap and twisted the ring over and over. Finally, it flew off, bounced on the counter, and dropped into the sink with a splash. I picked the ring up and dried it, then wrapped it in a clean handkerchief and tucked it beneath a stack of slips in my lingerie drawer. I put on my camel's hair coat and a beige hat trimmed with a brown velvet bow. I tiptoed out of my room, listening to hear if anyone had come home. When I knew for certain that the house was completely quiet, I buttoned my coat and picked up my handbag. I opened the kitchen door, stepped outside, then locked the door behind me. I walked out of Mamma Nonna's house as an unmarried woman for the first time in seven years.

It was a bright day, snow melting, the sidewalks cleared. I knew I didn't have a lot of time: school let out in about an hour and a half, and Kathleen would raise a ruckus if I weren't home, making a mess in the kitchen and eating most of the apple pie Mamma Nonna baked yesterday.

I felt the absence of my wedding ring, my left hand so used to its slight weight. It was as if my whole body had grown suddenly light, not just my hand. I kept touching my ring finger with my thumb, felt a slight pleasure at noticing there was no white band around my finger against darker skin. I'd always worn gloves whenever I was in the sun, but today, I didn't cover my hands.

The soda fountain's sign swayed back and forth in the breeze; I hesitated a little ways down the sidewalk. After all, I was still married. When I went to church, I felt everyone's eyes on me, not on the altar. When I told this to Anna, she patted my arm and told me I was imagining things.

"It's John they'd stare at if he were here, not you, Mary," she said, but it didn't make me feel much better.

I began to grow cold standing on the sidewalk, so I made a decision. I took a deep breath, smoothed my coat, then walked the few steps to the soda fountain and opened the door as my heart thrummed hard in my chest.

Bing Crosby crooned "Pennies From Heaven" on an unseen radio. The shop seemed deserted at first and I wondered if Casimir was in the back. Then I noticed a woman sitting at the far edge of the counter. She had the kind of red hair whose color could only come out of a bottle, lipstick redder than her hair, and a cigarette dangling

from her mouth. She was filing her nails with an emery board, which she put down to turn over the pages of a glossy magazine.

I sat down at the counter. She finished her cigarette and flipped through a couple more pages before she yawned, sighed heavily, and got up to walk towards me, pulling an order pad from her bib pocket. As she came closer, I saw her name on her apron: *Ruth*, in bright pink letters.

I ordered tea, not coffee; I thought tea would help me stay calm. Ruth set a small white teacup in front of me, a saucer with a thin slice of lemon on it, and two packets of sugar. I took a long while brewing the tea before I pulled the bag out and floated the lemon slice on top. It wheeled in the cup, a transparent, sunny yellow.

Ruth settled back into her place at the far end of the counter. From the pile of stuff in front of her, I figured she perched there for most of the day when she wasn't waiting on customers. A stack of magazines leaned to one side, next to a black cigarette case, a large metal ashtray, and a white coffee mug, stenciled with a red lobster and stained with lipstick at the rim. Ruth opened another magazine as I waited.

I checked my watch every few minutes until a half-hour passed, taking tiny sips of my tea so it wouldn't run out. No other customers came in, though I knew kids would be getting out of school soon. When I finally reached the dregs of my tea, I stood up and walked over to Ruth, to ask her the question that had begun to nag at me like a child tugging my skirt.

I barely managed the words. Ruth scowled and narrowed her green eyes.

“What?” she said. “Honey, I can’t hear a word you’re sayin’. You gotta speak up.”

“When does Casimir Krakowski come in to work?” I said, a little louder than before.

Ruth’s face relaxed and she turned back to her fashion magazine. It showed a slim blonde woman in a long white satin dress; she had a gardenia in her hair and stood next to a streetlamp, looking puzzled, as if she couldn’t quite figure out how she’d gotten there.

“Oh, Casimir—he’s long gone, honey. ‘Bout a month now, at least. He sure was glad to get out of this here place—a man his age workin’ a sody fountain, you can’t hardly blame him. He had some uncle or somethin’, maybe it was a cousin, owned some hotel in New York City. He offered Casimir a job, just totin’ suitcases, you know, like a bellhop? Anyway, Casimir jumped at it, especially when he found out the uncle-or-cousin-or-whatever had this batch of rooms for him and his girls—a suite, he called it. He had them three girls, raised them up himself. He’s a lucky dog now. We got a postcard from him, shows the Brooklyn Bridge.”

I concentrated on the cigarette Ruth held as she talked; it was burning to a long gray ash. I noticed the thick border of her ashtray, engraved with portraits of the Dionne Quintuplets, their names in lacy script above each picture. Then Ruth gave a little shriek and the ash dropped right on the counter as I suddenly began to cry, loud as Kathleen during one of her tantrums, tears scalding my eyes and gushing down my cheeks.

Words tumbled out of Ruth's mouth. "Honey, what's the matter? Did I say somethin' wrong? Are you all right?" she said. She handed me a napkin. "Dry your eyes now."

I wiped at tears that didn't stop. Ruth looked panicked when two girls opened the shop door and headed towards the counter.

"You sit right here, okay? Cry all you want, but I have to take care of these kids. I'll come right back and talk to you if you wanna talk." She hurried over to the candy jars; the girls were lifting off the lids and looking inside. "Stop it," she told them, "I can't sell that if you put your grubby fingers all over it."

One of the children whispered, "That lady's crying." I turned my face away from them and wiped under my eyes with the napkin. Mascara streaked the white cotton, sooty and smudged.

The children paid for their candy and left; Ruth bustled over to me, carrying another pot of tea.

"You drink some of this now," she said, and poured a cup. She settled across the counter from me. She watched me for a few seconds, then said, "Hon, what on earth is troublin' you so much?"

I sipped my tea. My nose and eyes felt hot and swollen, but the warmth of the tea felt good. I knew I had to get back home soon, so I told bits and pieces of my story to Ruth: that I was living with my mother-in-law, that I had a daughter named Kathleen, that my husband had been a boxer and worked in Hollywood movies now.

“He’s divorcing me,” I said, tears springing to my eyes again. “He’s leaving me for Mae West, can you believe it? He was a chauffer or something in one of her movies. They’re going to have a big wedding and I’ll see pictures of it in all the newspapers.”

“Mae West?” Ruth said. She lit another cigarette. “You know what, honey? I always thought she was some kind of broad. Never saw her movies much. She offended me, you know? Wigglin’ her fanny around like a big white cat in heat.”

I told her about Casimir, too. Ruth blew out a plume of smoke before answering me in a soft voice.

“That’s too bad, honey. He was a sweet one, no doubt about that. Good to people. But I do know he had his heart set on goin’ to New York.”

“Do you have his address?”

“Sure, it’s on that postcard he sent. I’ll give it to you if you want it, but I don’t know where I put it just yet. Why dontcha come back tomorrow? If the other girl’s here, just ask for me. My name’s Ruth Pimbury.”

I thanked Ruth and took coins out of my purse to pay for the tea.

“Honey, we use the cheapest stuff in the world here. It ain’t worth the price we charge. Save your money for you and your kid, okay? And you come back here tomorrow. Anytime’s okay, ‘cause weekdays ain’t so busy.”

Kathleen was already home when I pushed open the kitchen door. I felt relieved to see Mamma Nonna sitting with her at the kitchen table; Kathleen had a bowl of Mamma Nonna’s escarole soup in front of her. Usually she called escarole soup

“disgusting, with weeds in it,” but today, she spooned up the soup without complaint and chatted with Mamma Nonna in simple Italian. I thought of the note her kindergarten teacher sent, years ago, telling me to speak only English with Kathleen, as my daughter was teaching all the other children Italian words. Mamma Nonna saw me with the note and noticed my distress. I showed the note to her

“That woman can kiss my *culo*!” she said, shaking her finger at the piece of paper, as if it were the teacher herself. “Italian is the language of emperors!” But she took Kathleen aside later and gently told her, “*Parla inglese a scuola, Katarina. Inglese solo a scuola.*”

“Mary, have a bowl of soup with us,” Mamma Nonna said.

I shook my head, even though she had already risen to her feet. I opened the door to my room, slipped inside, and changed out of my good clothes into a housedress. I hung my coat in the closet, then folded my skirt and blouse. These I put into a cardboard box marked “Winter Things,” which had been standing, open and empty, for days beneath my bedroom window.

I didn’t dress nice the next day, just wore what Rose called my “frump clothes”—a baggy beige sweater, a plain black skirt, my dark coat over everything. As I dressed, I thought about Casimir, about what I’d say in a letter to him. There was a box of beautiful writing paper in a stationery store uptown, creamy white, the edges bordered with small pink tulips. I had just enough extra money for the paper and the streetcar ride into Boston and back home. I knew I could do the whole trip in an afternoon.

The weather had turned cold again. I'd wondered all winter if I'd ever see any more than a few sparse days of blue sky. I had to throw my wool scarf over my head as I walked down to the soda fountain; the wind lifted my hair, messing it up and making me cold. Slush dribbled over the sidewalk; a light snow had fallen last night.

"Sure wish I'd grabbed my galoshes," I thought

The soda fountain had a fair number of customers, despite the cold day; I saw a couple holding hands over one of the small marble tables. The man wore a gray suit and the woman had on a beautiful peacock blue dress, her blonde hair in a tight roll. I walked though a cloud of Chanel when I passed by their table.

"I don't want to tell you," she said to him; a giggle in her voice. I smiled a little at how sweet they looked together. I'd been feeling a little better last night, since I knew I'd be getting Casimir's address soon.

Ruth noticed me right away and waved her hand. I felt like I'd come at the worst possible time, since several of the tables were full. I sat down at the counter.

Ruth walked right over to me, despite all the customers.

"Hey, Mary, you look a lot better today. Roses in those cheeks. You want somethin'?"

I nearly said, "Casimir's postcard," but I asked for tea instead.

"You sure are the tea drinker. Like my Mum. She's a Brit, you know. Straight from London."

"Were you born in London?" I asked. I didn't hear a trace of an English accent in her voice.

“Nah. I was born right here in Boston, at Mass Gen. You want sugar with that tea, hon?”

I nodded. Ruth’s slip-on shoes clacked as she walked off to wait on another customer. “She’s a little across the beam,” I thought, “Must be all the ice cream she eats here.”

Father Hinger at Star of the Sea had to remind me often at confession that it was a sin to have uncharitable thoughts about people. “Our Lord judged no one,” he said to me last Saturday though the confessional’s iron grille. “And a woman must always show kindness. Our Lady was forever humble and loving, even when her son hung bleeding to death on the cross.”

I almost asked him about the time when Jesus ran away at twelve to preach in the temple and the Blessed Mother practically had a cow when she found him, but I thought better of it. I just listened to him give me my penance—ten Hail Marys, as usual—and recited the Confiteor.

I startled out of my thoughts when Ruth put a teapot down in front of me, and a glossy postcard.

“Casimir’s no Shakespeare, so the message isn’t long or nothin’,” she said, “But that’s his address.”

I felt my face heat up when I turned over the postcard, as if I were looking at Casimir himself. Scrawled on the back of the postcard were an address and one sentence, “Having a grate time folks”.

“He has awful handwriting, to say nothing of his spelling,” I thought as I took a pen out of my purse and scribbled the address on a napkin.

“You can have that, hon. I already wrote it in my book.” Ruth had come by with the sugar.

“Thank you,” I said. I turned the card over and studied its picture of the Brooklyn Bridge spanning bright blue water.

Customers cleared out; Ruth took dishes and cups from the tables. The two lovebirds eventually left, holding hands and smiling. Ruth went to clean their table. She walked by me with her tray; dishes clattered as she placed them in a black dishpan on a trolley behind the counter. The only customer left was an old man sitting on the far side of the shop, drinking coffee and reading the Boston Globe.

“Those two always get my goat,” Ruth said. “They’re here every couple of days. He talks to her about all these fancy hotels he takes her to, and she tells him which ones she likes and don’t like. ‘Oh, the shower’s not hot enough there,’ she’ll say. ‘The mattress is too thin there.’ Stuff like that.”

“Nice guy, to take her to all those hotels,” I said. I blew on my tea to cool it; I wanted to get home and tell Anna to watch Kathleen, so I could go uptown to get ahold of that nice stationery, and maybe even a new pen.

“Nice guy, my foot,” said Ruth. “He’s married, and she’s not the missus. Mum saw them in here, told me later that the wife and kids and the guy go to her church every Sunday, the Episcopalian one across town. He brings Blondie in here like I don’t know what’s what. And Blondie’s a fool. Keeps askin’ him when he’s gonna leave the wife.

Says she's sick of waitin' by the phone for his calls, sick of spendin' her Saturdays alone. 'Oh, I had nobody at Christmas to help me decorate my tree.' All whiney-like. Well, let me tell ya, nobody ever leaves the wife."

I stared at her. Ruth turned and walked over to the elderly man, coffee pot in hand for a warmup. She bent down.

"Hey, old-timer, you gonna drink my coffee and read that paper from now until Doomsday?" she roared, straight into his ear. He didn't even jump.

"If it means I can look at your beautiful face, Ruthie, I will," he said.

"You need anything else, Bill?" she yelled. "I gotta get off my feet for a minute."

"No, I'm fine, sweetheart." He turned a page.

To my surprise, she sat down at my table.

"Bill's deaf as a post," she said. "Can't hear a word I say unless I bellow at him. You don't mind if I sit here, do you, hon?" she asked as she lit a cigarette.

"No, it's fine," I said, even though I didn't particularly like the smell of cigarettes.

"God, what a day. Seems like more people come in on a cold day than a hot one. They want coffee and pie on days like this, though. Half of the East End's puttin' on the flesh just because of this place, I think." Ruth stretched her arms and put her feet up on a chair.

"So how you doin', hon? You were quite the waterworks when I saw you last."

"I'm better." I poured tea into my cup. Ruth's comment about men never leaving their wives for another woman still itched at me, enough to make me open my mouth.

"You know," I said, "Sometimes they do leave their wives."

Ruth sat up straight and opened her eyes wide.

“Oh, Christ Almighty, I’m sorry. I forgot about it—old Mae and all. I just see that bastard every couple of days with Little Miss Blondie and I get so mad.”

She must have said that loud enough for Bill to hear, because he chuckled and told her, “That’s my Ruthie, always shooting off that pretty little mouth.” He walked towards us, the paper tucked under his arm, and handed Ruth a few coins.

“Thanks, Bill, you’re a dear,” she yelled.

“Can I keep this paper, Ruthie? I haven’t finished the funnies.”

“You should be in the funnies, not read ‘em, Bill, but go ahead.”

I wondered why Ruth wasn’t hoarse from raising her voice at Bill, but I guessed she was used to it. Bill smiled at both of us and walked out.

“He’s pretty energetic for a man his age,” I said.

“Yeah, he’s all right. Flirts with me like a dandy, but he’s really got a crush on Mum. Comes in here hopin’ she’s at the counter. Never says much when she’s here, though, just looks at her all googly-eyed.”

“Is there something about this place that makes everyone fall in love here?” I asked Ruth, only half-joking.

“I thought about that myself. Then I figured it was all the chocolate and sugar. Makes all the little kids wild and the adults goofy. I don’t eat none of it myself. Gotta let go some ballast on these old ironsides.” She slapped her hip.

Ruth stubbed out her cigarette and walked behind the counter. I put some change on the table, thanked her, and turned to go.

“Hey, Mary, wait a minute.” I looked at Ruth. She had a dishcloth in one hand, a soda glass in the other.

“Look, I feel pretty bad about what I said, and I was thinkin’. I’m cookin’ dinner for Mum on Friday night. English stuff, you know, roast beef, horseradish cream, Yorkshire puddin’, all the things she likes. Why don’t you come on over and join us? I make enough food to feed an army.”

I hesitated. “I’m Catholic and we can’t eat meat on Fridays. Just fish. And I have a little girl; she gets bored pretty quickly.”

“Shoot, you don’t have to eat the roast. I can even make somethin’ else. Mum loves a good fish pie, or a chowder. And you can bring your daughter, too. My mother loves kids. Keeps buggin’ me to find a swain, get married, pop her out some grandbabies.”

Ruth polished a few glasses. “So whaddya say, hon? Six o’clock Friday?”

I thought about it. What did I have to lose? If it was awful—if Ruth turned out to be as overbearing as Rose—I never had to go there again.

“Okay. Six o’clock Friday. That’s fine. Where do you live, Ruth?”

I knew the neighborhood she described, close to the Moschella family’s first store, Vesuvius; she even shopped there occasionally and knew Carmine Moschella.

“My Italian neighbors keep tryin’ to teach me how to cook,” she said. “I think I’m gettin’ better. Anyway, we’ll see ya Friday, you and your kid. She’ll like my doll collection. I don’t mind if kids play with ‘em, long as they’re careful.” I set some coins down on the counter, thanked her, and walked out into the gray afternoon.

Escarole Soup

Get one thing out of the way at the start: you're going to need a little cooked macaroni or other pasta. Not too much, and you can use leftovers if you have some, it works pretty well the next day, but make sure it's there, cooked, before you start.

This soup goes together pretty quickly. You'll need a nice head of escarole, washed of course. Cut the leaves into narrow strips. Melt some butter—a fair amount—in a pan, then add the escarole and a quarter of an onion chopped pretty small. In a few minutes, when the escarole is getting wilted, add a couple of cans of broth and a pinch of nutmeg. Some of my relatives would be furious at me for using canned broth, but I don't want to spend my whole life in the kitchen to make broth when I can get perfectly good broth at the market.

When the broth comes to a boil, add the cooked pasta, and cook for a moment; then add salt and pepper to your liking; and when it's done, it's done. I like to sprinkle a little Parmesan on top when I eat it.

Mary Vardaro (Nonni)

Chapter Ten

Memorare

After we came home from Ruth's, Kathleen complained that she was still hungry and thirsty. I poured a glass of milk for her and heated some escarole soup—Mamma Nonna made a huge pot of it every week and stored leftovers in the refrigerator. Kathy had finally stopped saying that Mamma Nonna made it with weeds when my mother-in-law showed her how to cook it. A few dishes soaked in the sink; Mamma Nonna had probably been called out and left them for when she got back home. I decided to wash them for her; I scrubbed and, after she finished her meal, Kathleen offered to dry them, a task she liked. She polished each piece over and over until the surface shone: a pink serving bowl with a faded silver rim, a small white platter with a gaudy yellow sunflower at the center. Lately, Kathleen had begun to be concerned about so many small dirtinesses: a speck of hardened food on a plate made her rush to the sink, to wash and dry the plate immediately. Mamma Nonna said, "Look at her, the hard worker," but sometimes I felt uneasy about the way Kathleen inspected her clothes every few hours for dirt and stains, or came out of the bath at night with her skin bright pink from rubbing it so hard with a washcloth.

As we'd emptied our closet that week, Kathleen liked to go inside and sweep the floorboards, bringing out dust I didn't know could exist in such a bare space. To make the room look a little homelike during our last days there, I kept a white linen runner on the dresser, and a few small things: my Mary stature, my rosary of red glass beads, a

china clown I'd had since I was a small child. Propped against the clown, the Mass card from my mother's funeral, Our Lady on the front, all in blue, her veil spangled with stars, and the Memorare on the back in Latin, the prayer for refuge. Kathleen liked to dust the Mary statue with a small feather duster Mamma Nonna loaned her. I let her do that before bed. The runner looked dingy and I realized I hadn't washed it in months. I picked up the Mary statue and placed it carefully on my bed, cradled by the pillow. I took the other things off and lay them on my bed also. I went into the bathroom to put the runner into our laundry basket; when I came back, Kathleen was holding the Mass card.

"Ma, who was Josephine LaConte Vardaro?" she asked, sounding out the words carefully.

"She was my mother, *Katarina*. Remember? Your grandmother Josephine. She's in heaven now with the angels."

"Is that why they gave her this card?"

I smiled in spite of the sadness that I always felt when I thought about my mother.

"No, *Katarina*, they gave these out at her funeral."

My daughter turned the card over and looked at the prayer. Kathleen knew a little Latin from Mass and school, but the nuns always complained that she was slow to read the language.

"What is this prayer, Ma?" she asked. I translated it for her; she wondered what one of the lines meant.

I thought about it. Thoughts came so slowly to me these days, as if winter had settled in my mind and refused to leave. We were sitting close on the bed; I could feel the warmth from her small body. She gazed up at me, her brown eyes calm, as if she already knew the answer.

“Well, *cara*, in this prayer, we asked Mary for her intercession. That means if you pray this prayer, the Blessed Mother will help you with whatever you ask for. We call her our mother in this prayer because she tries to be the mother to everyone in the world.”

“I prayed to the Blessed Mother for a Shirley Temple doll on my birthday and I got a Raggedy Ann instead,” Kathleen said.

I remembered that particular birthday tantrum, and didn’t feel like talking about it. I told Kathleen to put on her nightgown; while she changed, I put everything back on the dresser.

My daughter came over to me with a bag of curl rags in her hand. She sat between my knees as I brushed out her black hair into sections and rolled them on the old, soft rags. Kathleen chatted about how, at school that day, Sister Ursula’s veil blew open just a little when she was walking the children to the school gate.

“It was so windy, Ma! Sister Ursula had to hold her veil with one hand. I was standing right behind her. I got to see under her veil before she pulled it down. She had a big gray bun at the back of her neck, just like Mamma Nonna. Jimmy O’Reilly said all nuns are bald, like old men. He said they shaved their heads every morning before school starts.”

“Well, now you know that’s not true,” I said. Kathleen settled into her bed under the window and I tucked the covers around her. I listened to her prayers, the ones I’d taught her from the time she could first talk: a prayer to her guardian angel, a prayer to the Holy Family. I kissed her, turned out the overhead light and switched on her nightlight, a flat yellow disc that plugged into a socket above the baseboard. The nightlight was engraved with a smiling cow jumping over a crescent moon; Anna and Mike had bought it for her when she was five and began to be afraid of the dark.

I sat cross-legged on my bed, listening as my daughter’s breath slowed. Seeing Ruth and her mother tonight made memories of my own mother come back in a rush. I thought of how she had said the Memorare out loud every night when my older sister Lucille was dying. Lucille was so young, only eighteen years old; the doctor said she had cancer that started in her leg bone and quickly moved to her lungs. Before she got ill, she resembled a grown-up version of Kathleen, shining black hair, dark eyes, cheeks the color of pink flowers. I could never remember Lucille before she got sick without a sudden picture right after that of how she looked when she was dying. It rose up like something out of the shadowy bottom of a well: sunken cheeks, white skin, her lips cracked and bleeding.

“I thought Lucille would be my only child,” my mother said once when we were changing her soiled bed linen. She often talked out loud when she took care of Lucille, as if I wasn’t there. I knew my mother had married my father when she was fifteen and had given birth to Lucille a year later. Seven years passed before I was born.

“And then, four more after you, Mary, almost one every year!” she’d said. I helped her settle clean white sheets and two gray blankets over Lucille’s still body. I watched my mother as she filled an eyedropper from a blue bottle and slipped it into Lucille’s mouth. The doctor said to put the drops on the back of Lucille’s tongue every hour. My mother kept a brass alarm clock set those weeks Lucille was at home, its burr so loud that it broke open my sleep every night, so I always heard my mother’s footsteps as she passed my bedroom door and her quiet voice in the next room, talking to Lucille as if she were her baby again. My sister didn’t seem to be in pain or open her eyes much; her lips moved sometimes, but no sound came out.

I helped my mother when I wasn’t in school, bringing her tea and cool, wrung-out cloths for Lucille’s forehead. Somehow I thought those cloths would make Lucille better and she would wake up to become the sister I once had, dressing me up in her hats and kid gloves, letting me wear a ratty fox stole she’d picked up someplace and was trying to mend so she could wear it to church. Rose had been even closer to Lucille than me and slept clutching that fox stole; I often had to climb into Rose’s bed at night, to rub her back as she sobbed. Rose told me things in broken sentences, a story about a friend of hers at school who lost both her sisters and her mother in the same month, how everyone in her class was praying for Lucille, but she never got better, and because of that, Rose had stopped believing that God heard her prayers, that she was afraid, so afraid.

At night, Mother said her rosary next to Lucille’s bed. She had an olive-wood strand of beads—from Jerusalem, she told me—and prayed silently; I guess she was scared of bothering Lucille. But she always said the Memorare out loud.

I wondered what would have happened to me if my mother had been alive when John left. I often fell into thinking about this, sometimes letting my daydream get away with me so much that none of my work got done. Other times, I prayed to her, my own mother, instead of the Blessed Mother. But tonight, like Rose, I didn't think either of them could hear me, one cold in the earth, the other locked away in a heaven that I couldn't imagine tonight, except to think of it as the color of the sky I saw beyond my bedroom window, pure black and full of white, sharp-pointed stars.

School let out in mid-June. There was an end-of-the-year show at Kathleen's school; I dressed in one of my church dresses and sat in the back row, fanning myself with the program. I was the only woman in the audience that night whose husband wasn't with her, and I found myself thinking about that, instead of concentrating on the children in Kathleen's class as they performed a jerky, hesitant folk dance, urged on by a red-faced Sister Ursula.

Kathleen's dress gleamed under the shaky spotlights, which flickered every time the children jumped. I'd made her costume from a green velvet skirt Anna found in the attic; I shortened the skirt and attached it to one of Kathleen's school blouses. Then Anna and I glued gold and silver sequins on the collar and around the hem.

We worked on the dress in Anna's kitchen, dabbing glue with small paintbrushes onto green velvet, sequins sticking to our fingers and falling like miniature coins to the floor. We both moaned from time to time about the sticky glue and the slippery little sequins.

“Still, sewing them all on would just take forever,” Anna said. She brushed back a lock of her hair and a sequin stuck to it.

As my daughter kicked and turned on the stage, I thought of how Anna and I had taken a break from the costume and straightened up in our chairs, rubbing our tired shoulders and hands.

Anna touched my arm gently and said softly, “Mary, you are my sister forever. You know that, don’t you?” Sudden tears stung my eyes, but I blinked them away as I lowered my head. Still, I couldn’t hold them all back; a few dropped onto the skirt’s green velvet, spotting it. Anna didn’t mention them. I glanced up to see her staring too hard at the costume as she leaned back over it and dotted glue on cloth as if her life depended on it.

I thought of how Mike came down to my room that morning to help tie rough string around the last of my boxes. He sat down on the floor next to me, measured and cut string; then he put both string and scissors down and rested his hand on a box.

“Mary, if you need anything at all—money, clothes, food for you and little *Katarina*, come to us. We’d give you our last crumb. You understand? You never need to pay us back, not for anything.”

I’d only nodded, my throat so tight that I couldn’t reply. I was beginning to know that there would be so many changes now, more than just moving over to Rose’s house. I knew I’d never be able to run upstairs to Anna and Mike’s flat to borrow thread from Anna or ask for her help with a pattern. I wouldn’t be able to hear Mike and Anna calling me from the top of the stairs to listen to “Jack Bene,” as Anna called him, the

three of us crowded around their little radio, Mike laughing so hard at the jokes that he sometimes couldn't catch his breath, Anna and I giggling like two little girls as we mended clothes or darned stockings. I was going to become a stranger to Mamma Nonna's house and to everyone in it, whether I meant to or not.

I opened the school program and saw there was only one song left. All the children crowded together on the stage to sing "Salve Regina," the littlest ones standing in front, looking like they were about to fall off the stage, it was so packed. I craned my neck to see Kathleen, smiling and singing at the top of her lungs in the third row.

"She sure loves an audience," I thought.

Kathleen wouldn't go to sleep that night. "Too much cake and ice cream at school," I thought. It was past eleven when I finally stopped telling her to lie down, and told her she could read a book. We had a few left in the room, my Bible and a children's *Lives of the Saints*, which I handed to her. Kathleen opened it and I told her I would be in the kitchen. I made a cup of tea at the stove; Mamma Nonna's house was quiet, everyone in bed.

Mamma Nonna was out delivering a baby, something that happened less often these days. "Everyone wants the doctor and the Massachusetts General," she lamented from time to time. Still, she had enough births going on that she occasionally had a fair distance to roam in the neighborhood. Sometimes her sons could escort her back and forth, but not all the time, and I always felt afraid for her whenever she had to walk by herself early in the morning or late at night.

Her youngest son, Roland, told me that nobody would dare rob Mamma Nonna.

“She’s so tough, she’d end up stealing from the thief,” he said, but I still worried about her. Even though tonight was my last night in her house, I still waited up, listening for the turn of her key in the lock. I wondered if anyone would do that for her when I was gone.

Mamma Nonna walked into the kitchen near midnight. She put her satchel down on a chair—a satchel of crackled brown leather she told me she’d taken on the steamer with her from Italy. She described once what the satchel had held on that long voyage.

“Herbs from my mother’s garden, some linens my sister and I embroidered. A portrait of my mother someone sketched one day outside our bakery. Little things, things a mother gives a daughter when she’s going away from her house.” Now the bag held supplies Mamma Nonna used at birthings: sharp scissors, fresh cloths, a roll of white string. She kept these wrapped in a piece of flannel, and never left the house without making sure everything in the satchel was clean.

I asked her if she’d like a cup of tea; she nodded and removed her coat and the black muffler she wore over her head. I turned to the stove, a white Westinghouse gas stove she called “*il miracolo*,” the miracle.

“No more praying to Saint Jude that the oven might work well enough to cook a decent meal,” she said when her sons and Mike installed it. She kept it as immaculate as the day it arrived in her home, though its gleaming whiteness looked a little out-of-place in the dark kitchen, like a pretty bride at a funeral.

When the tea finished steeping, I poured it into a flowered cup and set one in front of her.

“*Katarina* still awake?” Mamma Nonna asked, motioning towards our door, a sliver of light showing beneath it.

“I don’t know. She couldn’t sleep. All that excitement at school.”

“Ah, well. Best to leave her alone. She doesn’t have to get up as early tomorrow.”

We drank our tea. My mother-in-law was too silent. Usually she’d tell me every small detail of the birth, from how much pain the mother had, and the nervous antics of the fathers. Many of them claimed to feel labor pains in their own stomachs, or ate so much during the pregnancy that their round, full bellies matched their wives’. But now Mamma Nonna just stared into her teacup as if it held a message for her.

I wondered how long it would be before I ever sat with her again. I knew I could never spend another holiday in this house. Anna and I had already planned that she and Mike would take Kathleen here on her birthday and for a few hours on the other holidays, in case her father happened to show up. I hated knowing that my child’s time on those days would be scattered like a puzzle someone carelessly dropped, one piece here, one piece there. But it was the only way I could figure out to let her have time with her relatives and avoid John myself.

I looked around the kitchen, at the rows of shelves, the neat stacks of plates and rows of glass jars, the glassed-in cupboard which held Mamma Nonna’s good china, the small clock on the wall, painted above the face with a crescent moon and clouds.

I felt badly about the fact that, in all the time I lived here, I wanted to be someplace else. I knew I needed to say something to Mamma Nonna, to let her know I

had gratitude for allowing me a place in her home. Just before I started to speak, she looked up at me.

“Mary, *viene qui*. There is something you and *Katarina* need to have,” she said.

I followed her out of the kitchen and up two flights of stairs, our steps muffled by the heavy carpet. We entered her bedroom, a place I had never ventured into, although I had glimpses of it often as I passed it in the hall. It smelled faintly of the beeswax candles Mamma Nonna kept lit night and day in red glass holders on a small shelf. Behind the candles, a painting of the Blessed Mother in a wooden frame, side-by-side with a pencil portrait of a woman with an angular face, her dark hair coiled on top of her head. The woman stood in front of a wall of rough bricks, arms crossed, her mouth in a faint smile.

Mamma Nonna lit the green globe lamp on her dresser. I glanced at the coverlet on her bed, red silk embossed with roses, topped with white pillows edged in lace. Her dresser held boxes of polished wood inlaid with mother-of-pearl flowers and leaves. Mamma Nonna took a key ring from her dress pocket and unlocked the largest box. The box opened out onto its hinges to reveal a plush interior of wine-colored velvet, divided into little compartments. My mother-in-law muttered to herself in Italian as she searched the box; I saw her fingers move aside ropes of pearls, jet beads that winked in the dull light, silver filigree bracelets. Then she pulled out a drawstring linen pouch and motioned me to sit down on the trunk at the foot of the bed, the steamer trunk she had taken with her to America.

“Open your hands,” she said.

I wondered if the pouch contained money, it looked so heavy, but when she pulled the bag open and tipped it, a solid gold snake slid into my upturned palms.

I knew this piece of jewelry from a story Mamma Nonna told me. She'd given birth to her last child, Roland, in this bedroom, and her husband had brought the snake necklace home as a present.

"But only after he left me alone all night with only Signora Rubino to tend me and Anna to mind the other children," she said. "It was Anna who first held the baby, not his father. Pietro sneaked back home early in the morning and peered like a fox at the little one in the cradle. I rolled over and stared at the wall, not speaking one word to him. He placed a parcel on the bed and then left the room. I lay on my side a long time, until the baby began to fuss. I opened my gown, put the baby in the crook of my arm to nurse, and opened the parcel with my other hand.

"I couldn't believe how real it looked. See how it's made out of flat gold pieces that fit into each other perfectly and yet made the snake flexible. These are real diamonds on its head, and the stone dangling from its mouth is a diamond also. But what I looked at for a long time were these eyes, two emeralds, the fire in them like the eyes of a real viper, its mouth full of poison. The first time I looked into them, I thought of something my mother taught me, long ago when I was a child. She taught me to wait quietly on the road if a snake was there, giving it a lot of room to slip away into the bushes. She told me that snakes had wisdom of a sort, to know when to spend their venom and when to hold it back."

I touched the snake's tail, a coil of rigid gold engraved with Roland's birthdate. Mamma Nonna showed me how to wear it; she unscrewed the diamond-paved head and draped the snake's body around my throat, then slipped the snake's neck through the coiled tail and screwed the head back on. The necklace felt icy against my skin, its weight like a heavy gold noose. The snake's head hung low on my chest, its diamond tongue resting just above my heart.

I turned towards Mamma Nonna. "I can't take this from you," I said.

"No, I want you to have it. It's yours. And when *Katarina* is of age, pass it to her. Pietro handed this to me out of his guilt, sleeping with some *puttana* on the very night of his son's birth. All these years, I have never been able to wear this for the memory of what it meant. Oh, I've taken it out sometimes to look at it, to slither it along this bed, idle play like that of a silly child. But a gift like this should be given a different way, a way that cleanses it of everything it was before. To remind you that you and *Katarina* were more than just boarders in the house of your mother-in-law, more than just the wife and child my son left behind. You understand? And for love, Mary. A gift given out of love, for both my granddaughter and the woman who brought her into this world. I hope that you come to see it this way, to know it was the least I could do."

I carefully took off the necklace and slipped it back into its pouch, my sudden tears gathering the room into a single, gleaming blur. Mamma Nonna stood up.

"You have a long day ahead of you tomorrow, Mary," she said. "No need to be exhausted." I nodded and squeezed her cold, hard hand, picked up the pouch, and

walked out of the room. She reminded me to light the hall lamp so I could see my way downstairs, then gently shut her door behind me.

Rose had always said of me, “Mary, you’re a little bit pretty and a little bit smart.” I could never tell whether she was complimenting me or making sure, in her roundabout way, that I knew I was a little bit ugly and a little bit stupid. I remembered this often the week I moved into Rose’s flat.

Rose’s flat sprawled over one floor of a tall brown house, five blocks away from Mamma Nonna’s. Those five blocks were worlds away from the old houses in Mamma Nonna’s neighborhood, each with big back and front yards, old trees casting shadows on the sidewalks. The houses were thinner, more crowded together in Rose’s neighborhood, and the lawns shrank to small patches of grass.

Rose’s husband Joe kept flowers blooming all spring and summer in the two brick planters that flanked their stairs. He told me that he liked color; sometimes red geraniums, a few tall sunflowers, dahlias, marigolds, and zinnias all grew together in the same planter, crammed against each other like people elbowing for space. I never learned much more about Joe except for his love of gardening. He generally said only, “Yes, Rose,” “That’s fine, Rose,” “You know what’s best, Rose.” When he wasn’t trying his best to dodge my sister’s temper, Joe sat in a worn armchair which had once been maroon but had faded to a muddy pink; he looked through seed catalogues and books on gardening, or sometimes worked a crossword puzzle. He treated me politely, tipping his

hat and saying, "*Buon giorno*," or "*Buona sera*," whenever we crossed paths going in or out the front door.

Rose promised us an attic room in the townhouse. It was full of dusty boxes, bags of old clothing, even a dress dummy with a yellow tape measure around its neck. Despite the dust and clutter, the room had large windows and two good-sized closets. Rose and I spent weeks before my move carrying boxes downstairs to the basement; sometimes Primo came by to take care of the heaviest things. Finally, the only thing left in the room was the dress dummy. Mike and Primo had moved everything in one day; our boxes and furniture barely filled a corner. Anna brought over curtains she'd made out of soft pink gingham; she'd asked Mike to measure the windows.

I'd tried so hard to make moving seem like fun for Kathleen, but I knew she didn't really understand why we were going. Since she was a small child, she'd grow fretful every time she entered Rose's house, always asking me when we were going home. I let her help me as much as possible with fixing up our new room; one afternoon, we were polishing the windows when Kathleen stopped and looked up at me.

"Why can't we get our very own house together, Ma? I want my own bedroom, like Winifred Owen"

"Katarina, Winifred Owen's papa owns a big clothing store," I said. "We have to do the best we can with what we have."

"My papa's a movie star," she said. If you asked him, he'd give the money for it."

I had tried many times to explain to Kathleen that her father and I were going to live apart always. The words bunched in my throat when I said them, and I knew she didn't believe much of what I said. She had a game she played sometimes with her dolls, placing a girl doll with a pleated silver gown on one end of the bed, and a boy doll in a Venetian gondolier's outfit on the opposite end.

"And now the papa takes a long, long trip. And the papa takes the girl away with him and they both go to be movie stars," she'd say as she moved the boy doll and the girl doll together. Then she'd dress the girl doll in scraps of fur and lace from a bag I kept for her, full of dress trimmings.

Pizza Rustica

Mom only makes this at Easter, it's a special thing. I really like it, and when I grow up and have my own house and my own kitchen I'm going to make this all the time.

There's two parts, the shell and the filling. The shell seems simple, but it's really kind of hard. You start with two cups of flour, and you have to sift it before you measure it, and a teaspoon of salt. That's what Mom says, but she never fills the teaspoon full, so I think it's a little less. You also need a heaping half-cup of Crisco.

So you mix together the flour and salt, and then you put little bits of the Crisco into that and mix it in with a dough cutter. That's a funny tool, it kind of looks like an old potato masher we used to have, but it has a bunch of little blades in it instead of the flat mashing parts. Anyway, the dough cutter will chop up the Crisco bits and mix them into the flour. You just keep pushing it into the mixture, over and over, until it's kind of like sand.

When the Crisco is mixed into the flour you need to add an egg and a little less than a half cup of cold water. That's really really important, the water has to be cold or the shell won't turn out right. So just mix the egg and water in with the flour and Crisco, and make sure everything's pretty well mixed.

Now is the part that makes Mom crazy. You have to roll out the dough to make the crust. You only get one try to get this right, maybe two if you're lucky, but Mom says that if you roll it out twice the crust will be all tough and bad. The board has to be cool, and then you put the dough and you gently roll it out until it's a little larger than the

pie pan it's going into. Then you put it in the pan—Mom is really good at this—you roll it around the rolling pin, lift up the pin, and sort of unroll it over the pie pan. Then you press it into the pan to make it fit in all the corners, and then put it into the 'fridge for a few minutes while you make the filling.

The filling is really easy. You need a big tub of ricotta cheese, two pounds. You don't drain the cheese for this, like you do for lasagna, just dump it in a big bowl. Then there's a couple of cups of sugar, a little bit of salt—Nonni showed me how to measure it in the palm of my hand, it's a small pile—four eggs yolks, a tablespoon of vanilla extract, and a cup of milk: you mix all these ingredients together with the ricotta really well.

Don't throw away the egg whites when you get the yolks—I almost did that and Mom got really mad. You put the whites in a separate bowl and beat them with the electric mixer for a while. The little tips are supposed to fall over a little when you take the mixer out. Then you mix in the whites with the ricotta mixture, but you do it in a funny way: you're not allowed to just mix it up, you have to do it really gently, kind of picking up the mixture with the spoon and laying it over on the rest.

When it's all mixed, you get the shell out of the 'fridge and pour in the filling; then you put it all in the oven. Mom says this is important: it's 400 degrees for the first 15 minutes, then you turn down the thermostat a little for the rest of the time. It cooks until the filling is "done": Mom checks by sticking in a toothpick, if anything sticks to the toothpick it's not done.

Joanie McMillan

Chapter Eleven

Ghost Stories

Los Angeles, 1968

Soon after we moved to the Bahama Street house, I started telling my little sister stories about witches. Trish and I shared a room at the new house, spacious and bright, with one large closet and a smaller closet full of shelves, which held toys and board games. Before we moved, my mother sent out most of our bedroom furniture to be “antiqued,” as she called it, our maple dressers, headboards and vanity transformed from deep brown to a streaky, smeared white, as if someone spread chalk all over them. Mom bought round drawer pulls made of china with painted roses at their centers; those were the only things I liked about the new furniture. All the pieces were too white, too unfamiliar, like the house itself, so full of blank walls and the smell of fresh paint.

Everything and everyone seemed to go in different directions when we moved, both inside and outside the house. Nonni found a small apartment on Orion Avenue, close to the freeway. Her apartment was one long building with concrete porches that held the sun’s heat like a bake oven, each apartment door screened off by milky plastic partitions. Nonni visited our house every day after work, but it felt strange to know she was living so many streets away from us now, not just across our backyard.

Maryanne and David had their own rooms; my mother sent David’s furniture out to be antiqued, too; his bed and dresser came back in a strange, murky shade of teal. My

parents no longer slept in a bedroom at the center of the house; their room was behind our new living room, down a short, shallow hall. Mom kept the drapes drawn, so their room was always dark. One of the first things she did when she moved was to set up her saint's statues on her dressers. Our Lady, Saint Jude, the Infant of Prague. The darkness, the statues, the smell of perfume from the green and yellow bottles on her vanity, made me feel like I was standing in a small church whenever I entered my parents' room.

For weeks after we moved, trucks pulled up to the house, filled with shrubs and flowers; the men who drove those trucks planted everything, my father and mother standing outside, giving directions. The bare lot seemed to transform suddenly from raw dirt to a small oasis of camellias, jasmine, gardenias, and a spindly tree my mother called a "silk tree," which she said would be covered with flowers in the spring. She planted a yellow Peace rose next to the walkway leading to our front door, and a pear tree. My father brought home a bench made of pebbled pink stone from Builder's Emporium and sunk its legs deep into the soil beneath that tree. He put down four round stepping stones in the same material as the bench; I helped him take out little squares of green moss from black plastic pots; we planted them between the stones.

"The moss'll spread everywhere," he said, and eventually, after several seasons, it became a soft green carpet. Dan put a dichondra lawn in the front yard, and redwood bark chips around the pitted gray deck of our pool, which sparkled sky-blue in the day and alien green on the nights when I swam with my sisters and brothers under a Los Angeles night sky, with its sparse handful of stars. The water reflected in ripples off the

bark of the one backyard tree—a pale olive, the delight of all my Italian relatives, who pointed out to me its thin, silvery leaves and purple-black fruit.

“You could pick those olives and cure them. It’s a waste, they way they just fall all over the ground,” Nonni said, but my mother declared that it was too hard and nobody ever did those kind of things anymore.

The Bahama Street house was closer to Our Lady of Peace School, so Trish and I could walk home together instead of waiting for Mom to pick us up. Best of all, Nonni’s apartment was only a few blocks school, so we knocked on her door every afternoon. Sometimes she was even home; on those days, she laughed to see us and made us a “float,” with vanilla ice cream and orange soda or 7-Up. If I felt tired, she’d let me lie down on her bed. She’d bought a new bedroom set and, though her room was as dark as my parents’ room, it had different gleams and colors in it: a crystal basket filled with tiny red, yellow and green flowers, a crimson tapestry bedspread, the chocolate-colored wood of her dresser and headboard always shining and smelling of lemon furniture polish.

I felt like nothing bad could happen to me in Nonni’s house. The truth was that I had begun to tell stories over and over, to myself, to kids at school, to my sister, because it was easier to lose myself in a story than think about what was happening at home. For, out from under Nonni’s watchful eye, my parents began to drink openly, in front of us, more and more. I’d seen wine at family meals since I was a young child; my siblings and I sometimes lurked around the edges of the dining table after the adults left and drank the round rubies of wine dregs left in the bottoms of glasses. Once—I couldn’t have been older than five or six—my father gave me a tiny splash of beer to drink in my favorite

pink plastic cup. I ran around the house, shouting at the top of my lungs that I was drunk, until Nonni shushed me and said it wasn't funny.

Now my mother had glasses of white and red wine before, during, and after dinner; my father brought a tall can of Coors to the table and drank Jack Daniels afterward as he watched police shows on TV. He'd come in the front door after work, head for the refrigerator, open it, and pop the top of a beer can. His sigh of relief after that first sip punctuated every evening of my life and heralded anger and tension. If my grandmother came by—always after dinner, as she rarely ate with us when my father was there—my parents were like the cartoon characters I saw on TV who swept a giant pile of garbage under a rug, hiding it behind them with big, fake smiles.

Sometime during the move, I unearthed an old doll I named Jamila. Jamila was made like a rag doll, but out of printed pink satin instead of cotton. I decided to name her Jamila because she wore a bellydancer costume like the "I Dream of Jeannie" lady. The doll had wide black eyes which looked off to one side, and rosy lips puckered into a kiss. When I showed Jamila to Nonni, she said that the little sharp-pointed curls around Jamila's face were called spit curls.

I decided that the doll was magic, her silly costume just a disguise for other abilities. At night, I'd perch Jamila on my bedpost.

"She's a witch," I said to Trish. "She lives in a cave. Nobody else lives with her because they're afraid of her powers."

Trish held onto her stuffed purple dog and listened as I told her about Jamila the Witch. It wouldn't have mattered if my cat was the only living creature listening to me.

During the weeks after the move, I found myself telling story after story—not lies, but made-up tales. I had loved reading about Scherezade, her words keeping her alive for a thousand and one nights; I told stories as if my own life depended on it, too.

I kept a group of friends in my third grade class entertained at recess for a couple of months as we acted out a pretend game I invented.

“We’re sailing over the Rockies in a hot air balloon,” I told the group of girls huddled against the brick wall of the nuns’ convent, which bordered the playground.

“Andrea, you be the pilot. Molly’s the girl about to fall out of the basket.”

“We have to save her!” my friend Barbara shrieked. Molly splayed herself on the asphalt; we grabbed her ankles and hauled her back an inch or two towards the wall.

“She’s alive! She’s alive!” we shrieked, so loud that the yard monitor came over and told us to settle down.

Stories were becoming more important than the world going on around me. I especially liked to open a book on my lap during class; I sat in the back anyway, and my teacher, Miss Whittimore, never saw me. I hated Miss Whittimore anyway, mostly because her cute clothes and long, shiny red hair had made me things she was going to be as nice as my second-grade teacher, Sister Thomas Marian. Sister Thomas had red hair, too; a bit of it peeked out of her veil’s white headband. She had a soft Irish accent and told us her real name, Peggy, the one she had before she entered the convent. Miss Whittimore spent most of the day yelling at us; when that didn’t work, she told us to shut our mouths and sit on our hands.

“I don’t want to see anyone with their hands under our legs,” she snapped, patrolling the aisle between our desks. “Put them right underneath your bottoms.”

I slipped my hands beneath my thighs anyway. We sat that way for what seemed like hours, until the dismissal bell rang. I ran out of the classroom and took a drink from the big brick-and-tile drinking fountain.

“My hands are all numb now,” I said out loud to a group of girls from the class, just as Miss Whittimore passed by on her way to the teacher’s room. Her milky, freckled face looked smooth and she didn’t frown, but I looked right in her blue eyes, pale as ice, as she walked by. She looked right down at the ground and kept walking.

“Jamila catches people and makes them sit on their hands until they’re smashed flat, like big bloody pancakes,” I told Trish that night. “If they try to run away, she catches them by their feet and pulls them back in her cave.” Jamila sat in a cave I’d made from blankets and sheets, her satin body doubled over so that her head touched her knees.

“What does she do with them then?” asked Trish, her eyes wide. She clutched her purple dog close.

“She freezes them into paintings on her wall so they can never, ever get out.”

I’d been reading a book all week called *The Wicked, Wicked Ladies in the Haunted House*, which described the same thing: ghosts of women trapped in portraits, only these women were able to move in and out of the portraits, causing mischief and saying unbelievably rude things to people in the neighborhood. I read scary stories by the dozens, even an ancient paperback my brother had discarded, *The Arrow Book of Ghost Stories*. Its cover—which showed a huge, tattered white ghost hovering over a broken-

down shack—was half torn off and the pages were the color of the ochre crayon in my box of Crayolas. I especially loved the story of the Conjure Wives, who huddled together in their kitchen and tried to cook, even though a voice kept saying scary things to them. The Conjure-Wives kept saying, “Who’s there?”—but the voice just made fun of them. Finally they got so frightened that they shriveled into little owls, their eyes hooded with thick dark feathers, and flew away, though they kept up with saying, “Who, who?” until the end of their lives.

Sometimes, after Trish fell asleep, I took a flashlight (which I kept hidden between my mattress and the bedframe), crawled under the covers, and read more stories. Reading like that made me feel like a rabbit in its burrow. I formed shelves out of the covers, though they collapsed the minute I turned over. I made a hole for air between my two pillows and read, over and over, all the stories I knew by heart: The Water Ghost, The Woodman and the Goblins, the Wonderful Cat of Cobbie Bean.

Hiding under the covers helped me to not listen to my parents fighting in the kitchen; that was another new thing, the nightly sound of their raised voices. I’d started sleeping under the covers years ago, in the Woodley Avenue house, not because of my parents yelling at night, because of something Maryanne had told me, something I could never figure out was a dream or real. She swore that she’d woken one night to see an old man in a strange, fancy costume. He had a long beard and a little round hat on his head; he had his hands clasped together and kept bowing over and over; he watched her all the time with deep, dark eyes. I was only too happy to sleep under the covers after that.

“We have to, both of us,” Maryanne said, “Because I think he’s going to come back sometime.” I told her that I had been scared for a long time that ghosts rocked my bed at night, side to side, like a baby’s cradle—I could feel the gentle motion, like being on a drifting raft, just before I fell asleep almost every night. I didn’t want to see if anything was there.

“Should we tell Trish to sleep under the covers, too?” I asked Maryanne.

She thought about it. “No, she’s too little. She might get stuck. Besides, I don’t think the ghosts are after her.”

Now that we were living in a new house, I thought the ghosts from Woodley Avenue couldn’t follow us here, so I just read about them instead: ghosts of drowned women, their voices soft and whispery, like the wind in the eaves, a woman who found a tiny piece of white bone in the cemetery and took it home, only to have the cold, skeletal owner come looking for it, late at night when all the windows in the town had gone dark.

The house still filled with relatives every Sunday: my grandfather, and sometimes his brothers, Albert and Jerry. They’d been in California for years now; my grandfather got them jobs at movie studios; Albert was a prop man and Jerry did janitor work. The Indrisanos always visited on Sunday, and my father cooked everyone steak dinners. Nonni came over on Saturdays, and sometimes her brother, my Uncle Primo, came over with my Aunt Helen and their kids, Denise and Anthony. Sometimes Uncle Hank and Aunt Terry stopped by, too, though not as often. Nonni got along with Uncle Jerry and Uncle Albert just fine, but our grandfather and Nonni still were never invited to be in the

same house together; I thought something dangerous would happen if they did meet, my mother was that careful about it. If there was any chance her father would be in the house on a different day than Sunday, my mother called my grandmother soon enough for her to go shopping, or visit her friends. The only exception to this was Easter Sunday and any other holiday that happened to fall on Sunday, too. Those were always Nonni's days with us, no matter what.

Our first Easter in the new house approached; I looked forward to the long break from third grade and Miss Whittimore. She'd been nice to me only once, the day school got out for the Easter break. Apparently, she'd discovered a secret I'd been keeping: I couldn't tell time at all, and marked my school day by the different bells for recess, lunch, and dismissal. Miss Whittimore called me up to her desk one afternoon and told me to look up at the round clock above the row of white alphabet letters on a green cardboard background.

"Do you know about the big hand and the little hand?" she asked. I told her I did.

I knew that part of it pretty well, just not what the hands meant at the different numerals.

"Can you tell me what time it is, Joanie?" she asked. She always wore thick false eyelashes; one of them was peeled a little bit from her eyelid. I could see the strip of white adhesive.

I looked at a red enamel apple on her desk; it was actually a pencil sharpener, with a round hole like a worm hole, where the pencil point went in. Miss Whittimore

smiled. I thought about making up a lie on the spot; I knew she often smiled right before yelling, making kids jump right out of their desks sometimes. Lying was a good way to avoid getting yelled at, or worse. Mom had begun to slap me if I wiggled out from under a hard comb while she yanked on snarls in my hair, or played too rough with Trish. I remembered being spanked a few times at the house on Woodley Avenue—once I stared for a long time at my dad’s perfect red handprint on my thigh, watching the handprint fade slowly away—but the slapping and spanking was getting worse by the weeks at the Bahama Street house. My mother always seemed fooled by lies, so I became good at coming up with one in a split second.

Same with Miss Whittimore—when she’d quiz me about why I hadn’t done my homework, I never told her that the real reason was because I’d dump my backpack down in the living room, just in time for “Dark Shadows.” I’d forget about the bag, engrossed in watching Barnabas Collins stalk another screaming victim. After dinner, my parents—fueled by beer and wine at dinner—went off to the living room to fight, and I was too scared to get my book bag and the homework inside it. Sometimes Miss Whittimore believed my lies—the best one was that I had left it in my grandmother’s car and she’d driven off to her job at Topanga Plaza with it—but other times, she made me stay after school until I got all the work done. I felt a small, warm flush of triumph after every successful lie. I had a book when I was little, a fold-out book with a big hole on every page. The book came with a cardboard mouse that I wiggled through the holes into another scene. Every time I told a lie someone believed, I felt like that mouse, wiggling into a totally different surrounding that didn’t include punishment for me.

Miss Whittimore asked me again if I knew what time it was. I looked down at my shoes, cracked Oxfords my mother swabbed every night with white polish from the bottle with the picture of a smiling nurse on the label.

“I don’t know,” I finally said.

Nothing happened. Miss Whittimore didn’t yell at me or tell me to go to my desk and sit on my hands. Instead, she asked me to come back to her desk when school got out. When the dismissal bell buzzed, I was still at my desk, trying to zip up my book bag; its plaid cloth was frayed at the zipper and loose threads sometimes caught in it. Miss Whittimore walked over to my desk and handed me a clock made from a small paper plate. She’d written the numbers in black crayon and made big and little hands from a large and small brad, poked through the plate and opened up. She handed me a note in a lavender envelope.

“You give this to your mom, now. Tell her you need to work on this at break. And have a nice Easter, okay?” She walked back to her desk and riffled through some papers. I zipped up my bag and left.

Nonni’s small white car was in the driveway of our house; she sat with my mother at the kitchen table. They had stacks of paper in front of them, squares and rectangles in every color—half-sheets of folder paper, white paper, thin blue and green stationary, all webbed with spidery handwriting in ink or pencil, some pieces stained with oil or tomato sauce, many of them ripping along creases which had been unfolded and refolded many times over. These came from the “recipe drawer” next to the dishwasher; the drawer was crammed full of paper and Mom had to root through it, sometimes for an hour, to find a

recipe she wanted. I knew Mom and Nonni were planning Easter dinner—my grandfather spent it elsewhere, though Uncle Albert came over, and sometimes Uncle Jerry.

Mom never let me touch the recipes in the drawer; she said that some were old as the hills and would break apart if I messed with them. She let me take out some of the mini-cookbooks she got at Vons and kept in the recipe drawer; I especially liked *The Joys of Jell-O*, printed in colors as garish as real Jell-O. Occasionally, my mother and Nonni would page through the cookbook with me, chuckling over pictures of green and yellow molded salads with names like “Ring Around the Tuna” and “Hawaiian Eyeful.” I begged my mom to make a dessert from *The Joys of Jell-O* called “Broken Window Glass.” The recipe said to make Jell-O in different colors, cut it up into cubes, mix it with Dream Whip, then pour it all into a tall mold shaped like a crown. When unmolded and cut, the Jell-O cubes looked like pieces of stained glass suspended in a white cloud. My mother promised, but never got around to it; she didn’t care much for Dream Whip anyway.

Nonni liked the clock; she turned the brads around to face different numbers. My mother read the note, then put it down, folded her arms and stared at me for a second.

“I can’t believe you don’t know how to tell time,” she said.

“Kathleen, she’s just a child,” Nonni said. “It’s probably because she was so darn premature. Don’t you remember, Dr. Chudacoff said she’d have a few things to catch up on?” My mother had nicknamed Dr. Chudacoff “Dr. Chew-Your-Ear-Off” because he

talked so much. I got a shot every time I went to his office, except when I had a polio vaccine, when I got to drink sugar water from a pleated paper cup.

“Remember how she couldn’t button?” my grandmother asked. My mother uncrossed her arms and started unfolding recipe papers.

For years, I’d had a big pillow my mother and grandmother sewed me, blue denim on one side, heavy green cloth on the other. One side had two red felt flaps with buttonholes down one flap and big yellow buttons on the other. The pillow had eyelets and a shoelace on the other side; I remembered poking the shoelace through the eyelets and making a bow at the bottom. There was a zipper, too, that I could zip up and down. Nonni told me once that they made me a pillow because I took a long time to learn how to dress myself, my fingers awkward on buttons and zippers.

I went to the refrigerator and poured myself a glass of cherry Kool-Aid, which I brought to the table.

“For God’s sake, don’t spill that,” said my mother. She pushed a few recipes aside to make room for me. “Ma, do you think you’ll have time to make *pizza rustica* for Easter dessert this year?”

I loved the way Nonni looked today, in a dress that seemed like it was made from some kind of sweater fabric; it was long-sleeved and the skirt hung in soft folds below her knees. She called the color “Irish green” and wore a rhinestone brooch near the collar. The brooch was shaped like a star, only it had sixteen arms, not five; it looked like a many-armed starfish I once saw clinging to a rock at Malibu Beach. A pearl glowed in the center of the brooch, at the heart of all those sparkling rhinestones. I

craved that brooch for my dolls, but I would never steal from either my mother or Nonni. My thefts were confined to small things—a stick of vanilla incense from a long cardboard tube in my sister’s room, or a few sample Avon perfume bottles from the dozens crammed into the drawer of my mother’s vanity.

“Yeah, I have time, Kathleen. *Pizza rustica*’s simple—ricotta, eggs, sugar, a crust. Some lemon juice, some lemon peel. I’ll grate that fresh. I can put *acina pepe* in the ricotta, too, if you want.”

Acina pepe was a type of tiny, round pasta which my mother said Mamma Nonna always put into Easter ricotta pies and cakes, for good luck. I thought it looked a little like frog eyes.

“Okay. That’ll help me a lot, Ma.” My mother scribbled on a writing tablet in front of her, then raked all the recipes into one big pile in front of her, like a gambler collecting poker chips.

“Can you shop for all the stuff?” she asked Nonni. “It’s just a few things.” She started writing again on the paper, then creased it and tore it down the middle, giving one half to my grandmother. “Do you need any money for it?”

Nonni laughed. “God, no, Kathleen. I swear, sometimes I think you forget that I’ve got my own money now. Joanie, here, bring me that clock and I’ll show you how to tell time. It’s easier than it looks.”

She moved the brass hands around the clock’s cardboard face; by the time my mother finished folding up all the brittle recipe papers and slid the recipe drawer shut, I

had learned three positions on the clock: nine, six, and twelve, as well as the difference between noon and midnight.

I never liked Good Friday because of the three-hour church service; the only part of it that interested me was when Father Schneiders covered every statue in Our Lady of Peace Church with purple cloths. I'd already spent the last days of the school week in church, fidgeting through daily Stations of the Cross, half-hoping some kid would faint from the clouds of incense the priest lit at the end. Still, the whole Crucifixion story appealed to me, immersed as I was in scary tales at that time. There was nothing spookier to me than a dead body coming back to life, even if it was Jesus.

The day before school got out for Easter break, my friends and I sneaked into the church, which was on our school grounds. We often did that, especially when the weather was windy or cold. We'd kneel down in front of every statue, discussing their gorier aspects, even though each one of us had seen these statues hundreds of times, since we were babies. The life-sized Mary statue, in a marble niche just beyond the Communion rail, showed a blue-veiled Madonna standing on a half-globe of the world. A brown snake mottled with black lay on the globe, its head crushed under Mary's delicate, bare right foot. The snake's mouth splayed wide open, showing needle-sharp fangs. I looked into that snake's ribbed pink mouth every Sunday with enough fascination to sometimes make me not notice that the altar boy was sliding the gold paten under my chin.

Some of the statues were calmer-looking; a small one of St. Joseph stood just behind the pulpit; he had a big bunch of Easter lilies in his hand. Across the altar from him, St. Theresa of Avila held multicolored roses; she wore a yellow cloak like an olden-day princess. St. Anthony had a shaved head with a curly fringe, and he held Baby Jesus in one hand. Nonni told me that St. Anthony was the patron saint of lost things, and so I often prayed to him when I lost a bright pink shoe from one of my Liddle Kiddles, or a Barbie curler.

We always saved St. Lucy for our last leg of the tour around the church. St. Lucy wore an orange gown—saffron, my grandmother called it, with a row of squares embroidered at the hem. St. Lucy had hair as black as my mother's, and dark brown eyes. She held an olive branch in her left hand, and in her right, a white plate. Two round eyes were centered on the plate, their irises the same color as the ones in Lucy's head. The eyes had narrow tails of pink flesh on them, so they looked a little bit like two beached tadpoles.

Nonni told me that St. Lucy was the patron saint of eyes and eye diseases.

"You pray to her if you have any trouble seeing at all. She was my sister Lucille's patron saint," she told me one Sunday as we stood by the Lucy statue, waiting for my mother to join up with us in the crowd of people leaving church.

"Nonni, why does she have eyes on a plate?"

"Well." My grandmother opened up her big black pocketbook and slipped her white case inside. "It's kind of a bad story. She was a martyr. The Romans put her eyes out. That's why she carries them around on the plate."

“But why does she still have eyes in her head?”

“I don’t know, honey. Maybe God grew her some extra ones.”

My friends and I had picked handfuls of weedy flowers to put at the feet of each statue after we were done looking at it. I planned to put one on St. Lucy’s plate, to decorate it; the naked eyeballs always looked a little lonesome to me. We stopped when we opened the church door and stood in the glass-windowed vestibule, where the marble christening font loomed, all gold and veiny marble, behind a black iron grille.

“There’s a coffin,” said Andrea Hockenmaier. Andrea had bright red hair which her mother pulled up into a curly ponytail every day, securing it with a black bow. Mrs. Hockenmaier raised chickens and my mother sometimes went to their house after school to get a dozen fresh eggs. Mom marveled at the fact that Mrs. Hockenmaier had a cellar, to store the eggs and keep them cool. “You just don’t see cellars in California,” she told us.

“That is so weird,” said Molly McDermott, who was officially my best friend, equal to me in her love of scary books and her hatred for Miss Whittimore.

The gold coffin lay on a tall, wheeled platform, like a big metal cart. It had been trundled off to the side of the church, over by the confessionals, and it was banked with a huge spray of flowers: calla lilies as big as trumpets, gladiolas that looked like spikes of fire, and bright red roses.

Andrea dared me to touch it.

“No, that’s disgusting,” I said. I dared Molly. The dares went around and around our little circle, our laughter rising; I tried to shush the other girls, but it didn’t work.

Finally, I felt as if the energy of our laughter spun me out of the back of the church and down the side aisle, closer and closer to the coffin. I touched my pinky to its bright, cold metal. It was like the times I scuffed my feet on a carpet and then touched a doorknob, only the shock was raw fear. I ran back to my friends and we bolted out into the sunlight, scattering our handfuls of flowers as we raced at top speed back to the safety of our school.

The coffin was gone by Good Friday. I knelt next to Nonni and tried to say my rosary, but kept getting lost in watching its pink crystal beads pick up the sunshine from the church's high, narrow windows. Nonni had given me the rosary when I made my First Communion, telling me it was exactly like one she'd had as a little girl. Nonni's rosary was of blue glass; there was a long bead holding all the rosary decades together; the bead had a little bubble of Lourdes water in it. Nonni always closed her eyes when she said the rosary. I watched the priest drape every statue in the church; I knew the service would be over not long after that. I blinked my eyes against the too-bright sunlight; my eyes always took awhile to adjust after three hours in the dark church.

Holy Saturday always seemed like a too-bright day to me also, partially because of the frenetic activity inside my house. Mom didn't get after me to clean my room, though I had other chores; she was busy getting the lamb ready, scouring the kitchen, putting the good dishes through the dishwasher one more time, checking for spots on her crystal wineglasses. Today, she also was putting a meal together for my grandfather.

“Your grandpa hurt himself last week doing stunts for a movie. He’s walking on a cane. He can’t drive a car right now, so your dad’s taking him around to get some things for his house. He’s having lunch with us.”

I didn’t say anything; Mom banged the pots on the stove around in a way that made me wary of her. I didn’t know what to say about my grandfather, anyway; he pretty much ignored me most of my life, lavishing attention on my older sister instead. During our day-after-Christmas visit to his big house in the Hollywood Hills, my sister and I both sat on his couch of stiff black leather and cried as he gave Maryanne a pile of little dolls. He’d picked the dolls up in Egypt and Morocco when he was making a movie there. Maryanne scooped them all up into a cardboard box he’d fetched for her. Grandpa laughed at Trish and me as we cried; my sister just kept tossing dolls in the box and crowed in her loudest voice about her “real collection.”

“Trish and Joanie are just selfish, Dad,” Mom said. Her lit cigarette wove a halo of smoke around her head. She stubbed the cigarette out in a fluted blue ashtray and took a sip of a clear amber drink in a tall glass. After that day, I avoided my grandfather on the Sundays he came over. I liked his brother, my Uncle Albert, a lot better; when I was little, Uncle Albert read me any book I brought to him, even coloring books, and took all the kids out past Rayen Street to a wide, fenced-in field where brown horses grazed. A group of bald, bug-eyed Chihuahuas came to the fence and barked manically at us; they came from a house across the field. We laughed at them and fed fat, hissing geese pieces of bread, careful to avoid their beaks.

But when my grandfather walked into the house, leaning heavily on a wooden cane and walking so slow and stiff, I felt sorry for him. My dad had told me that my grandpa was in his sixties, yet he had no gray in his hair; I'd never seen him walk like an old man until today. He sat down at our kitchen table; I slipped past him and went outside to the front yard. A few camellias still hung on the bushes, and I picked three red ones for him. I lay the camellias next to the bowl filled with sugared ricotta my mother was just placing in front of him. I hated sugared ricotta, but Nonni told me once that all the Indrisanos ate it that way. Mamma Nonna apparently drowned her ricotta in nearly a whole bowlful of sugar, saying it was good for the blood.

Grandpa looked at me as if he were seeing me for the first time.

"Why, thank you, Joanie," he said. He lifted a spoonful of ricotta to his mouth.

"Dad, I've made some coffee, fresh. Would you like a cup?" said my mother, over the roar of the garbage disposal. She had out her new dish set, white, with a pattern called "Blue Onion." Every dish and cup had a curly blue tree on it, with strange, flat flowers on the branches. Between the clatter of the dishes, the fact that she was turned away from the kitchen window, and the noise of the garbage disposal, she couldn't have possibly have heard or seen Nonni as she opened our unlocked front door and walked straight into the sunlit kitchen.

Everyone in the room looked like the kids at Our Lady of Peace at the end of recess, when the freeze bell rang. We had to hold our exact positions, no matter what we were doing, until a second bell rang to release us. My grandfather sat with his spoon

midway to his lips; my grandmother held a covered pie pan in both hands; my mother held a saucer in one hand and a cup in the other. No one spoke. Finally, my mother set the saucer and cup on the counter, turned around, and shut the faucet and garbage disposal off.

“Hello, Mary,” said my grandfather. He put his spoon into his bowl of ricotta.

“I...I came to drop off the *pizza rustica*,” Nonni said. “I got up early this morning to make it. Thought I’d bring it here.”

“It’s Mamma Nonna’s recipe, you know,” said my mother. She looked from my grandmother to my grandfather and back again.

I wanted to get out of the room. I didn’t like the way all the adults stood staring at each other, and talking so slow and so careful. I wanted to cross the kitchen and get to the living room door, but Nonni was blocking it. There was a way to slip out of the kitchen and down to my bedroom, but I didn’t want to do that, either. Something almost forbidden was happening, and I knew it. It felt like the moments before a big fight erupted between my father and my mother, and, though I didn’t want to be in the room when it happened, I still wanted to know what was going on.

Nonni put the *pizza rustica* on the counter. “I should leave,” she said.

“Mary, no,” said my grandfather. “Stay here and have a cup of coffee with Kathy and me.”

Since my grandmother wasn’t blocking the way into the living room anymore, I walked out of the kitchen and settled on the couch with a Nancy Drew book, *The Spider Sapphire Mystery*. Nonni had given me that book earlier in the week; I’d been visiting

her apartment and she told me she needed a towel from the linen closet. The book had been on top of the towels; Nonni laughed when I saw it, the same way she laughed now in the kitchen. I heard a spoon clicking against the side of a cup as someone stirred coffee. Then my mother came out of the kitchen, closing the door behind her. She picked up her knitting bag from the couch.

“I guess they wanted some time alone together,” she said. I didn’t know if she was speaking to me or not. Mom dug through multicolored skeins of yarn in the bag and pulled out the Christmas stocking she’d been working on for Trish. She’d made all of us Christmas stockings; Maryanne’s had a fuzzy white angora snowman holding a broom with real bristles. Dave’s had reindeer on it, and mine had a Santa face. I’d managed to work a hole out just under Santa’s nose, which Mom repaired with black yarn, so it looked like Santa had a dark mustache.

“I can’t believe I forgot to call your grandmother,” she said. She looped green wool over red metal needles, over and over; the needles made a steady ticking sound. I pretended to read my book, though I was really trying to hear what Nonni and Grandpa were talking about. All I could hear were hushed voices and an occasional brief laugh. My mother was able to add a whole row of Christmas trees to the stocking when my dad walked in the front door. She dropped her knitting like it was on fire and met him in the hall.

“Is John about ready to go?” he asked. Mom whispered furiously to him.

“Well, I’ll be in the garage,” he said. “When he wants to go, send somebody out to get me.”

He didn't have time to go to the garage, though, because Grandpa opened the kitchen door and stepped out into the hallway. I could see part of the kitchen from the couch; Nonni sat at the head of the table; in front of her, a cup and saucer, and a slice of *pizza rustica* on a plate.

"I'm ready to go now, Dave," he said. He turned to my grandmother. "It was good to talk to you, Mary. And thank you for the *pizza rustica*." He walked out the door, leaning heavily on his cane; my father followed him.

Mom hurried into the kitchen. I did, too, because I was getting hungry, and I told my mother that.

"You might as well have a slice of *pizza rustica*," Nonni said. "We've already started on it."

"Ma, I can't believe you cut into this, after all the work you did to make it," said my mother. She cut a slice of *pizza rustica* and set it in front of me"

"Well, he wanted some, Kathleen. Said he hadn't had *pizza rustica* for ages, not since he last spent an Easter with Mamma Nonna."

"How long ago was that?"

"I don't know. A couple of years, I think he said."

Mom sat down with us; she'd poured herself a cup of coffee.

"Ma," she said after a couple of minutes, "What did you two talk about?"

Nonni wiped her mouth with a paper napkin. She opened her purse, took out a lipstick, spread a thin red layer on her lips, and blotted them with a tissue.

“Oh, little things. Chit-chat. Nothing important. I mean, what was I going to say to him, Kathy--how’s Mae doing these days?”

“Mom!” My mother pointed at me. It wasn’t as if I hadn’t heard the story of my grandfather and Mae West all my life, but once in awhile, Mom tried to turn it all back into a secret again. She did the same thing when Aunt Terry told certain stories, like the time Uncle Hank took her to see Gypsy Rose Lee on stage in New York City. I knew who Gypsy Rose Lee was, because the movie about her had been on TV a few times and I was allowed to watch part of it. Aunt Terry described everything I’d seen in the movie, and a little bit more: the pink velvet stage curtains, Gypsy’s violet lace-and-sequin gown, and the way she threw straight pins down into the orchestra pit as she undid her dress piece by piece. When Aunt Terry got to that point, my mother suddenly noticed me sitting at the table and ordered me off to my bedroom.

Mom sipped her coffee. Then she laughed.

“Well, if Dad ever wanted to see Mae again, all he’d have to do is walk around the block.”

It was true. When we moved to Bahama Street, Nonni and I took a walk in our neighborhood. As we walked down Rayen, the street just below ours, she pointed out a big, wavy wall made of white bricks. There was a black iron sign on the wall that said “Palm Tree Ranch.” Nonni said Mae West owned that ranch, but only Mae’s sister Beverly went there anymore. A few months after that, Mom and I even saw Beverly West, in the back seat of a sky-blue Cadillac, driven by a man in a gray suit and cap. We were behind the Cadillac in our own car, second in line to turn onto Gloria Street, and I

got a good look at the back of Beverly's hair, piled on her head like a pouf of white cotton candy.

My grandmother smiled. "You know, sometimes the things you've wondered about all your life have a way of showing up in your own backyard. And then you have to deal with them, whether you like it or not."

"I think I'm starting to know that, Mom," said my mother. She picked up Grandpa and Nonni's plates, scraped the half-eaten *pizza rustica* from them into the trash, and turned her back on us as she walked towards the sink.

Something bothered my mother all the time these days, and I knew it. I thought it was me. I couldn't make my room neat enough to please her. She'd find something wrong every day. My bedspread wasn't smooth enough. I'd left out my Barbie cases instead of putting them away; Mom closed each one over my protests that I had set them up a certain way. I loved making Barbie an apartment out of my two cases, her bed a small pink velvet pillow that I usually propped against my headboard. Mom pushed everything into the cases and made me put them in the closet.

"Don't take this pillow off your bed," she said. "It's for decoration." She seemed to know if I wore a pair of pants two days in a row or re-used a towel, both of which she deemed things that "dirty people" did. She still ran a comb through my hair most mornings, though I was old enough to do it myself; she'd gotten it chopped into a pixie cut for springtime and warmer weather. My short hair became dirty much more easily, and sometimes I didn't rinse all the Tame cream rinse out of it.

“It’s greasy,” Mom said, sliding a lock through her fingers. “Get back into the bathroom and wash all of that out.” I did whatever she told me, taking two showers a day sometimes. Still, every day, she looked at me the same way she did when I made a mistake at my First Communion. Mom and Nonni had taken me to a small, gray-carpeted shop in Los Angeles which sold nothing but communion dresses imported from Italy. The saleslady fitted me with a lacy, layered white dress and a veil with a crown of small pearls.

“She looks just beautiful,” the saleslady said to my mother. She nodded, and my grandmother told me I looked beautiful, too, like I was getting married.

On my First Communion day, after I was dressed in my gown, Nonni fastened a gold chain around my neck; on that chain was a gold cross with a water-blue sapphire. We’d practiced for weeks in Sister Marian’s second grade class, about how important it was to going up the center aisle of the church to the communion rail, and then down the side aisle back to our seats. I got confused and went back down the center aisle after receiving my communion, in full view of the whole congregation. I held onto Nonni in the vestibule afterwards, my tears making a huge wet stain on her pleated blue skirt as my mother scolded me.

“You went the wrong way! How could you do that? I can’t believe it! We spent so much money on this dress and this veil, and you didn’t even know which way to go. Honestly, I’ve never been so goddamned embarrassed in my life.”

“Kathleen, you stop this right now. She’s just a child. She received the Eucharist and that’s the most important part. Nothing else about it matters.” It was the first time

I'd ever heard my grandmother stand up to my mother. They left the church without speaking to each other, though things seemed to smooth out at my Communion party back home. I had a cross-shaped cake with white and yellow icing roses, and got a pile of presents from my relatives, including a Missalette edged in gold, a Joan of Arc biography, and five new rosaries. I draped them over my bedpost that night, their pink and green and clear crystal beads making me sorry that it was a sin to wear rosaries as jewelry. Sometimes I did it anyway, in secret with my bedroom door shut.

I had just changed into my pajamas—new flannel ones with blue Persian cat faces stenciled all over them—when Mom came in with my Chox vitamin in one hand and a cigarette in the other hand. Mom had sent me to bed, even though my older brother and sister were still out in the living room. Trish had already fallen asleep on my parents' bed and I knew Dad would carry her in later.

"I'm sorry I went the wrong way, Mommy," I said. I popped the vitamin into my mouth and chewed. Mom shrugged.

"Don't worry about it. I don't think anyone really did notice, anyway."

"Will you make fireworks with your cigarette, Mommy?"

She did, turning out the light, holding her cigarette in her hand like a pencil and moving it in circles so the burning tip made streaks of red light in the dark.

But that was last year and now Mom didn't say she was sorry for anything anymore—for telling me my hair was greasy, for yelling at me when she got down on her knees beside my bed and found library books or doll clothes, or a single roll of dust. I started to keep out of her way, and cleared a corner of my bedroom closet so that I could

play or read without her discovering me. I put an old, ripped-up silk quilt on the floor, with a little bit against the wall for a pillow. I could leave the doors open for light and read for hours. If Mom didn't see me, she didn't seem to care.

Mom stayed on the phone late at night nearly every day of the week, using the yellow hall telephone instead of the one in the bedroom she shared with my father. No matter how drunk he was, my father always went to bed right after the eleven o'clock news signed off. My bedroom was just a few steps away from the hall phone, so my mother's voice kept me from falling asleep. She talked to different relatives and friends, and always about the same thing: my grandfather.

"Well, Dad went back to work today. I'm worried about him, though. He's still on that cane if he wants to walk any kind of distance at all. He's doing stunts for an Otto Preminger film. No, Ma hasn't said whether they talked again at all. I doubt it. Just a one-time thing, you know? She has her own life, and he has his."

After a few nights, I grew bored with hearing her talk about Grandpa, and turned back to telling Trish more stories about Jamila. I'd been reading a book called *The Stone-Faced Boy* at school, about a kid named Gus who lived in a big, rundown house out in the county with his family and a guest, his crazy Aunt Harriett. Gus had chosen never to smile or frown, because he didn't want anyone to see his expression.

"Every day, Jamila turns her face into stone," I told Trish. "Nobody can ever tell whether she'd mad or happy. The only time she's really happy if she can make a spell to get people to come to her cave. Then she locks them in a closet and slides food under their door three times a day."

“What kind of food do they get?” asked Trish

“Worms and baked beans.” I loathed baked beans, even though the rest of the family said that my mother made the best. I filled up on Wonder Bread before dinner whenever I saw the shiny brown bean pot in the oven, and moved the beans around in my plate a little so it looked like I’d eaten some.

I kept going on about Jamila. “She has skulls all over the walls of her cave, and bones. She uses the bones to stir her cauldron. The cauldron has real human blood in it. And when Jamila drinks the blood, she can fly.”

“Stop it,” Trish whimpered. “Stop telling about blood.”

“The blood is all red and sticky and she drinks it from a great big gold cup. And then she gets on her broom. She flies everywhere, all over the city, looking for people to bring to her cave. And tonight, Jamila’s going to fly RIGHT OVER THIS HOUSE!”

I jumped up and stood on my bed as I said that. Trish screamed and started to cry. Mom stormed in.

“Goddamn you!” she screamed. She slapped me hard on the arm; I slipped and fell on my butt. “Get under those covers! You just shut the hell up and stop scaring your sister. It’s all that ‘Dark Shadows’ crap. I’m not letting you watch that show ever again.”

Now I started crying, louder than Trish. Mom ignored me and went over to my sister, soothing her until she stopped crying. Mom handed Trish her purple dog, then walked over to my bed as if to talk to me. The hall phone rang.

“I’m never going to have a moment’s peace in this house, I swear to God,” she said. She walked out of our room; I heard her pick up the phone.

“Hi, Uncle Albert. No, I haven’t heard from him in a couple of days. Actually, come to think of it, almost a week. No, I haven’t tried to call him. It’s been busy around here. I know he’s working pretty hard. He’s doing an Otto Preminger movie. Okay, you do that. Let me know how he’s doing.”

She hung up. I heard her walk into the kitchen. Trish didn’t make a sound, so I figured she was asleep, and soon, tired out from crying, I closed my eyes, too. I woke briefly to the sound of the phone ringing and the murmur of voices, but fell back asleep right away.

The next day was Saturday; I always got out of bed early on the weekends, much earlier and much more willingly than any other day of the week. I had just opened my eyes and was midway out of bed when I stopped, startled to hear my mother sobbing in the hallway, on the phone with someone.

“My father took two hundred aspirin last night. Enough to kill three men, the doctor said.” Her crying, wild and ragged, terrified me. I got back in bed and hugged Jamila.

“Albert found him last night. He’s in the critical unit. There was this doctor, a young guy, sitting at a desk. He was smoking a cigar, for Christ’s sake, and telling me that my father was lucky to be alive. Yes, they let me see him. He was tossing and turning, talking about Morocco. No, he didn’t know me, Ma. He’ll be out of it for a

long, long time, they told me.” She punctuated her sentences with bouts of crying; from the rest of her conversation, I pieced together that Uncle Albert had told my mother about a phone call Grandpa made to him. There had been trouble on the set with Otto Preminger—I didn’t even know who he was, except that he was a director.

“Dad was doing a stunt and couldn’t finish it. Hurt his leg again. That SOB Preminger yelled at him, ‘You’re an old man, Johnny, you need to go home.’ Albert told me that John must have done it that night or maybe the next morning. Dad was all alone for at least three days. No, Ma, he didn’t leave a note. He just took the pills. Washed them down with wine, then lay down on his bed. Or passed out.”

I lay back down against my pillows. My curtains were open and, as my mother talked, I noticed that the day was overcast; all the grayness outside seemed to gather in the room. I felt cold all over and burrowed deep beneath my blankets. Trish started moving around.

“Mommy’s crying, Joanie,” she said. She crawled into my bed, her body warm in flannel pajamas.

“I think Grandpa’s really sick,” I told her. I felt too afraid to get up and go in the kitchen, though I was growing hungry. I thought about going out to the freezer in the garage and getting a couple of Italian ices left over from last summer. Then I heard adult voices in the kitchen; the front door slammed and Nonni walked into our bedroom a minute or two later.

“Girls, your grandfather is ill,” said Nonni. “He’s in the hospital. Your mom and dad are going there. I’ll be here all day with you.”

“Why is Grandpa in the hospital?” asked Trish.

I nearly said, “Because he ate a whole bunch of aspirin,” but Nonni told Trish it was something small and he’d be better soon. We followed Nonni out to the kitchen and she made oatmeal for all of us. Trish and I watched cartoons; Maryanne went off to her babysitting job, and Dave stayed in his room until cartoons were over and he came out to watch a Western. Nonni brought in three white Avon cartons from her car, and we spent the rest of the morning putting boxes of perfume and talc into little white bags. Nonni marked each bag with the customer’s name—one lady had five full bags.

“She’s going to smell really nice,” said Trish.

“Yeah, maybe a little too nice.” Nonni put those bags in one corner of the Avon carton; after all the cartons were repacked, she took them out to her car again. Trish and I played Barbies, leaving them out in the bedroom with no fear of getting yelled at. Nonni had us work with her to make a supper all the kids liked: a ham slice, chopped up into little squares, then mixed with cream of celery soup and potatoes. As Nonni slid the baking pan into the oven, she said, “It’s one of those things that looks awful, but tastes good.” The phone rang and she went to answer it in my parents’ room; she closed their door so we couldn’t hear her.

“That was your mom,” she said when she walked back into the kitchen.

“Grandpa’s going to be okay. They’re going to keep him in the hospital for awhile and then send him to a new one. Your mom and dad will be home tonight, but probably after you guys get to bed.”

We all watched "Petticoat Junction," even though my brother said that show was for girls. We all went to bed a full hour before our usual bedtime, without any complaining. Nonni sat with Trish and me awhile before she shut our light off, and took time to brush our hair. Trish's hair took longer than mine; it was straight and fell almost to her waist.

"I had hair almost as long as this when I was little," Nonni told us. "Then I got really sick. I remember it all, though I was only about four. I had such a high fever that my mother had to lay clean cloths on me to bring my temperature down. I woke to see all these strands of my hair all over the white pillow. I had been so ill that I started losing my hair; patches and patches of it fell out. My dad ended up shaving it all off with his straight razor. I remember how gentle he was, cutting all the hair off, then lathering my head and shaving it so gently. He promised me it would grow back ten times more beautiful. I still cried, though. The day he shaved my head, he gave some money to my mother for yarn.

"'Get the prettiest you can find for her,' he told her, and she came home with skeins of lamb's wool yarn in pink and blue, baby colors, but I thought they were so nice. They felt like clouds in my hands. She sat down and took time from her busy day to crochet two little caps for me to wear right away; all week long, she crocheted another and another until I had one for each day of the week. They all looked different, with little puffs all over them like popcorn, or daisies on the brim. All the girls at school wanted caps just like it! And you know, my father was right. It took awhile, but I ended up with the most beautiful, shiny hair that took a curl so well."

By the time she finished, our hair was all brushed out and we'd climbed into bed. She said our prayers with us and kissed us both good night. She made sure to switch on both our nightlights and I turned over on my stomach to sleep. Our day with Nonni had been so quiet that I almost forgot about Grandpa in the hospital and the fact that, for the first time since Trish was born when I was four, I hadn't been with my mother for a full day. I woke briefly in the night once to the sound of doors opening and closing, but fell back quickly into a deep sleep without dreams.

A quietness entered our house during the next few weeks. The weather stayed foggy and gray; I wore sweaters to school and shivered in a classroom filled with dull light. Trish and I came home to find Mom, more often than not, napping in her bedroom. She still got supper on the table every night—usually something she could start making earlier in the day, in one pot, like split pea soup with a ham bone in it. Meals were quiet and subdued; Maryanne and I helped Mom put dishes in the dishwasher, and Mom headed off to her room, to talk on the phone. When Nonni came over, they talked in the living room, in quiet voices. My father stayed late at work, returning when everyone was in bed, so the nightly arguments calmed down.

Miss Whittimore quizzed me at school on telling time, and praised me when I knew what every position of the clock hands meant.

"You've worked really hard on this, Joanie," she said as she gave me a small postcard with a gold star pasted on it and "Good Job!" written on it in blue ink. I decided

I didn't hate Miss Whittimore too much after that. I crayoned a picture of yellow sunflowers and a butterfly for her, which she put up on the bulletin board.

Despite Mom's earlier threat, I still watched "Dark Shadows" every day; one Friday, Mom brought a glass of wine and an ashtray into the living room as I lay stretched out on my stomach, watching Quentin Collins turn into a werewolf. She lit a cigarette.

"Joanie, we have to get up early tomorrow," she said. "Grandpa's been moved to a new hospital, and we can all visit him there."

I sat up and looked at her. "Is Grandpa feeling better?"

"Yes. He's a little tired and he forgets things, but he's doing okay. He's in a special kind of hospital so he can get a lot of rest."

Mom woke us up early the next day, and told me to wear a dress. I chose a yellow knit dress with a zipper in front; the zipper had a daisy shaped pull. I pulled on stretchy white lace tights and Mom told me to put on a sweater.

"It's kind of cold where we're going," she said.

At the last minute, I decided to take my Pearl doll with me. I'd gotten Pearl when I was in first grade. She was packed in a box printed with her full name: "Poor Pitiful Pearl." Pearl had two outfits, a pink dress, pink tights, and white shoes, and a ragged calico dress, black tights, black shoes, and a blue flowered headscarf. The little book that came with her said that Pearl needed love and a new dress to make her pretty again. Over the years, I'd accumulated a large wardrobe for Pearl, including a fake-leopard coat and a matching beret. I put these on her for our trip to see Grandpa, even though I knew my

brother would make fun of me for carrying a doll around. As I dressed Pearl, I heard my mother talking on the hall phone.

“I hope it helps him, Ma. His doctor said it would make him want to keep going if he sees his grandkids. Yeah, something to live for.”

It took a long time to find the hospital; when we finally parked and walked up to it, I was startled to see that it looked more like a big mansion than a place for sick people.

“You kids have to be quiet now. Don’t make a sound and don’t do anything to bother your grandfather,” Mom said. She held Trish tight by the hand.

She didn’t need to say anything to us. Something about that place made me not want to talk at all, especially when we opened the front door and went inside.

The last time I’d been in a hospital was when my brother fell on the patio of the Woodley Street house and cracked his head on the cement. Mom took him to Northridge Hospital; I went with them and Dave sat for what seemed like hours with his arm pressing hard on my shoulder. He held a bloody washcloth tight to the gash on his head.

“At least you’re good for something,” he told me.

I remembered Northridge Hospital as a place of long, echoing corridors, flat yellow lights, and long stretches of marbled green-and-white linoleum. This place had red velvet draperies at every window and big potted plants on desks. I didn’t see any nurses or doctors; people in street clothes walked up and down the corridors, talking in little groups. The only thing this hospital shared with the other one was the quietness; even the people in the hallway spoke in whispery, hushed voices.

We didn't have to sit in a waiting room; my mother and father led us down a maroon-carpeted hall. Doors on each side of the hall opened into bedrooms; each bedroom looked light and clean, like the one my family had stayed in at a Travelodge on our way to see the Carlsbad Caverns. We reached the end of the hall and crowded into a room where my grandfather lay on a bed that looked almost too small for him. He wore white pajamas and a white bathrobe, and pushed the tip of his cane on the floor below him to hoist himself up into a sitting position.

My parents must have talked to him, but I don't remember any conversation. I knew it wasn't polite to stare, but I couldn't help myself; Grandpa seemed so different from the last day I had seen him in our kitchen. He was thinner and looked from one person to the other as if he didn't quite recognize them. I wondered if something had gone wrong with his eyes; they looked darker somehow, though maybe it was just because his skin was so pale.

His bedroom was fancier than the others, with big windows that looked out into a garden full of trees and tall flowers. There was another bed next to Grandpa's and a thin, balding man came into the room and sat down on it. For years, I thought he literally came in through the window that overlooked the garden; in reality, the windows were probably glass-paned French doors.

"This is my buddy," said Grandpa. He told us the man's name, which I didn't catch, though I would never forget the intense clamminess of his hand when I shook it. Everyone in the room did, even my grandfather. The man stared at the floor and laughed at something, then stretched out full-length on his bed and closed his eyes. Finally, a

nurse—the first one I'd seen today—came in and said that visiting hours were over. All of us said goodbye to Grandpa in turn; my father and brother shook his hand, and my mother and sisters kissed him on the cheek. I did, too, planting a kiss on his stubbly jaw. The coarse hairs chafed my lips so hard that they burned long after we walked out to our car and drove away.

Capitone

Nonni and I were at Hughes Market last week to get some fish for dinner. We looked at the lobster tank awhile. It's always full of lobsters, climbing around on each other's backs and trying to fight, even though their claws have wooden pegs stuck in them to keep them shut.

"We had all kinds of fish at the fish market when I was little," she told me as we drove to Mom's house. "You've never seen that many fish, all different kinds, all silvery and black. Some of the scales were like rainbows in the sun. And there weren't just fish like we have today in the store. There was octopus, and squid, even eel. The eels were the scariest."

I asked her why, and she told me, "They were alive, swimming in a big tank, back and forth. The fishmonger would pull them out one at a time, and they'd thrash around. They have long, strong bodies, and sometimes he'd drop one. It would wiggle right out into the crowd of people! My mother had the man cut our eels up right there, though some people took them home alive, all wrapped up, and did it themselves. I'll never forget how those eels moved, and I always turned my eyes away at the moment when the fishmonger was about to stun them and cut them up. We took the pieces of eel home and my mother would rub them down with fresh lemon and salt, to draw out the oily taste. Then we'd cook them up in a marinara sauce—just tomatoes, garlic, a little lemon juice, some parsley and oregano. She called it *capitone*. Nothing too complicated. And by the

time it was ready, the eel meat was falling off the little delicate bones. It looked nothing like the big eel in the fish market, really, twisting and turning, fighting for his life.”

I told her I never wanted to eat anything like that, ever.

“I don’t blame you,” she said. “My parents loved it, but I could never forget exactly what it looked like before the fishmonger put his hands on it.”

Joanie McMillan

Chapter Twelve

A Birthday

In June, we all signed a big card made out of blue construction paper for Miss Whittimore and gave her presents. She liked the pink-and-white tube of Avon Moisturizing Hand Cream my mother had wrapped in apricot-colored paper.

"It's lovely," she said. "Tell your mother I really like it." I didn't tell Miss Whittimore that I had seen my mother use hand cream out of that same tube once or twice before she wrapped it up.

Our house seemed calmer after school let out. Trish and I had swim lessons at Sepulveda Park three times a week; we'd come home after lessons and swim some more in our own pool. All that sun and swimming made me so tired by the end of the day that I'd fall asleep quickly, without much time to listen to my mother on the phone. Nonni came over a lot on the weekends, though, and I could glean a few things from just by sitting in the living room or coming into the kitchen to get something to eat.

"There's always a person with him, 'round-the clock, every day," my mother said to Nonni. I rummaged around in the pantry, slowly, so as not to miss a word.

"Well, that's good, Kathleen. Who stays with him?"

"Albert, mostly, and a couple of guys from the studio."

From what I could figure out, my grandfather had been out of the hospital for a while now and back home in his big Hollywood house. There wasn't much more to it; Mom said he was "on the road to recovery."

“I’ve invited him over tomorrow for my birthday, Ma. Do you...want to come over, maybe?”

Nonni laughed. “Kathleen, let’s not put too much on the poor man. He’s had enough to deal with. Maybe another time. Call me after he’s gone and I’ll come by with your gift.”

I was mad at my mother the next morning, because she was going to take Trish with her when she picked up Grandpa, and not me. I tried hard not to show it, though, because it was her birthday. She liked the card I gave her of purple roses frosted over with glitter that I’d picked out at Nonni’s store, and the earrings made from clusters of orange beads. By the time I went off to church with Dad, Maryanne, and David, I’d nearly forgotten I was angry with Mom.

The day was turning so hot that I welcomed being in the air-conditioned church. As we were leaving, I glanced over at my school, and thought of its empty classrooms baking in the heat. The sunlight looked especially yellow, a yellow mixed with bright white.

On the way home, Dad told us to get the house cleaned up. I didn’t see how it could get any cleaner than it was—Mom kept the house shining—but I agreed to dust and put away the dishes.

“I got to get those steaks ready,” he said. “Maybe pick up a couple bags of briquettes.”

We parked in the driveway and he unlocked the door. The phone was ringing and ringing and ringing.

“Jesus H. Christ,” he said. He picked up the phone. “Hello?” He listened for a moment, then dropped the receiver. It slapped against the wall and hung twisting on its cord. Dad headed for the front door.

“You call your grandmother, you hear?” he said. “Call her at her house and her work. It’s in the address book. Tell her to come here.” He slammed the front door and I heard his car pull out of the driveway.

I started to cry. My brother hung the receiver up, then took it off the cradle again and called Nonni. I ran to her when she finally entered the house.

“What’s happened?” she said. “Where’s your mother and Trish?”

We told her as much as we knew. She shook her head.

“God knows what’s going on. Maybe your mom’s car broke down. Here, let’s make some lunch and hope someone lets us in on what’s happening.”

As I helped Nonni put grilled cheese sandwiches on plates, the phone rang. Nonni answered it, was silent for a moment, and then said only one word: “No.”

My parents and Trish came home late that night; I saw my mother’s back as she disappeared into her bedroom. All I knew, from what Nonni told us, was that my grandfather had died suddenly.

“His heart stopped,” she said softly. She took Trish and I to our bedroom, but didn’t tell us to get in nightgowns or go to bed; she just left, looking like someone walking in her sleep. The phone rang and rang; my father or Nonni answered it every time and talked in voices too low to hear. Finally the house was quiet.

Nobody had come to put us to bed, so I helped Trish put on her nightgown. We got into our beds and I turned out the bedside lamp.

"I'm scared," she said. "I want Mommy." She started to cry.

I climbed into her bed and patted her back. "It's okay, Trishie. Mom's asleep or something." I found Trish's purple stuffed dog under her covers and handed it to her.

"It was scary there," she whispered. "We went to get Grandpa. He wouldn't come to his door. Mommy knocked and knocked. We went to the house next door. A man answered. He had another man in the house with him. They broke a window in Grandpa's house. Mommy told them Grandpa was sick." Trish sat up against her pillows; she'd stopped crying. "The man had this little dog, a white and black dog. The men got in through the window and opened Grandpa's door. Mommy went with them all through the house."

"Did you go with them? What did you see?" I asked.

"Mommy left with the men. I had to stay in the hall with the dog. It was a mean dog. It barked so much. I thought it would bite me."

Trish told me she was tired and slid back down on her pillows. Her breathing grew quiet and regular. I found myself falling asleep, then realized I hadn't said my Guardian Angel prayer. Usually Mom came in to say it with us. I rattled it off as fast as I could: "Angel of God, my guardian dear, to whom God's love commits me here, ever this day be at my side, to light, to guard, to rule, to guide, amen."

"Joanie?" said Trish. I jumped; I thought she had fallen asleep.

"What, Trishie?"

“Joanie, what’s a suicide?”

I didn’t talk directly to my mother for a long time after that. She moved though the house, she cleaned, she talked for hours on the phone at night, but she didn’t speak to me. I kept out of her way, riding my bike and playing in the front yard for hours. Relatives came and went, always talking in hushed voices. The day of my grandfather’s rosary service was the only time I exchanged a few words with her. She came into my room to help me pick out an outfit.

“I don’t have anything black,” I told her.

“You don’t need to wear black,” Mom said. “Here, this will work fine.”

She took out a lacy white short-sleeved blouse and a navy jumper with tiny purple and red flowers on it. I would eventually grow to hate those clothes, as I wore them to every funeral after that until I was nearly twelve. Mom spread the clothes on my bed.

“Wear some navy blue tights and the same color shoes—you have those navy flats,” she said, and left me to lay out my tights and shoes.

The rosary service was held in the evening. I sat next to Nonni, who wore a dark green coatdress; her rhinestone brooch glittered just underneath the collar. The church was packed with people, and the vestibule seemed crammed wall to wall with flowers. Nonni had hustled me past those flowers to our seats. She apologized for going so fast.

“I just want to get a place to sit on the aisle, in case I have to take you or Trish out,” she explained. We joined my family, near the front. I sat next to David. He looked so handsome in a white shirt and blue tie, his black hair slicked back. The church looked

strange and different at night, the lights and shadows deepened somehow, and the stained glass windows were dark.

Men carried my grandfather's coffin into the church, on a wheeled cart like the one I'd seen months ago. The coffin was made of deeply polished wood, with a blanket of red roses on it; the men stopped with the casket right next to the aisle where we sat. The priest started saying the rosary, and everyone followed along. I knelt next to Nonni and listened to her praying the Our Father and Hail Mary in her soft voice.

Father Schnieders wore black vestments embroidered with gold. He swung an incense burner over my grandfather's coffin and prayed that my grandfather would know eternal rest. Then the pallbearers got up and moved the coffin so it was parallel with the communion rail.

I knew what was next, and hid my eyes. The kids at school always said that they opened up coffins at a rosary service; I'd been praying that Father Schneiders would forget. But he didn't. I looked down at the brown kneeler as the flowers rustled and the coffin lid creaked slowly open.

"Grandpa's sitting up," David said to me. "He's looking over at you. He's getting out of the coffin and coming over here."

I drew in my breath. My body had grown completely cold, all the way down to my toes.

"Just kidding," said my brother. I made up my mind to kick him as soon as we got out of the church.

"What does he look like?" I asked.

“He looks like he’s sound asleep,” said David. Nonni touched my shoulder.

“Joanie, I’m going to take Trish to the back. Marge Dragotto’s there. Can you stay with her?”

I said yes. Marge was my godmother and brought me elaborate packages from I. Magnin every year on my birthday. I looked down at the floor as we walked down the side aisle towards the vestibule; my neck ached when I finally could raise my head. Nonni said something to Marge--she looked like a rounder, kinder version of my mother--and told me she’d be back in a few minutes. Marge took Trish’s hand.

I turned away from Marge and the crowd of people at the back. I stood on tiptoe and peeked through the window which ran the length of the vestibule. I could see my grandfather; it didn’t seem so scary from this far away. He wore a white turtleneck and a jacket; his face looked purple as a bruise. My parents were standing next to him, along with a few other people. Dad had his hand around Mom’s waist. My grandmother walked to the center of the church; she hesitated and then stood tall, shoulders back and head held high, as she moved up the aisle towards the open coffin.

Ossa Da Mordere

My mother made these for wakes. She said they were known as “cookie bones,” but the name translates literally to “bones of the dead.” Whenever I caught sight of her making a batch of these, I knew someone in the neighborhood had passed away. People would sit around the open coffin, holding a plate of these, dunking them into their coffee and talking about how natural the dead person looked. It seems a little strange now, but that’s the way it was. We didn’t hide death away like we do now.

For this recipe, you need to chop a cup and a half of almonds, coarsely, with a sharp knife. Set these aside and separate three eggs. Mother always made a little sieve of fingers, cradling the yolk gently as the whites dripped into the bowl. She’d save the yolks for something else. Beat the whites with one and three-quarters of a cup of sugar, and a half-teaspoon of freshly grated lemon peel. Sometimes my mother would preserve lemon peel in sugar during the winter; these work fine, too. Just reduce the amount of sugar a little in this part. You don’t need to whip the egg whites to peaks like you do for meringue, just blend everything smoothly and then work the almonds in with a wooden spoon. Last of all, add one and three-quarters of a cup of good-quality white flour.

I used to help with this part when I was little. Flour your hands and pinch of small lumps of dough, then form them into the shape of small bones (a little like dog biscuits, really). Place the cookies on a greased baking sheet and bake at 375 degrees for ten minutes or so until they are a pale brown. When they’re done, put them on wire racks

to cool, and when they've cooled, put them in tins for storage. They keep a long time, and taste good dipped in red wine as well as coffee.

Mary Vardaro (Nonni)

Chapter Thirteen

Bones of the Dead

“So this is what it comes to,” I said as I stood by my daughter, looking down at John in a coffin lined with white satin. The words tumbled out of my mouth almost as if they were alive on their own, though it’s not as if I hadn’t been thinking about them for days now. Kathleen touched my arm; I think she was the only one who heard me.

It seems that I had known nothing but death and more death since I was a child—first Lucille, then my mother, then my father. Nicky, dead in the war. My baby brothers and sisters who never took a single breath, or lived just a few days. How did my mother bear it all? She still sang when she cooked; she always had a smile for us. But she must have carried so much grief around, like a brick weight.

Each person I saw who had passed away looked so peaceful at the funeral, as if death really were nothing more than a comfortable sleep. Lucille looked beautiful at her wake, despite all the weight she’d lost; the undertaker had been careful with her makeup, rouging her cheeks and lips.

“Like a bride,” my mother said. She had dressed Lucille in a white gown and had even found a wreath of wax orange blossoms to put in Lucille’s black hair, still shiny and curly after all her terrible suffering.

But John looked as far from peaceful as anyone could get. The mortician had molded his lips into a smile and plastered his face with makeup, but nothing could really hide the swollen, purple skin. Someone had twined a black rosary in his pale fingers; I

wanted to laugh. John had never said a rosary when I knew him, at least not with any sincerity. If he did, it was to wheedle something he wanted for himself from the Blessed Mother.

The first thing I saw when I walked into church was a wall of flowers in all colors. One arrangement stood out, so huge it had to sit right in front of the others. It was a giant heart made of white roses, with a line of red carnations making a jagged crack across the center. A gold banner scrolled down the side of the heart, with “Goodbye, Johnny. Love, Mae” printed on it in big gilt letters.

“I can’t believe they allowed that in this church,” I told Kathleen.

“I’ll have them take it out, Ma,” Kathleen said.

“No. Just leave it here. It looks like something for the horse that won the Kentucky Derby.” I took Joanie’s hand and walked to my seat. I meant what I said. I wanted everyone to look at it. At the end, Mae didn’t even care enough to come to John’s funeral—not like I really wanted to see her there; I expected she wouldn’t bother to show up. Those flowers seemed like a symbol of their whole relationship. And tonight, after the service, I would get into a car I’d paid for myself, and go back to my own apartment. In a few days, I’d put on a skirt and jacket and go to a job where I sign invoices and paychecks, where I take the store’s money to the bank every Friday and make a deposit. I have my own checking account, my own savings. John didn’t put money in my bank account, or Rose, or anyone else but me. I wanted to shout to John and to Mae, with her stupid arrangement of flowers, that my life was my own now, that I had built everything I had out of nothing.

They might have laughed at me, those two, at a life that seemed small and dull. In the end, though, where did all John's desire to be famous lead him? To this, to a coffin lid shut tight on him for eternity.

Primo followed me home tonight in his car, still the little brother concerned about his sister. I invited him in, but told him all I had to offer was orange soda and vanilla ice cream.

He laughed, "Why not? Helen and I sure ate plenty of that when we first came to California." They'd won so many ballroom dancing competitions back East that they thought studios would hire them on the spot, but all the work they could find at first was driving a Good Humor truck around Los Angeles.

"I have that photograph of you and Helen in your uniforms, standing by that truck. You wrote, 'Look at us, we've arrived!' on the back," I said.

Primo laughed as he mixed ice cream and orange soda together. "I hated Good Humor bars for years after that. Still hate them, if you want to know the truth."

After a few minutes, Primo said, "I knew something like this was coming. A guy like that, with all his life tied up in his good looks —what happens to someone like that when he gets old? He couldn't handle it. His big ego just ended up killing him in the end."

"And right on Kathleen's birthday," I said. "I have no idea if my daughter's going to get over it, Primo. She can hardly keep herself together as it is."

"What a bastard." Primo always made no secret of how much he hated John for leaving me alone with Kathleen all those years ago. It didn't matter if John had gotten

him a job in the studios. "I don't mind biting the hand that feeds me," Primo said, especially after he'd gotten a glass or two of wine in him.

"How did he manage to do it?" Primo asked. "I thought someone was watching him round the clock."

"Yeah, they were. The hospital people told us to have family or close friends watch him, to help John remember he was part of something. Someone—I don't know who, nobody wants to admit to it—asked Jerry to spend the night with John and keep an eye on him. Jerry told us that John called a cab for him and sent him away. Said he'd be fine, that he was feeling good and Kathleen would be there in the morning to pick him up. Jerry said he didn't want to go, but John kept telling him it was okay to leave. He believed his brother; Jerry really didn't understand why he couldn't leave John alone. He'd been told, but he doesn't remember stuff."

Primo shook his head and finished his soda. He glanced up at me. "Mary, how are you doing with all this?"

"I'm okay. Still in shock. None of this feels real."

"Listen, how about I give you a call after the funeral tomorrow? Come over and be with us, at least for a late supper. Helen'll cook up those chile rellenos you like so much."

I told him I would. "You know, Primo," I said, "I'm starting to wonder if life isn't just all about change after all. You'd think it wouldn't have taken until I was nearly sixty to figure it out. Everything changes, everything goes." He reached across the table and squeezed my hand.

“I guess we’re supposed to get used to stuff like this, sis. But I don’t think anyone does.”

After Primo left, I put the kettle on and made a cup of tea. Used one of my cups and saucers with the apple pattern. I look around this little place. I have plans for it—new linoleum squares, bright yellow. I’ll crochet an afghan for the couch, squares in every color of yarn I can afford, bordered with black. Like stained glass. And new drapes, to block out the sound of the freeway; I’ve been looking at ones made of soft blue velvet, though they’re a little too rich-looking for here. Just before John died, a few days before, I hand-sewed muslin curtains for the bedroom window, a pale, soft cream.

I miss my little house on Woodley, the scent of grass and earth from the field behind it, coolness rising from it in the evenings. I haven’t driven back there to see what’s been done to the property. I imagine bulldozers ripping up dirt in their metal jaws, unearthing secrets, things buried by the children, a wide hole where we tossed bottles and broken china. The men will tear apart my son Ray’s pigeon coop, the one he built by hand; they’ll haul off the old clawfoot bathtub where he raised koi.

“Look, Ma, they know me,” Ray said one afternoon when we’d come to feed them special pellets he insisted on getting from a little shop on Reseda. The fish swirled around each other, the colors of a sunset, gold and rust, dark orange, crimson. Ray showed me how to hold a pellet close to the water; a red koi took the food from my hand, opening its strange, glassy mouth.

Maybe some other woman with a child will live in that house. Torn now off its very foundation, hauled to God knows where. Do our voices still echo in my small house and the large house where Kathy lived with her husband and children? Sounds of my daughter and me talking as we cooked, laughter and the kids' loud crying. Everyone split up now, everything fallen into fragments, the way it felt after Ray was drafted into a terrible war.

"Ma, what am I going to do?" Ray sobbed when he got the notice. I didn't know there were things I could do. Maybe I was too afraid to find out. Go to the recruiting office, tell them Ray's father died when he was a little boy, that he was my only son. Steal him out of the country. Looking back, I wish I had found it in myself to do any of those things. But I remembered his father, a soldier in the World War, and Nicky. I had Nicky's medal in my dresser drawer, the one mailed from Washington, D.C., after he died. And I told Ray, "Go, fight for your country."

He left for Vietnam; he came home a year later, but he never really returned to me, this young man who loved pictures of faraway places when he was a boy. Collected postcards from everywhere: Hawaii, Java, New Zealand, Hokkaido Island.

He went to a place farther away than any of those and came back silent, brooding, his arms covered with tattoos of snakes, skulls, a tiger showing its fangs. Hair long and lank as a castaway's. Moved right into a buddy's house almost as soon as his plane touched down. I call him every few days to say hello, to tell him I love him. He talks a little about the job Primo found him at Technicolor, his motorcycle, his new dog.

Sometimes I think I'm trying to reach the child he once was, the one I think I can hear behind his grownup voice, calling for me still.

Night after night, my daughter telephones me, crying, "Ma, why did Dad do this?" She wouldn't tell me what happened when they returned from his house; she did something from when she was a teenager instead: walked into her bedroom and slammed the door. I had to corner Dave on his way to the living room and asked him to tell me everything, right now.

We sat at the table. He opened a beer and sipped at it as he talked.

"Kathy knocked for a long time on the front door. She finally ran to the neighbors and got some guys to break in. They found him in the garage. John had taken a garden hose, made a noose from it. His friends got all the knives out of the house, razors, anything like a rope, but they didn't think of that. He climbed up on a ladder in the garage, tied the hose on a rafter. Got his neck into it, kicked the ladder away."

"Good God. Kathleen didn't see him there, did she?"

"No. Almost did, though. She was in the kitchen, going over some papers he left. A letter he started and didn't finish, no name on it, no way to tell who he was writing to, and a bunch of poems. 'This is the last dance.' Craziness like that. The guys got her and Trish out of the house right away. Waited until police came; that's when I got the call and tore out there fast as I could. Those cops were about to walk Kathleen through the garage. Identify the body. Those fools didn't have no more sense than God gave a jackass. Kathleen was crying so hard, could barely stand up."

He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and lit one. I said a silent prayer to the Blessed Mother for sparing my daughter that sight. I knew her mind would have shattered forever after that, like a china plate tossed to the floor.

“The police walked me through the house, all official-like. Told me my job was to say if the body was John Indrisano. Warned me there might be maggots already. We opened the door that went to the garage. I stood there. The heat, Mary, and the stink. Must’ve crapped his pants when he did it. I turned to the cops, standing there with hands behind their backs like they’re on Dragnet, and I said, ‘Couldn’t y’all have cut the sonofabitch down first?’”

I still can’t get the picture out of my mind that Dave’s words put there, of my ex-husband hanging for hours. I take a hot shower and, when I close my eyes to let the water hit my face, all I can think of is John choking in the long seconds before he died. Did he try to stop it, haul himself up somehow, tear the noose away from his throat? No one will ever know.

I get out of the shower and put on my warmest nightgown. I can’t seem to feel anything but cold right now. There is another image I keep seeing, of John when I first knew him, before our child, before anger dug its claws into us and never let go. A handsome man, with a smile on his face just because he had caught a glimpse of me. And the feeling I had then of being so alive, so full of the sense that the world held every possibility.

I sometimes still feel that sense of new things to come. There are jacaranda trees in the lot across the street from my apartment, bordering a school where children shriek and laugh at recess. The jacarandas always look like they're so old and dead all winter, yet in spring and summer, they're covered with blooms in a shade of purple I can't really describe. Some days, I feel like those trees. It's as if time is moving backwards, not forwards, and, though I look like a woman approaching old age, I feel like I am growing younger and younger every day. I've even begun to bleed again, a few drops now and then on my underpants, like a girl at her first *sangue di mestruale*. Even though the image of my son as a child haunts me, even though my daughter gathers anger like a thundercloud, my grandchildren run to me, smiles on their faces, arms wide. They are the ones I will not fail by leaving them too soon.

I slip into bed and turn out the lamp, hoping for a decent rest. I close my eyes, but my new curtains seem too flimsy to block out the light of passing cars. All night, a brightness overwhelms my dark room, waking me, hour after hour, like a white shadow piercing my deepest sleep.

Pastina

See, this is very simple. Just boil some water in a pan with some salt. They say the water should be as salty as the Mediterranean Sea, but I've never been there, I just put in a small spoonful of salt.

When the water is boiling, put in the pastina and stir it up to make sure it doesn't stick. Don't put a lid on the pot or it will boil over. When the water does start to boil again, make sure to turn down the heat a little.

After a few minutes you need to check the pastina, to see if it's done. Just get a few on a spoon, cool them off by blowing on them, and test them in your teeth. They should be soft with just a little firmness.

Now put the strainer in the sink and pour the whole thing into the strainer. Good. Now dump the pastina back into the pan. Add a pretty good pat of butter and mix that around until the butter is completely melted, then add some milk—not too much!—and it's ready to eat.

Kathleen McMillan

Chapter Fourteen

Pastina

Los Angeles, 1970

One morning just before Thanksgiving, Nonni woke to the sound of my mother opening the heavy bedroom drapes and setting a glass of vanilla Ensure on her nightstand. There were cases of Ensure stacked on top of the freezer in our garage; the liquid nourishment was the only thing my grandmother could keep down. She tried different flavors until she found two she liked best: vanilla and coffee. “At least I can still have something like my morning coffee,” she joked the first time she drank it, “But I’d rather have real, honest-to-God coffee than this milkshake stuff.”

“I’m awake, Kathleen,” said Nonni as my mother tiptoed around the room. To her daughter’s overly cheerful, “How are you today, Ma?” Nonni answered, “Well, this is a first. I feel hungry.”

As my mother picked up the glass of Ensure to hand to her mother, Nonni said, “But not for that garbage.”

“The doctor says this is all you can have right now, Ma,” replied my mother. Nonni sat up and leaned back against her green corduroy bed pillow.

“If I’m hungry, I’m hungry, Kathleen,” she said. “I slept good last night and I feel fine today. No, I don’t need a pain pill right now. Maybe later. Hand me my comb,

would you, and my compact. Thanks. Do you have anything in the pantry, Cream of Wheat, something easy on the stomach?”

“I’ve got some pastina,” said my mother. “I think I should call the doctor, though, to see if you can eat it.”

Nonni combed her hair. It was thicker now, growing in after months after radiation treatments, and much more gray. “I guess I’ve earned every one of these gray hairs,” she thought as she shut her compact. Then she said, “Kathleen, let’s try just a little. And don’t call the doctor. I’m sick of everyone getting on the phone with him whenever I want to do something. Next think you know, he’s going to get a call to see if I’m allowed to wipe my own behind. A little pastina won’t hurt me.”

My mother hesitated, then said, “Okay, Ma,” as she picked up the glass of Ensure and headed toward the kitchen. She dumped the Ensure down the drain, then took a blue box of pastina, nearly full of tiny pasta stars, from the pantry. The box had a picture of a smiling blond baby on the front, which was appropriate, as every child in our family ate pastina as their first food instead of regular baby cereal. My mother prepared the pastina as if for a baby also: she boiled water in a small saucepan, shook the pastina into the boiling water, let it cook for five minutes, then drained it in a sieve. She put the pastina in a china bowl, added a touch of milk, and brought the bowl to her mother, along with a spoon.

“Those African violets finally bloomed,” remarked my grandmother as she stirred the pastina around in the bowl, “I never noticed it until today.” A row of small plastic

pots stood on my mother's bedroom windowsill; a few plants showed deep violet flowers above their dark leaves.

"I've been keeping the curtains closed most of the time, Ma. That's why you didn't see them," said my mother as she watched Nonni take a few bites of pastina. Nonni glanced up at her.

"Kathleen, it's fine. Stop watching me like a hawk." She took another bite, swallowed it, then said, "It's good. You know, it was the only thing I could eat when I was first pregnant with you. Everything else made me sick."

"Ma, do you want another pillow, maybe? An extra blanket?"

"Look at us," Nonni laughed, "You're like the mother now and I'm the child. No, I don't want another blanket. I think I need that pill now, though. Just one. I want to stay awake for awhile."

Nonni finished her pastina as my mother went to the kitchen, returning with a glass of water and an oblong white capsule. She swallowed her medication and closed her eyes. After a few minutes, my mother turned and began to walk out, thinking Nonni had fallen asleep, but she stopped at the door when Nonni said, "Kathleen, stay here a few more minutes."

She crossed the room and sat down on the bed. Nonni opened her eyes and looked at her, a questioning look which made my mother uncomfortable, along with the silence. Finally my mother said, "Terry and Hank asked if they could come over for a little while tonight, Ma, if you're feeling up to it."

“That Terry,” said my grandmother, “I don’t know whether to love her or hate her half the time.” Nonni paused, then sighed and said, “You know that story she’s whispered about me behind my back since the Year One, thinking I’d never find out?”

“Ma, if you keep talking, you’re going to tire yourself out,” said my mother as she stood up.

“Kathleen, sit back down. Please. Pull up a chair if you don’t want to be on the bed. Yes, the story she’s told since she and Hank were courting, that I was pregnant with you before I married your father. Well, it’s true. Yes, it really is, *Katarina*, don’t look so surprised. When you were a little girl, Terry came over to visit me. I heard her asking Mamma Nonna about it, right in front of the whole family. Hank must have told her. Well, that was a mistake. The old lady grabbed Terry by the arm, opened the front door, and pushed Terry outside. ‘If you ever come near my house again, I’ll throw a bucket of piss on you,’ Mamma Nonna yelled at her. And Terry ran off down the street.”

The two women laughed, even though my grandmother said, “Oh, God, even laughing hurts.” She put a hand on her stomach, over the incision site. Then my mother swept a Kleenex over the top of the night table and closed the lid on Nonni’s sewing box.

“Kathleen, can’t you stop cleaning for half a second? I don’t care if the table’s dusty.”

My mother sat down again and began braiding the bedspread’s fringe as Nonni talked.

“I had no luck with men. You heard me say that all your life, and it’s the truth. I didn’t know anything about men when I was a young girl. The only men I really knew

were my brothers and my father. You know my mother died a few weeks before I graduated sixth grade. She was so proud of me, with my good marks, always saying that I practically lived at the library.

“Months before, our parents told us that there would be a new baby just before summer vacation. I helped my mother get all the little clothes ready. One morning my father told me the baby would be here when I got back from school. I was so excited, I ran all the way home, only to find that there was no baby, and no mother. Both had died. I cried for weeks, Kathleen. I cried all through my graduation, quietly, so no one would see or hear. Your grandmother Josephine, she was so much fun. We didn’t have a spare penny half the time, but at night, after chores were done, we’d start acting silly, all the boys and my mother singing. And my father knew how to play the castanets! Nobody knows where he learned to do that, but we’d beg him, night after night, for his gypsy music, we called it.”

“Ma, I know this story,” said my mother. She twisted the braids of fringe she’d made, then smoothed them out and unbraided them again.

“No you don’t. You don’t know all of it, Kathleen. I went to my sixth grade graduation. I put my medals for spelling and penmanship away in my dresser drawer. Then I went downstairs to my father, sitting alone at the table, and told him I wouldn’t go on to any more school, that I would stay home and help him. ‘Mary, you’re smart. You need to keep going. Rose, she can help me.’ he said. He was such a kind man. I knew Rose wouldn’t do a damned thing to help him, and of course she didn’t. Our mother wasn’t in the ground four months before Rose started going out to dances again and

batting her eyes at every boy in Boston. And so I stayed home. Oh, I still went to the library every week. That Irishwoman, the librarian, Miss Sullivan, she let me have so many books, many more than she'd let anyone else check out. I think now that I built almost an imaginary world for myself out of what I read in those books. *Little Women*, and when I was older, the one written by the man who lived at Walden Pond.

“As the years went on, my brothers started getting older, getting jobs for themselves. I still took care of everything in the house, though. Then Rose started nagging me. ‘Mary, you’re twenty-three years old and you haven’t been to one dance!’ She took me to a hairdresser to get my hair bobbed, helped me buy a couple of nice dresses. And you know what happened. The first dance I went to, I met your father.”

Nonni reached over, picked up her water glass, and took a few sips. “God, this medicine makes my mouth so dry,” she said. She lay back and smiled at my mother. “Your father. That black hair and those dark eyes! He looked so much like his own father. *Un Diavolo*. Well, the son turned out to be a bigger devil than the father, I guess. And I was a fool, Kathleen. My head full of stories from the books I read, and the movies I went to when I could. John had more money than anyone I knew, or so I thought when he brought me gifts. I had no idea then that every necklace and bracelet he handed to me was stolen, bought from a friend of his who sold such things.”

“Is that what you meant, Ma, when you said, ‘Oh, well, it wasn’t really mine to begin with, whenever you lost a piece of jewelry?’” asked my mother.

My grandmother nodded and pulled her bedspread higher. “Yeah. Every last bit of it hot. It’s not like your grandfather didn’t have enough money to buy something from

a jewelry store. But I took every gift he gave me. No one paid me much attention. Most of the women my age were married, with young children. I had no real friends. And there I was, listening to John say how pretty I was, how smart, how fun to be with. I wasn't a bad girl, Kathleen. He was the first man who ever looked at me. And I did whatever he wanted.

"Kathleen, you know that back then, you couldn't just go to a clinic and get what you needed to keep a baby from happening. Mamma Nonna told women how to prevent a pregnancy, but I couldn't exactly go to John's mother to ask her what to do. She only told married women anyway, women who'd had enough children. John said he'd be careful. I didn't know what that meant. And I was ashamed of what I was doing, excited and ashamed at the same time, afraid because I still loved going to church and knew exactly what the priest would say if he found out about it.

"Then the very thing I dreaded happened to me. I began to be sick every morning. I waited and waited for a period that didn't come. I pretended it wasn't happening. I pretended even when I could keep nothing down but a bowl of pastina, just like what I ate today. I went into the bathroom ten times a day, praying for the sight of a single spot of blood. My father, exhausted from his work as a laborer, didn't ask what was going on. I didn't tell John. There wasn't a person I could tell, Kathleen. It was considered *vergogna*, shame, the deepest shame of all.

"And the fear! I woke up each day, forgetting for just a second that I might be pregnant, and then fear and nausea rushed in like a dirty wave. And I lived like that, keeping everything secret for over two months."

“Ma. Please. You’re wearing yourself out. Sleep now. This isn’t something you need to tell me,” said my mother anxiously.

“No. I’m not tired. I’m not in pain, and I’m not tired, and I want to say these things. I kept being with your father. To do what never works, to keep him with me. Maybe I thought he might ask me to marry him, without me having to tell him I was pregnant. As the weeks went on, the nausea started to lift, and the tiredness, though of course my period never came and my clothes got tighter. One day I decided to go to the library. Trying to get my mind off the thing I couldn’t run away from much longer, I guess.

“When I came out, there was John, wearing a dark coat, standing right in front of the library steps. He must have followed me. No leaves on the trees anywhere. A cold day, that bitter kind of cold, wind picking up, the sky low and gray. He didn’t even say hello. He just asked if I was pregnant. I stood there, cradling my books in my arms. Then finally I said yes and started crying. He looked like a stone statue, your father. Silent and still. I noticed how tall he was, how big his hands were. It wasn’t like I hadn’t noticed any of those things before. But that day, I began to be afraid of him. I knew those big hands could knock me down in one second. He was talking in a way I had never heard before, rough and so angry. ‘I knew it,’ he said. ‘Your belly’s getting bigger, and it wasn’t just because you said you’ve been eating like a pig at the trough.’

“He calmed down after awhile and said, ‘Okay, Mary. I’ll take care of it.’ He walked off. That coat billowing in the cold wind. No hug goodbye, no kiss. I watched him go. So silly. I thought his anger had worn off and he meant we were going to get

married. I didn't want to think about that, though. The nausea had come back a little, and all I wanted to do was sleep. I went home and lay down on my bed. I did love your father, Kathleen. But it was like something had happened, changing him, changing both of us, right before my eyes.

"He came to see me the next morning. I was still in my room. I'd slept badly that night, tossing and turning, now that I couldn't deny for another moment that I was pregnant. My brother Primo yelled up the stairs that John was walking down the street. I went outside and talked to John on the sidewalk. I tried to joke a little with him, 'We always seem to find ourselves in the same place.' But he didn't laugh at all. He said, 'It's okay, Mary. A friend of mine knows a doctor who does clean work. It's going to cost me a fortune. Two hundred dollars. But I'll pay it. I have the money.'

"I didn't need to ask what he meant by clean work. Even though I didn't know many girls or women, everyone heard those stories. I stared down at my shoes until your father said, 'Mary, you have to do this. You have to. If you do this, I'll stay with you. I might even marry you someday. But if you don't, I'm going to leave you.'

"I couldn't look up. He kept talking, and I kept thinking. It was like my life had suddenly divided into two pieces, either of which I could take. One piece was to have the baby. The other was to get rid of being pregnant, go on with my life. Kathleen, please understand. A decision like that was like a wall in front of me that I didn't want to climb over. And I didn't know what to do.

“Finally your father said, ‘Tomorrow morning, you’ll meet me. Early. Five o’clock. That doctor does his work then. Make up some lie about where you’re going if someone sees you.’

“I said nothing to him. I just kept looking down at the ground. I glanced up after awhile.

He was gone. I went back inside, back up to my room. I couldn’t come out again. I told my father I didn’t feel well. God knows, that sure was true.

“I didn’t drop off to sleep once. This is why, *Katarina*. I knew stories more terrible than you can imagine. Maybe you heard such things, too, when you went off to college or when you became a married woman. My sister told me about a girl who got ‘in trouble,’ went off to do something about it. She came home, went to bed, and her mother found her afterward. Rose said, ‘The poor thing. It was like she was lying in a lake.’ And I knew what kind of lake that was.

“I felt colder that night than I ever had in my life. Even three blankets wouldn’t take away the coldness. I got up once or twice, to try and write a letter to my family. But writing it made it more real, that I might never come back to that room, and so I lay on my bed until a little light showed under my bedroom curtain. I got up and put on my clothes, and my heavy coat.

“John was waiting for me outside. We got into a car he’d borrowed from the same friend who told him about the doctor. He said I had to keep my eyes shut the whole way. I went with him, Kathleen. I kept hearing the words he said, ‘Do this, and maybe I’ll marry you.’ I didn’t want him to leave me, Kathleen. A young woman’s foolishness.

“Along the way, John swore when he thought he’d gotten lost. He kept saying, ‘Keep your eyes shut.’ Called me terrible names, names no one had ever called me. We reached the doctor’s office. I recognized that part of town when I got out of the car, but I didn’t dare tell John.

“We walked into the doctor’s office, at the top of a narrow building. John knocked on the door, and a tall, thin man answered. He was not Italian. Pale skin, blond hair, eyes so light blue they seemed not to have any color at all. John put an envelope in his hand. The doctor took me into a room with a regular examination table. I was starting to think maybe it would be all right, until suddenly he told me to take off all my clothes. Every stitch. I had never been seen that way as a grown woman by anyone but your father, and now here I was, undressing in front of a stranger who gawked at me as if I was doing this willingly, just for him. The doctor told me to lie down. He prodded my breasts, poked his fingers inside me, pushed on my stomach. He walked back out to the waiting room and told John, ‘She’s so far along. A hell of a lot more dangerous, and it’s going to cost you another fifty.’ John and the doctor haggled over the price, talking about me like a cat or a dog. Finally I heard John take out his wallet and count out a few extra bills.

“Then the doctor told John, ‘I want you to put your signature on this paper. It says I’m not responsible for what happens to her at all.’ And I heard the pen scratching as your father signed, without any protest, as if writing out a grocery receipt. Perhaps he was as scared as I was.

“I lay there listening to them. The doctor made a telephone call. His voice so harsh, so rude. And the more I listened to them, the more I knew something. I knew it clearly, as clearly as my own name. I knew if I let the doctor do what he was going to do, I would never get off that table again. And this is the strangest thing, *Katarina*. I thought I could almost hear my mother’s voice again. Almost, not quite. A whisper, maybe in my imagination. ‘Mary, get out of there. Get away from these people.’ I thought of her, how she looked, in her coffin with the baby tucked in her arms. I knew I would look just like she did, still and cold, and white as a sheet.

“And so while John and the doctor were in, I was busy putting on my dress, picking up my coat. They sure were surprised to see me walk into the waiting room.

“I said to John, ‘Sign any paper you like. But I’m leaving here, and I’m leaving alive, not on a goddamned slab. I’m going to have this baby.’ And I opened the door and went out. I had a little money in my pocket, and, as I said before, I had some idea of where I was. I took a streetcar home.

“Maybe I didn’t do this all perfectly, Kathleen. Sometimes I thought about it, many times, especially when Mamma Nonna told John he had to marry me, then later, when your father left me. But that day, for the first time in my life, I made a decision for myself, instead of going along with what others wanted for me. And no matter what happened later, I knew it meant the difference between living my life a certain way and maybe not living at all.”

“Mom,” said my mother. “You didn’t have to tell me any of this.” She stared at the bedroom carpet, at the African violets on the windowsill, at the St. Jude statue on the dresser, anything to avoid looking directly into her mother’s eyes.

Nonni took another sip of water. “Kathleen, ever since that day, I carried that memory inside me, too ashamed to breathe a word about it. And then, one night your father got a few glasses of wine in him and told my brother Hank about the visit to the doctor. My brother never treated me any differently, but I guess he told Terry. He didn’t know then what she was like. Hank made up that saying about her, you know: ‘If you want something broadcast to the entire world, just let Terry know about it.’ But he said that after he’d been married to her for years.

“Terry came to me in the hospital after I gave birth to you. She wagged that miserable tongue of hers. ‘Mary, I’ve heard all about you,’ she said. After that, I was so afraid, Kathleen. What if she told you, or you overheard it from someone?

“All your life, I wondered, ‘Would my daughter hate me if she found out? After I got sick, it was worse. I thought you would hear it from Terry, or some other relative, after I was gone. This thing I’ve feared all my life, I’ve told you now, myself. And I need to know something. Do you hate me for it, *Katarina*? For any part of it?’”

Even though a maelstrom of emotions made my mother tremble and tears stood in her eyes, she said softly, “No, Ma. No, I don’t hate you. You gave me my life. The other parts, the other things, they don’t matter.” She felt like a child in front of a classroom, terrified, but sure of the right answer.

My grandmother nodded. “Well, Katarina, I guess we gave each other our lives in some way. I don’t know anymore if that’s a good or a bad thing, But that’s the way it happened.” She turned over and lay on her side, not saying another word until, finally, her eyes closed. My mother watched Nonni for a few minutes. Then she stood up, straightening the bright pink bedspread over her mother, as if smoothing a blanket over a sleeping child. Quietly, so as not to wake her, my mother crossed to the window, shut the bedroom drapes, then walked out to the kitchen, carrying the empty bowl in both hands.

*Cesti di Pasquale***Easter Baskets**

My mother, my sister Nunzia, and I made these together. Sometimes we were like Christ in the tomb, working in our bakery from Good Friday to Easter morning, just to make sure we filled every order. We delivered them house to house if we had to. You're lucky everything's so much easier now.

To start, mix half a cup of lukewarm water with one teaspoon sugar, and then dissolve two yeast cakes in the sugar water. Let this rest in the bowl until it's full of bubbles. Keep the bowl in a warm place.

Then mix one cup milk, one cup sugar, a teaspoon of salt, and a quarter-cup of butter in a small pan. Stir these over a low flame until the milk is warm. Set aside until it cools to the touch.

Beat three eggs and stir into the cooled milk mixture. Beat in two cups of flour, the yeast and water, and mix everything together. Add about four to five cups flour, the yeast mixture, and mix again, using your hands if you need to. Turn the dough out on a floured board and knead until it's smooth.

Make sure you flour your hands and keep flouring the board too, so nothing sticks. Keep kneading for ten minutes. Put the dough in a large bowl, cover with a clean cloth, and let rise for an hour and a half. Don't go too long over this or the dough will rise too high.

Hard boil and dye eight eggs. You can do this step before you start the dough, too. Make sure there are no cracks in the eggs before you dye them, or they will spoil the look of the baskets. My mother used beet juice, so we only had red. When the dough has risen, punch it down and divide it into nine pieces, all the same size. Twist eight pieces of dough, one at a time, into ropes. Curl the ropes into flat circles. Make sure you moisten the free end of the dough with water or milk and press it into the coil. These are the nests for the eggs. Put the nests on a cookie sheet you've greased well.

Break off sixteen pieces of dough and roll each piece. You can get a little fancy and make braids, coils, whatever you want. Cross 2 pieces of dough over each egg to make the basket handles. Some of the egg in each basket should show. Moisten the loose ends of the handles, tuck them under the basket, and smooth them into the underside, so they don't come apart.

Place the baking sheet in a warm place (near the oven is good, but not too close). Make sure you preheat your oven to 350 degrees. Let the baskets rise until double in size. This will take about an hour.

When the baskets have risen, put them in the oven and bake them for twenty minutes. Watch them carefully so they don't get burned. When you take them out of the oven, slide them off the baking sheet and let each basket cool on a rack.

Make a glaze of three tablespoons very soft butter, three cups of powdered sugar, five tablespoons milk, and a quarter-teaspoon vanilla. Stir until soft and brush over the warm baskets.

Buon Pasquale! Tell everyone how hard you worked at making these. The family will appreciate what you've done for them.

Mamma Nonna

Chapter Fifteen

La Storia di la Strega

The Strega's Story

Los Angeles, 1963

Restless, unable to sleep, I pace this room; then reach for my bathrobe, draped across a bedside chair. The robe's much finer than anything I brought in my suitcase. Thin silk, light as a moth's wing. The background white as a moth's wing also, but printed all over with pink poppies, so bright I want to pluck them right from the fabric. My daughter Anna gave me this robe the morning I arrived in Los Angeles.

"Anna," I said when I opened the box, "This is a gift for a young bride, not an old woman with shriveled *tette*."

"There's been a heat wave, Mother, and that terrycloth thing of yours is too heavy. Besides, you've worn it every morning since I married Mike."

It's true, especially about the weather. Snow lay on the ground when I left Boston, but here, flowers shine in every yard, and heat stays trapped in the bowl of this valley. At night, the house warms up and my room feels like an oven, even though I open all the windows.

Everyone in this house sleeps deeply, as if drugged by the heat. My granddaughter Kathleen gave me the master bedroom. She moved her son David to his sisters' room, where he sleeps on a cot. I hear the children laughing behind the closed

door long after their mother shuts off the light. Kathleen and her husband sleep in David's room.

I walk past Kathleen's dresser, bare except for the twin globe lamps she bought at a place called Builder's Emporium. The lamps have stained glass bases, dark purple, and identical shades, white porcelain painted with lavender roses. Nothing else on the dresser—not a brush, not a comb, though Kathleen told me she wants to get saint's statues to put there.

"What do you think, Mamma Nonna, a Saint Jude or an Infant of Prague?" she asked.

"I can't choose for you, *Katarina*," I told her. All I could think of were the statues' plaster eyes, staring at Kathleen and her husband in bed.

This house is too clean for a place with so many children. In my great-granddaughters' room, shelves of dolls in straight rows. Joanie took down the one she called "her Italian lady," a plump *contadina* with an embroidered skirt, a basket of cloth tomatoes balanced on her head. The little one showed it to me, then carefully placed it back on the shelf, as if she's not used to keeping a doll in her hands. In the center of the room, a big dollhouse of painted metal. The girls' flowered bedspreads smooth and neat, like an advertisement for bedspreads. My great-grandson David's room also spotless, paneled in walnut, his window shrouded by the giant bird-of-paradise growing in a brick planter outside.

"That room is so dark, so cold for a little boy," I told Kathleen as we toured the house.

“I’ve never heard him complain, Mamma Nonna, not even once,” she said. I knew then to open my eyes and keep my mouth shut, to see the truth about her life in this spotless house. I thought perhaps Kathleen and her mother simply cleaned thoroughly for my visit. Now I know that Kathleen’s always scrubbing, mopping, and mending for hours each day.

“*Katarina*, slow down,” I joked with her yesterday, when I could no longer stand the sight of her taking the broom from the utility closet one more time. “Let’s have *un’espresso*, I’ll make you the best, *cara*.”

She sat at the table, fidgeting, the way she did when she was a child. I could tell that her hands itched to get back to her polishing, to scour the bathroom sinks and open up another brown bottle of Lysol.

“It’s the germs, Mamma Nonna, they’re everywhere,” she had explained one morning as she carried Lysol into the bathroom. The house always has a faint tinge of disinfectant smell; I feel like taking the bottle and tossing it into the garbage can outside. And maybe, sometime before I leave, I will.

No one knows that, at night, I move through this house like a shadow. I switch off the twin lamps on Kathleen’s dresser at ten, say my rosary until I hear all the doors close in the hall. Since I turned eighty, sleep comes to me less often than the memories I try to unravel, snarled as a handful of thick wool.

I walk down the hallway, slippers keeping my tread soft. A streetlight in front of the house pours silver onto the living room carpet. I sit in the most comfortable chair, an overstuffed one by the window. In a bathrobe pocket, my rosary. If anyone wakes and

comes out here, they will see an old lady telling her beads and reflecting on the Glorious Mysteries. But, in truth, I ponder only the mysteries that burrow through my own life, like velvet moles tunneling underground.

There's a hutch in one corner of the living room; when I first came here, it was as bare as anything in this house. A lace-edged runner on top, cupboards filled with beautiful dishes in patterns of apples, ivy, and roses, heavy doors shut tight on them. The top's covered now with pastries I'm teaching Kathleen and her mother to bake. A dozen loaves, all shapes and sizes, plates of rolls, and something my mother taught me to make when she ran the family bakery in Grottaminarda: Easter baskets made of woven bread, each with a colored egg in the center. I'd never baked them in all the years Kathleen lived in my house; they took time I didn't have then.

Kathleen and her mother looked at me this morning in wonder as I punched down bowlfuls of sweet dough after their first rising. I told them how my mother and I spent hours making these baskets in the week preceding Easter Sunday. The heat in our bakery radiated from sturdy, deep brick ovens. "Big enough to hold an entire cow made of bread if we wanted one," my mother told me. I took ropes of dough and showed Kathleen how to coil them into a round basket. She boiled a dozen eggs; I told her to soak them for a long time in the dye.

"Especially the red ones," I said. "Make those as red as you can." The eggs came out deep green, blue, and yellow, the red ones dark as rubies. We placed one egg at the center of each basket; I showed Kathleen and her mother how to weave a crossed basket handle from two pieces of dough.

“Won’t the eggs crack when all this bakes?” asked Kathleen in a worried tone. I knew she was concerned about her shiny oven, clean as a new coin. Her eyes widened when I pulled the baskets out of the oven, glossy and brown, the eggs intact, their colors unfaded.

My great-granddaughter Maryanne came home from school that afternoon, saw the hutch covered with bread, and told me, “Mamma Nonna, it looks like something out of a fairytale!” The kitchen, of course, has its own magic, simple and fragrant. But I’ve come here not just to show others how to bake a perfect loaf of *ciabatta* or nest bright Easter eggs in bread baskets for children.

Kathleen, of course, thinks differently. She picks up the phone and calls relatives, “Such a nice vacation for her, now that she has so much time.” Speaks her English rapidly, believing I can’t understand. Yes, I have time now, not for vacation, but to scrutinize Kathleen, to know whether I can instruct her in the art of the *strega*.

A few cars speed by on the road. I thought Los Angeles would be a large city, like New York, which I saw for a few short days, just before I traveled to Boston to join my husband Pietro. But this part of the city still has spaces as open as the fields in Grottaminarda. Even the street in front of this house is dirt, like the road I walked with my mother, miles out of town, as she gathered herbs. She handed me leaves and flowers to put in my apron pockets. It seems I always knew how chamomile soothed a teething baby’s fretfulness, that fennel took the wind out of its stomach. As I grew older, she told me other, secret things: how pennyroyal could bring on one’s tardy *sangue di mestruale*,

how a bright blue flower she called *discordia*, when dried and slipped under porch steps, caused endless misery and argument in a house.

My father died when I was two, leaving my mother to run the bakery by herself. She worked before dawn until evening. She was tall, the tallest woman in our village. Hair black as the night sky, not a touch of gray. “Strong as a man,” everyone said. My sister Nunzia and I worked by her side, before and after school. She never took another husband. There was a tintype of my father by her bed and, above our stove, a shelf he carved for her, ivy leaves and small, squared-off flowers. On this she kept only two things: a paring knife, its handle fashioned from an iridescent shell, and a bowl of thin white china, the kind one sees in a rich person’s home. We were never allowed to touch that bowl, or the knife, for it was used to shatter *malocchio*.

When her work was done at the bakery, my mother came home and sat at the table after dinner. I knew we were more prosperous than most people in Grottaminarda, because we had a girl to prepare our supper and do a few chores. This girl always poured my mother a small glass of wine after our meal. My mother sipped from it, swirling the wine in the glass from time to time, especially when she listened to visitors who sat at the table with her.

I was supposed to stay in my bedroom, doing lessons or needlework. But my ears were as open then as they are now. I learned that Signore Tomelli, the village *fabbro* who made horseshoes and iron grillwork, had nightmares that made him afraid to sleep.

“It’s like my own bed is a cage of snarling animals all night,” he said to my mother. “I’m afraid I’ll burn myself at the forge one day, my hands too unsteady for this work.”

Other times, women came to her door, saying “*Uno momento di nostro tempo, per piacere*,” just a moment of your time. If my mother didn’t catch me peeking through a crack in my bedroom door, I watched her ponder everything she heard. Then she would rise from her chair to make a bundle of herbs for someone, or sew a small cloth charm, filling it with roots and leaves. The visitors always thanked my mother, over and over, leaving coins on the table, gold, copper, and silver. Others with no coins to spare left gifts: wine, a yard or two of cloth, vegetables from a summer garden, a small bouquet of wildflowers, picked from the roadside and arranged with care.

When I was fourteen, the month after my first *sangue di mestruale*, she called me into the kitchen one night when a woman came to her door, holding a thin baby. “It’s all right for her to be here,” she told the woman, who seemed too distracted to care if I sat with them or not.

“This baby nurses day and night, yet he will not grow,” she whispered to my mother, tears running down her cheeks.

My mother took down the bowl from the shelf, and the knife. “Maria, you must watch now,” she said. For weeks, I’d told her about the strange thoughts that filled my mind like dreams, though I wasn’t asleep: how noises in the wind sounded like voices whispering, how a vermilion flower at the edge of a dry field was the exact color and shape of a bloody mouth. I thought that the mouth of the flower could utter terrible

things, if I put my ear to it and listened. She only nodded, touched my forehead with a cool hand, gave me chamomile steeped in water, as if I were a baby again.

My mother filled the bowl with water she kept in a small cistern, then added a pinch of salt from the tin box on the table. She poured three drops of olive oil into the water. "Look at the oil, Maria, and you will know what you need to know," she told me.

I saw the oil drift into torn ribbons, clouds, small puddles like the ones I jumped into when I was a little girl. Soon, the oil gathered into a single, slick green circle. My mother told me this was the sign that the woman's child was afflicted with *malocchio*.

"Someone has glanced at her child with envy or hatred, enough to cause it harm," she said as she took the knife and cut the oil three times in the shape of a cross, whispering a sentence three times also, about chasing away the eye of evil with salt water bitter as tears.

My mother then picked up the bowl and opened one of the kitchen shutters. "Now you know why I plant nothing underneath this window, Maria, for *malocchio* must flow away, directly into the earth," she said as she poured the oil and water out onto the ground.

And, weeks later, on Christmas Eve, we saw the woman with her baby at Midnight Mass. He smiled at us over her shoulder, bright-eyed and healthy. After everyone left the church and the sacristan snuffed out the candles, my mother told me to wait until the square outside was empty. Then she pressed the door's heavy latch and pushed it open just a bit.

"This door is never closed to those who know how to pick the lock," she said.

We sat on the floor of the vestry as she taught me the incantation to break *il malocchio*. Over and over, I repeated it, until I knew it as well as I knew that I was Maria Barrasso, of Grottaminarda, Italy.

I asked her that night why she chose to teach me and not my sister Nunzia. My mother told me that all the strange thoughts crowding my head, the faces I saw in the patterns of tree bark, the shadow of a human figure I sometimes caught flickering at the edge of my vision, were signs that I was blooming into a *strega*. “Nunzia thinks of recipes for bread all day, Maria,” she said. “Cakes are her only magic. Some families have more than one daughter who becomes a *strega*. We don’t.”

This power saved me when I came to America as the wife of Pietro Indrisano. Everyone in the family tells the story of how he handed me a strand of pearls on our wedding day that cost a thousand dollars. I never wanted for a meal, or clothing for my children. I thought marriage would be different in America, without the cruelty I’d seen in Grottaminarda. Pietro’s sisters entered our house the morning after our wedding and tapped on our bedroom door, saying, “Wake up, you two, we have coffee. We have fresh towels and basins of warm water so you can both wash your face and hands.”

Pietro hauled himself up on one elbow and yelled, “Get the hell out of here!” He told me that no one was going to check the bridal sheets for a spot of blood. “This is a different country,” he said. “No need for a sign of your purity.”

And so, from the first day of our marriage, I wore the pearls he gave me, cold at first around my neck every morning, then warm, and the silk dresses he paid a seamstress

to make. There was a statue of the Virgin Mary in the backyard, blue-glazed, eyes downcast, palms turned up, standing in a grotto shaped like a scallop shell.

“It’s been there ever since I bought the house, Maria,” Pietro told me. I went out every day and knelt on the stones in front of Our Lady. I spoke to her as if to a friendly neighbor woman, thanking her for my good fortune: a prosperous, husband with the best butcher shop in East Boston, a handsome man with a black mustache he brushed and twisted into a handlebar every morning.

But six months later, he stopped staying home. Just an evening here and there, but a woman knows when something’s wrong with her marriage. His subtle, sidelong look. The quick shoveling of food into his mouth. His insistence that I have a fresh shirt for him every night, ironed and ready. When I went to shops, other women began to glance at me too long, too sympathetically.

One day, as I walked home, I heard two neighbors whisper behind me, “Poor thing, *disgrazia*, why does he have to carry on, and with more than one? *Volgare*.” I could feel their pity like a bucket of scalding water thrown at my back.

That night I cooked one of Pietro’s favorite meals: Italian sausages, peppers, potatoes. When he walked into the dining room, I said nothing to him. He sat down at the table. I lay the roasted green peppers on his plate, the soft potatoes, and the long sausages. And I cut each sausage into small, ragged pieces as he watched.

He hesitated only for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders and ate. When he finished, I cleared the table. I kept my back turned as I scraped the dish and pans into a bucket, until he asked, “Maria, where’s my clean shirt?”

I turned around and stared at him. "It's up your *culo*, you bastard," I said, quietly and evenly, "Go find it there."

He jumped up from his chair then and grabbed my arm. When he raised his hand, I raised my own. In it, a paring knife, the same one I'd used to cut up the sausages.

"Hit me, *diavolo*," I said, "And I'll drive this knife right into your stomach. You'll see that meal you just ate pour out of you like a river." My voice hissed, the sound of a snake ready to strike. He let me go. Pietro still went out that night, and most nights thereafter, but he never raised a hand to me again.

Now, so many years after his death, I know Pietro was doing what he had seen men do in Italy all his life. Perhaps he even told me that once or twice. Yet I could not let it go; my anger enclosed us like a thorn fence. Once, I screamed at him so loud and long about his mistresses that he hung his head like a child. I wanted to hold him then, but rage made me unable to take him in my arms.

"Maria, you hate me so much that when I die, I know you're going to cook chicken," he said. "A feast fit for the day you finally rule this house."

And, God forgive me, so much bitterness filled my heart when he visited his *puttana* year after year that I made not one, but two plump, roasted chickens after Pietro's heart gave out one afternoon in his butcher shop. His customers said it was as if a hammer struck him, no warning.

At the wake, I planned to set the platter down triumphantly on the table in our parlor. I made the chickens with a glaze of lemon and rosemary, arranged them on a bed of shredded greens.

But nothing prepared me for the sight of my husband in his coffin. I thought I would feel only relief, the cuckolded wife released from her shame at last. I stared at him, remembering only the smallest things: how, each time one of our babies died, he rubbed my back and hands as I cried. He could be so cold at the births of his living children, but not once did he say, "It's okay, Maria, we can have more babies," when we lost another and another. I thought of the beef soup he tried to make so I could get my strength back after I miscarried a six-month baby. He carried a bowl of the soup to me himself, but it was so salty and watery at the same time that we both laughed, despite our tears, when I tasted it.

I put the plate of chicken on the edge of the table, not the center. And quietly, carefully, so as not to draw attention to myself, I stood at the side of his coffin and brushed a stray lock of Pietro's hair into place, smoothing it over the rigid scalp.

I know now that my husband's infidelity was my salvation. All those evenings alone, when my children were older and Anna could take care of them, I learned midwifery from Signora Rubino. All my fine dresses and boxes of jewelry meant nothing to me then. Pietro kept bringing me gifts: a cameo carved from a pink and white shell, delicate as a petal. An aquamarine pendant set in platinum. Perhaps, in his way, he was trying to say he was sorry. But I snatched the jewelry away from him, rough and angry, saying, "*Grazie*, Pietro, I deserve this, because you're such a demon." I could not bear the fact that I conceived his children, knowing he lay with others. And yet I took comfort in the rare times we touched each other, our bedroom too dark to see each other's faces, our couplings so careful, so tender, it felt like we were crying with our two bodies.

One year after I came to America, I bore my first baby, a boy who died the instant he was born, the cord around his neck tight as a hangman's noose. We took him in a tiny coffin to the cemetery, and two months later, my *sangue di mestruale* stopped again. I did not want to believe another child was on the way, but Signora Rubino told me it was so.

Still, I grieved for my other baby, all the way through my second labor, a labor which went on for nearly a day. And when the baby was finally born, the little one neither cried nor moved.

Signora Rubino kept saying she was sorry; the neighbor woman who helped her covered the baby with a white cloth and placed her on the bed, though the cord was not yet cut. "*Morto*," I heard one of them say. Then I sat up and slipped both hands beneath the body, which already had begun to grow cold.

What did I do then? I don't remember, for the afterbirth came as I pulled the baby to my breast. Signora Rubino said I shrieked, uttering words in a language not English and not Italian; the neighbor woman said I touched the baby right over the heart and a rosiness spread through her pale skin, like a pink stain.

"It was as if the statue of a baby suddenly came to life," said this woman for months afterward, to anyone who would listen. All I know myself is that one moment, I held a dead child in my arms and the next, my daughter woke and screamed, open-mouthed, waving her little arms and legs, the daughter I named Anna.

When Anna was just a few weeks old, people began to come to me for help. Small things, a cloth bag of herbs for good luck, to hang above a store counter. A tea to

cure rheumatism. It was as if I traded my first baby's life, and the near-death of my daughter, for a piece of my own good luck. I wept the first time someone placed a silver dollar in my hand for a bouquet of sweet flowers tied with a white ribbon, to bless a bride and groom. I knew someone would eventually ask me for the ritual to take away *malocchio*. I selected a bowl from my wedding china, gold-rimmed, and a knife. Simple, with a wooden handle. Not one person who saw me use it ever suspected it was the one I nearly drove into my husband's full stomach.

Soon, coins for my services filled a jar. I dug a deep hole at the foot of my Mary statue, and lined the hole with flat stones. Another stone on top, like a pot lid. Pietro never went to that corner of the garden, and I knew he didn't pray anyway. When I knelt in front of Our Lady, I said the rosary first, then lifted the stone and counted the coins, each one heavy, cold, all mine.

Now, here in this strange city, I would pour all that I know as a *strega* into my granddaughter Kathleen's hands, like coins from that jar. I would give her what my daughter Anna, in her sweetness and softness, could never accept: the power to read fortune and disaster in the patterns of oil on water.

And yet, though Kathleen is the only woman of my bloodline old enough to learn what I know, I have watched her this week, the way a hawk watches everything from its perch. I see how Kathleen spends her days cleaning, how she pushes her children away, how she longs for the things she sees on television, always wanting what she cannot afford. She chooses a woven bread basket with a cheerful yellow egg nestled inside, not the one with an egg the color of the deepest part of a woman's body, the womb which

pushes out life. Some might say this is not enough to refuse Kathleen my gifts. But there is something no one mentions, although everyone knows it: the alcohol on her breath from early morning until late at night. Kathleen lied about it this very afternoon, telling me the coffee cup in her hands held only grape juice, as if I were too old and stupid to recognize the smell of wine.

A woman who drinks like that will take the *strega*'s power and bend it to terrible purposes. And so, as I watch the sky lighten over the black outlines of houses, I realize I will not pass on what I know. I think of my three great-granddaughters, Maryanne, always the center of attention, Joanie, so small and wary, Patricia, little more than a baby still. Perhaps I will live long enough to see the oldest one come to her majority. But more likely not.

This is what I want for them, these girls living in the house of a mother whose mind is like a fragile ribbon, shredding and fading. I do not know what their lives will be, my great-granddaughters who know not a single word of Italian. Long after I pass from this earth, I hope they will pause on an ordinary day because a shadow in the shape of a person flickers at their vision's edge. Maybe they will stop while walking a child to the park because the afternoon breeze suddenly carries the voice of a lost loved one. Perhaps they will place a few roses in a slim glass vase and startle at the color, red as wounded mouths. And this will be the *strega* waking in them, unmistakable, a knowledge bright at the coiled necklace of a snake in dark grass.