



Child of Wonder

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Ferraro, Raphael -
CHILD OF WONDER
pp. 121

**Dedicated with much affection to my beloved
Grandmother Filomena Calvi Drago**

Chapter I

A blazing sun beat down on the Calabrian landscape, a desolate region of scattered mountains dotted with wild flowers, scanty trees, and sparse shrubs. To escape the blistering rays of the scorching summer sun, a young boy and an old woman rested beneath the arching branches of a leafy olive tree. Smiling, the white-haired woman took two shiny pears from a basket set between them on the dry rocky soil and handed one of them to the boy. Finishing the tasty fruit, the woman wiped her mouth on the sleeve of her tattered black dress, then edging closer to the child held out a long sharp knife. "Long ago, these beasts roamed the earth," she explained pointing to the partly human figure with protruding teeth, pointed ears, and a short tail etched into the wide metal blade of the worn knife.

"These savages enjoyed killing innocent animals. Once a month, they butchered a different animal for their god. One day, they planned a special sacrifice for him. For this sacrifice they looked everywhere in the land until they found a large white lamb with thick wool. His death would please their god." The woman held up the yellow bone-handled dagger with its tarnished blade. "A knife like this would rip out the poor animal's heart, draw the blood for the beasts' magic."

The boy's brow wrinkled. "Magic?"

The old woman rose and brushed strands of hair from before her eyes; standing straight she thrust her thin fingers

above her head, moving them in wavelike motion while mumbling incoherent words.

Twelve-year old Lorenzo jumped to his feet. In elfin steps he paced back and forth by a thorny hedgerow twirling his small hands in the air. His dark eyes opening wide, he pointed at a scrawny fig tree growing close to the edge of the mountain near a cluster of rocks and stones. He looked at the tree's bare branches. "Fruit grow! Fruit grow!" he shouted in a loud clear voice.

Lorenzo brushed back his unruly black locks. He smiled and snuggled close to his grandmother, watched as her wizened face broke into a smile.

"A *Lovely Lady* who lived beyond the sky appeared to the god of the beasts on the morning the lamb was to be killed and begged him to let the lamb go free. She loved the lamb and did not want to see it die. But the mean god told the beautiful woman, who called herself *Mother*, that he couldn't live without the blood of animals. He told her the lamb had to die."

Lorenzo moved closer to his grandmother.

Giuseppina bowed her head. "The lamb was sacrificed, but at the time it died, black clouds filled the sky. Day turned to night."

In quick thrusts, Giuseppina's long narrow fingers pantomimed how at the lamb's death the mountains trembled and shook and the land split and broke into little pieces as flaming rocks fell from the heavens.

"The world ended?" asked a wide-eyed Lorenzo.

"Only the fish and animals of the deep lived."

"Did the *Mother* die?"

"The *Mother* cannot die, *mio caro*. She is not of this world."

Lorenzo's eyes widened. "Who is this *Mother*?"

Giuseppina gazed at the sky.

"*Nonna*?" repeated Lorenzo.

Giuseppina took a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped tears from her eyes. "The *Mother* is the light of the world. She is unlike any human woman, yet every woman resembles her. Her face is radiant. Her body is sunlight. And her voice is like music."

Lorenzo wondered why talking about the *lovely lady* upset his grandmother. "*Che c'e?*" he asked.

"*Niente*," answered Giuseppina turning from Lorenzo and reaching over to pick up the partially filled basket of pears. "We have to leave now. You know how upset your mother gets when we're late."

Mid-afternoon, the woman and the boy returned to their home in Alba. Entering a small house, they went into the kitchen, a semi-dark room with yellow cotton drapes covering the room's one window. Across from the streaked window, a chipped enamel metal pitcher and basin rested on a square table set against the wall.

Pale green shelves on the right and left of the kitchen sink contained bottles, jars, and boxes of salt, pepper, spices, and herbs, while in the cracked stone sink unwashed dishes and a frying pan reeked of rancid oil. Directly above the malodorous sink--suspended from cords nailed to a wooden beam--hung a row of hot red peppers and a few small, shriveled salami.

Giuseppina slid the worn pitcher and basin aside and set the basket of pears in the center of the table. Breathing heavily, she sat as Lorenzo skipped over the broken tiles of the room tossing his arms about and shouting meaningless words before stopping by the table to reach for one of the pears. Grinning, he polished the pear on his sleeve and then opened his mouth about to bite into the juicy fruit when he looked toward the doorway and froze.

A stout woman in a soiled black dress stomped into the kitchen. Her steel-gray hair knotted into a bun hung askew at the back of her head. The furious woman stood

with clenched fists, her narrow black eyes glaring at Lorenzo as she stepped forward and slapped the pear from his fingers.

The swiftness of the blow surprised Lorenzo, who stood immobilized much like a bird hypnotized in the presence of a snake. He watched his agitated mother pace before him, wondering why nothing he did ever pleased her. Her caustic tongue was ever ready to ridicule him, to reproach him, to humiliate him.

"You take three hours to pick a few pears; now you want to eat them!" The angry woman pummeled the boy about the face and arms with her fat hammer fists.

"It was my fault we took so long," apologized Giuseppina.

Marianna tossed a hand in the air. "Alberto says to me, 'My mother's alone. No one to look after her. She's old and needs someone to cook for her.' I say 'Giuseppina can live with us.' I feed you. I clothe you. I take care of you, and--"

Giuseppina felt the shabby black dress she wore day in and day out and thought how well Marianna had clothed her. She recalled the scanty meals Marianna served her so as not to deprive herself and Alberto of ample portions and thought how well Marianna had fed her. She remembered the many sleepless nights she had cried because of her painful arthritis and how seldom Marianna had made any effort to comfort her. Yes, Marianna, you've treated me well indeed over the years, thought Giuseppina.

"You fill Lorenzo's head with stupid stories!"

"Children learn from stories," protested Giuseppina.

Marianna's heavy cheeks flushed as she stepped closer to Giuseppina and shook an extended finger at her. "This is the last time! Tell Lorenzo any more of your ridiculous stories and I'll send you back to that shanty you call a house."

Giuseppina knew Alberto would protest her leaving, but eventually he'd give in to his wife's constant remonstrations.

From the time she had first defended Lorenzo, Marianna's resentment toward her knew no bounds. Besides, Giuseppina would have left the house long ago were it not for Lorenzo. Protective of her beloved grandson, she knew that life would be much more difficult for him without her close by.

"Is that understood?"

Giuseppina put her head down and trudged toward her bedroom.

"*Sì*," she answered over her shoulder.

Setting out to school the next day, Lorenzo delighted in the singing birds that circled about him and the occasional stray dog that leapt up to lap his face and hands. Further down the road, he saw the school building in the distance and thought how attending school always made him anxious. He turned from the main road and strolled close to the mountain's edge where he sat on a boulder to admire the view below the Calabrian mountain on which Alba was located. He remembered his grandmother telling him that whenever he was troubled or disturbed, nature would calm him if he took the time to look at the trees, the sky, or the land and listen to the sound of the wind, the rain, or the birds. He often found observing nature soothed his anxiety.

Orchards, olive groves, and green fields filled with fruits and vegetables dotted the land while beyond them spread vast stretches of black and gray areas, barren countryside where the sizzling heat had singed the life from trees and plants leaving rubble and the ashen appearance of death. And, here and there, blemishing the picturesque view, zigzagging lines of veined earth revealed dried streams, ponds, and rivers. Lorenzo thought it strange that the land of Southern Italy survived even though, in places it

appeared more dead than alive. Picking his textbooks from the ground, he plodded toward school, little consoled by nature.

The instructor was a middle-aged man with a round face, a long neck, and large ears. On the top of his head, his sparse hair was thinning into a bald spot while thick tufts of wiry hair grew around his ears. The lanky instructor's light brown eyes scanned the classroom as he paced the floor. Shortly, with an assertive gait, he moved closer to his students, ready to begin the day's lesson. "In Italy are famous sites which tourists visit each year, sites which are part of our heritage. Today, we'll review what we have learned about these special places." All the eager hands of the instructor's fifth-grade pupils shot up except for Lorenzo's.

Lorenzo glanced about the cramped room thinking about nothing in particular. He noted the water-stained yellow ceiling, the squalid white walls, and in front of the room--behind the *professore's* desk--portraits of grim-faced old men with curled gray mustaches and beards. For a time, he stared at the immaculate Italian flag with its familiar colors of red, white, and green suspended between the dusty framed portraits before looking down at his desk and thinking about the tale his grandmother had told him. He was sad because the beasts killed the lamb. He wondered whether the poor lamb knew it was going to die and whether it suffered much. His thoughts then turned to the Mother. He imagined a lovely woman tiptoeing through the woods, her sun-sparkling gown rustling over leaves and twigs.

"Beautiful, beautiful, *Mother!*" sighed Lorenzo pleased with the pleasant picture his mind had conjured.

From the pocket of his black frock, Lorenzo took a stubby pencil and doodled on his desktop.

Scholarly Silvio, the class prize pupil, rose to his feet. He stood straight, his eyes fixed on the *professore* as he

recited in a confident voice. "*Le Colosseo di Roma* was first known as the Flavian Amphitheater until its name was changed to *Le Colosseo* in the 8th century. It was begun in the year 72 and completed in the year 82. *Le Colosseo* is 186 yards long, 170 yards wide, and 159 feet high. It seated about fifty-thousand people. Many visitors come every year to see this ancient Roman monument."

"*Bene!*" praised the *professore*. "Now, let us see what we have learned about *Le Palazzo Vecchio*. "Mario," called the *professore*.

Mario jumped to his feet, his darting eyes set on the long hickory stick the *professore* carried with him and tapped against his leg whenever he paced about the room. His arms limp and his mouth half open between words, Mario recited the facts word-for-word as he had read them in the textbook.

"*Bene*. I'm pleased that some of my students are prepared."

He turned his head quickly. "Lorenzo!"

A surprised Lorenzo sprang to his feet, sliding his history book over the sketch on his desktop. "*Si, signor?*"

"*Si, professore.*"

"*Si, professore,*" repeated Lorenzo.

"Will you please share with the class what we have learned about *Le Colosseo di Roma*."

Lorenzo stood silent.

"Tell us then about *Le Palazzo Vecchio?*"

Lorenzo shrugged his shoulders.

"*Niente?*" asked the *professore*, surprised that Lorenzo was unable to recall a single word of the lesson discussed just minutes earlier. He sighed. "Yesterday, I spoke in great detail about *Le Torre di Pisa*. Now, Lorenzo, tell us why *Le Torre di Pisa* leans?"

The students stared at Lorenzo.

Lorenzo's face flushed. "Because, because--" He could not remember. Finally, he blurted out, "Because it's not straight."

Laughter filled the room.

"*Stupido!*" yelled one pupil.

"*Che asino!*" snickered another.

"*Babbeo!*" chuckled another.

Slamming his stick across a desktop, the teacher's stentorian voice boomed, "*Silenzio! Silenzio!*"

An embarrassed Lorenzo cowered in his seat. Suddenly, the pupil in the chair behind him reached over and brushed his book to the floor. Chuckling, he pointed to the sketch on Lorenzo's desk. Other pupils craned their necks or left their seats to see what Marco had uncovered. When they saw the figure of a fat lamb, the pupils pulled their ears and stuck out their tongues.

"Ba! Ba! Ba!" they droned in unison.

"*Disgrazia!*" shouted the *professore* striking his stick so hard against his desk that it split in two. His face flushed, the annoyed *professore* lectured his pupils on their inappropriate behavior and scolded them for their unnecessary cruelty to Lorenzo, whose poor memory and weak reasoning ability deserved their sympathy and understanding more than their ridicule. "Your punishment is to write out the answers to Lessons Nine, Ten and Eleven for tomorrow." He raised his voice. "Anyone foolish enough not to finish the assignment will receive five blows of the stick. Now, class is dismissed except for Marco and Lorenzo."

The *professore* took a new switch from the closet and tested its strength by bending back its tip and then slamming the stick hard against the palm of his hand. "Marco!" he called.

"*Si, professore,*" replied Marco without looking up.

"Your hand, please."

Marco unclenched the fingers of his chunky right hand, closed his eyes, and gritted his teeth. The stinging sensations of the switch rushed from the fingers of his fleshy hand up to his arm. A few tears stained his cheeks.

"You may leave." The *professore* turned to Lorenzo, who did not notice Marco glaring over his shoulder at him as he hurried from the classroom.

"And what am I to do with you, young man?" sighed the *professore*. "You do not pay attention in class. You do not study your lessons. And now, you draw pictures on your desk."

"I try," protested Lorenzo, "but I can't remember things. I don't know why."

Professore Strato shook his head. "Everyday it's the same.

'I can't remember. I forget. I didn't do my homework.' This afternoon, I will speak to your mother about your behavior. I've put the meeting off long enough."

Lorenzo clutched the *professore's* arm. "No, no! *Per favore!*"

Seeing the fear in Lorenzo's eyes, the *professore* thought perhaps the poor child deserved one last chance. "Alright. Alright. I will postpone the talk--but your behavior must improve."

"*Grazie! Grazie!*" exclaimed a grateful Lorenzo.

"Your punishment, however, is to scrub all the desks clean.

Pronto!"

"*Si, si, professore!*" Lorenzo rushed to the corner of the classroom to pick up a bucket before darting across the room toward the water faucet. Shortly, he returned swinging the bucket filled with water and applied himself to the dreary task the *professore* had assigned him.

When the last desk was brushed clean, Lorenzo hurried from school secure in the knowledge that the

professore's silence would spare him his mother's wrath. Kicking loose stones on the dirt road, he wondered why it was difficult concentrating on the lessons discussed in class and why he couldn't discipline himself to do the homework the *professore* assigned. He knew that the constant belittling remarks of his classmates made him uneasy and forgetful whenever the *professore* called on him. Why did he have to attend school anyway? His grandmother was teaching him all he needed to know about life.

A brawny boy stepped from a doorway and blocked Lorenzo's path. "Ba! Ba! Ba!" he mimicked knocking the surprised Lorenzo to the ground. "Big ears! Ba! Ba! Big ears!"

Lorenzo tried to stand, but each time he rose the heavy set Marco pushed him down and spat in his face. "You get me into trouble again, *babbeo!*" Marco kicked Lorenzo hard in the stomach and then shook his clenched fists at him before he turned and swaggered down the street.

Lorenzo wiped the spit off his face and brushed the dust from his rumpled shirt and pants. He hurried home, but finding no one in the house, he went into the family storage room which also served as his bedroom. He tossed his books and school clothes onto a cot and then changed into the patched pants and faded blue shirt that comprised the rest of his wardrobe before leaving for the fields.

On the sloping hills, Lorenzo saw his grandmother's stooped, thin figure weeding a row of tender plants. He threw himself into her arms. "*Nonna, nonna!*"

"*Che c'e?*"

Lorenzo did not answer.

"School?" she prompted.

"*Si,*" mumbled Lorenzo, blurting the story out in almost one breath.

Giuseppina wiped her brow. "The sun's hot." She led Lorenzo to a cool spot beneath a shady tree. "My child,

you're not like other children. When you were born, *Le Fate* cursed you. For all of your days, they will try to turn everyone against you and take from you all that you have."

"Why, *nonna*?" asked Lorenzo. "I never hurt anyone."

Giuseppina pointed to the withered leaves and whitening branches of the tree growing on the nearby slope. "My child, when the seed for that tree fell to the earth it was just like any other seed. Now, why's that fig tree dying and the others aren't?"

Lorenzo shrugged his shoulders.

Giuseppina patted his hand. "It's difficult to know why some trees grow and blossom and others wither and die. It's difficult to understand why good or bad things happen. But no matter how much we suffer, my child, we must trust that in the end good will come from it.

"I pray you will survive the difficult times ahead and find your destiny, your purpose in life. I pray that like a sturdy tree you will endure the winters of your life and bring forth fruit."

Lorenzo thought how Giuseppina spoke the right words to assuage his fears, knew the secrets of nature, and was always willing to share that knowledge with him. Though he did not understand all his grandmother told him, she assured him that the meaning of her words would one day be clear to him. Lorenzo considered himself fortunate to have such a wonderful grandmother. That night after Lorenzo said his evening prayers, he fell into a deep sleep, dreaming he stood close to his grandmother, treading a steep mountain path. Black clouds masked the full moon while all about them in the blistering wind they heard the raucous screeching of bats and ravens. Shortly, however, the dark clouds passed and the moon's bright beams once again fall onto the earth allowing him to see the clear outline of a shiny white temple perched on a cliff near the top of a mountain.

Lorenzo and his grandmother hurried their pace. Close to the temple, Giuseppina rested a hand on Lorenzo's shoulder and stepped ahead of him. "I'll go first." Her foot barely touched the moonlit ground when she thrust her hands forward. In horror, Lorenzo watched a powerful invisible force pull the resisting Giuseppina toward the ledge of the cliff and then drop her like an old rag doll into the ravine below.

Lorenzo awoke with a start. "*Nonna! Nonna!*" he cried. It was only a dream he told himself attempting to dismiss the tragic incident, but his anxious mind fixed on the painful event refused him the luxury of forgetfulness. Unable to sleep, he buried his face in the pillow, closed his eyes, and prayed.

Giuseppina listened to the hushed cries from Lorenzo's room. Though she had grown accustomed to his whimpering through the night because of bad dreams and nightmares, it still upset her to hear him cry. Turning her head, she closed her eyes and circled her black rosary beads around her fingers. With each familiar wooden bead which slipped through her nimble fingers, Giuseppina recalled that unforgettable Friday afternoon on October 13, 1917, when the dreadful curse began....

Relatives and family members had gathered in the Malcini house because Marianna was to give birth. Arriving earlier, the town's midwife and her anxious aide raced back and forth from the bedroom into the kitchen fetching pan, water, and towels. When they returned to the laboring Marianna with the necessary items, the midwife arranged them on the table next to the bed and proceeded with the delivery. Shortly, a piercing shriek burst from the bedroom.

The panicky midwife--her face white as death--rushed from the doorway shouting, "*Le Fate! Le Fate!*" Stumbling, her frightened aide followed after her.

Those in the living room made the sign of the cross. Reluctant to enter the bedroom or to approach the newborn child, they, too, fled from the house.

Giuseppina was riveted to the images of the painful events which brought her grief whenever they came to mind. Momentarily, she held back the indelible memories, but soon they flashed before her more vivid and alive than ever....

Blood ran from a gash in Tiny Lorenzo's head. He lay wailing and kicking on the cold cement floor at the foot of the bed. With tear-filled eyes, Alberto picked up his newborn son, held a cloth against his bloody head as he placed the child on the pillow next to his hysterical wife who pushed the crying baby away from her. Despite Alberto's efforts to calm his distraught wife, Marianna was inconsolable. At that moment, Giuseppina extended her hands, took the screeching infant from Alberto and cradled him in her arms before bathing his wound and hushing him to sleep with her soothing lullabies.

"*Le Fate* snatched the baby from me," the midwife broadcast throughout Alba.

"A bad omen," repeated others.

"The poor child is cursed," whispered the townspeople whenever they spoke about Lorenzo or the unfortunate circumstances of his birth.

Those in Alba and the surrounding towns and villages believed three invisible sisters dressed in flowing white garments and wearing bright red roses in their long golden hair were present at every human conception. These three beautiful women, known as *Le Fate*, predicted lives of hardships and suffering for some newborns by dropping them onto the floor during birth while for other newborns they foretold lives of ease and happiness by filling the household with the fragrance of flowers and the sweet melodies of their lutes as they danced around the blessed child.

Concerning Lorenzo's future, everyone believed that the circumstances of his birth forebode a difficult life, one burdened with adversity and tragedy.

Giuseppina remembered her many visits to the *Church of San Giovanni*, where she pleaded before the statue of the *Blessed Mother* for Lorenzo's burdens to be lifted from him and given to her to bear. She recalled one visit in particular. While gazing into the compassionate eyes of the *Blessed Mother*, incredulously, she watched the *Mother's* sky-blue robe turn a pale white, the diadem of stars on her brow become a crown of thorns, and what moments earlier was a serene smile change into an expression of deep sorrow as a stream of tears rushed down her cheeks.

The dolorous features of the *Blessed Mother* indicated to Giuseppina that Lorenzo's calvary would be a long and arduous one.

Lorenzo's early years passed quickly before Giuseppina.

With displeasure, she watched Marianna reproach him and beat him at every opportunity. If the bread in the oven did not bake well, it was his fault. If it failed to rain and the crops did not grow, it was his fault. If there was too much rain and not enough sunshine to make the earth yield, it was his fault. The accursed Lorenzo was blamed for any unpleasant incident or any misfortune which befell the Malcini family.

Giuseppina overheard the townspeople's disparaging remarks about the dwarfish Lorenzo's appearance: his long narrow ears and enormous dark eyes, his pointed chin and wide cheekbones, and especially his thick black eyebrows which lapped over his eyes joining one another at the ridge of his long thin nose--a fitting face for one doomed by the Fates.

"*Madre mia, mia Maria,*" sighed Giuseppina. And then as on many a night, she fell asleep reciting the Rosary,

trusting the benevolence of God and the power of her prayers to circumvent the terrible consequences of the dreadful curse placed upon her beloved grandchild.

Chapter II

Lorenzo grew more anxious with each passing day, sleeping poorly, losing his appetite, and reluctantly leaving his grandmother's side, even for a moment. At times, images from his terrible nightmare flashed before his mind. He saw his grandmother frantically flailing her arms as she fell helplessly to her death while all about the mountainside he heard the cawing of crows and the high pitched cry of bats. Often, he cringed at the image of the twisted bloodied body of his grandmother lying motionless at the foot of a mountain. Although Lorenzo believed his dream of Giuseppina falling into a ravine was a tragedy about to happen, he attempted to comfort himself by remembering words his grandmother had spoken to him about death being a passage from this world to a far more beautiful place, a land of perpetual light beyond the boundaries of this earth.

One day, when Giuseppina failed to return home from the fields, news of her absence spread among the townspeople who combed the hills, the valleys, and the nearby mountain without finding her. Lorenzo was frantic. Overwrought with concern for his grandmother, he skipped school, anxiously searched about the countryside on those familiar mountain sites where he and his grandmother often visited. Early evening, he started home, disappointed from his fruitless search. Approaching the piazza, he noticed two shepherds and a number of townspeople standing near a black mule burdened with a mangled body resembling a

woman. Lorenzo froze. His eyes became glassy and his limbs grew rigid as he felt his mind project itself outside of his body and hover above him. From a distance, he looked down at the small frightened and bewildered child resembling himself before turning his attention to the scene in the piazza.

People gathered to view the limp body tied across the back of the mule. Men and women sniffled or wiped tears, others stood silent. A heavy set woman pushed her way through the crowd while behind her a thin man with intense features mumbled prayers and wept as he attempted to keep pace with her. Lorenzo heard the woman cry, "Giuseppina, Giuseppina!" The maudlin woman wiped copious tears with a black handkerchief and then gave directions to the two shepherds. Lorenzo watched the short red-haired man shuffling behind the weeping woman, one hand resting on the broken back of the dead body bound to the mule. He looked familiar. For a time, Lorenzo observed him until he and the others crossed the piazza and were gone from sight.

Lorenzo slipped back into his body. He did not understand this unusual phenomena. At times in his life, usually during traumatic moments, he had experienced a similar severance of mind. Whenever these experiences occurred, he was left puzzled and confused by the unusual incidents. Afterwards, he always felt light-headed and uncertain whether he was dreaming or whether he was awake.

Rubbing his eyes, he started toward the piazza, following the black mule and the trailing crowd down one narrow street and up another.

When the crowd reached its destination, a young farmer spotting the dazed Lorenzo took his arm and led him into the Malcini house.

The aroma of fresh flowers and the pungent scent of burning candles filled the small room crowded with

mourners. Those who came to Giuseppina's wake huddled near the walls or gathered about her corpse. Lorenzo stood close to the bed, on Giuseppina's right side, studying his grandmother's features. The sight of the rigid body white and still as a statue with hollow cheeks, snowy hair, and bony fingers crisscrossing one another over her sunken chest fascinated him. Strange, how he knew she was dead, yet he expected her to sit up and smile at him at any moment. Finally, his eyes focused on Giuseppina's empty fingers. Though his father had searched everywhere for his mother's favorite black rosary beads, he was unable to find them. Lorenzo wondered if Giuseppina had lost them in the house or out in the fields. He thought about the countless prayers his grandmother had said for him on those worn beads. Who would pray for him now that she was gone? He knew Giuseppina had died, yet he couldn't accept that his beloved *nonna*--his friend, companion, and teacher--was dead. He would miss her terribly. And how would he survive without her? His peers mocked him, his parents abused him, and the townspeople considered him a blemish to the community. Lorenzo opened his hands and pressed them hard against his head attempting to release the anguish he felt, but no tears came to his eyes. Since Giuseppina's tragic accident, he was unable to express his grief. Not speaking or responding to anyone, he crouched by Giuseppina's deathbed like a dazed mute, wishing that the scene before him was but a passing bad dream from which he would soon awaken.

"Knock! Knock! Knock!" Three sharp raps were heard on the front door followed by the entrance of seven women dressed in black who slowly crossed the room, stopping beside Giuseppina's corpse where they formed a circle before taking from the deep pockets of their dresses small crucifixes, religious pictures, and wooden rosary beads. In unison, the haggard women lifted their arms and

recited magical words and prayers, passing the implements of their craft up and down and back and forth above Giuseppina's body. Seven times they performed this ritual followed by plaintive moans, heart-rending wails, and a flood of tears. When the mourners finished with their outbursts, they glanced from the corpse to the ceiling--though they seemed to be looking beyond it--and in deep commanding voices chanted their "Song of the Soul," an ancient incantation to guide the spirit on its journey into the hereafter.

The chant completed, the eldest of the group, a lean humped back woman with a brown wart on her cheek, approached Alberto and stood over him while his shaky fingers fumbled into his jacket pocket to take out a few crumpled *lire* which the hovering woman snatched from his fingers without a word of thanks.

About to leave, the hoary woman turned instead and looked at Lorenzo. Stepping close to him, she thrust out her fleshless hand, pressing her thumb forcefully against his forehead.

"Giuseppina was my friend," she whispered. Her stern face broke into a full smile before she turned and joined her companions who in single file followed her from the house.

The passing weeks were lonely ones for Lorenzo. He thought often about his grandmother. Everywhere he went, he looked for her, expecting to see her walking about the house, working in the fields, or praying in the church. Though he found it difficult accepting the reality of her death, he comforted himself in the belief that his grandmother was watching over him from the other side, the place she referred to as the "Land of Bright Light."

With affection, he remembered her telling him to be kind to everyone no matter what harm they did, for loving others unconditionally allowed the soul into paradise; and

when it was not possible to show kindness to others, he was to pray for them. Though Lorenzo tried, he was unable to pray for those who had hurt him. Even his prayers for himself were words without feeling. Giuseppina had assured him that no prayer is ever in vain, but at this difficult time after her death, Lorenzo felt little comforted by prayer.

Lorenzo put down the empty basket that he was to fill with string beans for the evening meal and sat on the rocky soil with his arms limp by his side. His eyes closed and his body relaxed, he breathed slow deep breaths for a time until the screen of his mind filled with points of flickering light. "*Nonna, nonna*," he called.

Giuseppina's face shone like a bright star from among the myriad points of light. "*Nonna*, I miss you. I have no friends. I feel so alone without you." For a time, he shared his unhappiness with the comforting image of his grandmother.

From a great distance, Lorenzo heard someone call his name. The shrill voice broke his concentration, shattering the image of Giuseppina's loving face into fragments of light which scattered into the depths of his mind.

A slight man wearing a purple-plaid shirt shook Lorenzo.

"*Vagabondo!*" he shouted.

Surprised, Lorenzo gaped at the angry man with coarse reddish hair whose breath reeked of wine. The shabby man yanked Lorenzo by the nape of the neck.

"It's almost dark. No one's seen you since this afternoon. And what're you doing? You're sleeping! Your mother works hard at home. I break my back in the fields, but you--you sleep!"

Lorenzo snatched the empty basket and hurried home, his father on his heels striking him from time to time against the arms and back with his fists. "Your mother's

right. You're lazy and no good. You've brought us nothing but bad luck."

At the entrance to a small stucco house, Lorenzo drew close to his father at the sight of Marianna looming in the doorway.

His father's abuse was tolerable compared to his mother's vile temper.

Her hawkish eyes fixed on Lorenzo, Marianna seized his arm, pulled him from his father's side, and slapped him hard in the face with her heavy opened hand. Lorenzo attempted to free himself from her, but she clutched his tiny wrist in a claw-like grip and dragged him like a reluctant chicken into the house. In the hallway, she took a heavy black whip from a closet. Glaring at him, she tapped the whip against his arm. "Next time, if you fall asleep in the fields when you should be working, you'll pay for it. Now, go to your room. And don't come out!"

"I haven't eaten. I'm hungry," protested Lorenzo.

Marianna snatched the basket from him and turned it upside down. "Eat what you brought home!"

The bone-handled sacrificial knife of the beasts clanged against the concrete floor. Fearing his mother might take his cherished possession from him, Lorenzo snatched up the knife, clutched it with both hands as he hurried into his room.

"*Cretino!*" yelled Marianna.

A mild man of few words, Alberto seldom knew what to say or do in the face of unpleasant family matters, especially those difficult situations dealing with Lorenzo. He rested a hand on Marianna's shoulder. "*Pazienza,*" he comforted, then went into the kitchen to pour himself a tall glass of wine.

In the classroom the next day, *professore* Strato spoke about ecology and how nature achieves harmony by balances and counter balances. He showed the students

pictures of various birds, commenting on the unique color, shape, and song of each species.

He mentioned how these beautiful winged creatures of the air prevent insects from eating much of the land's produce. "Birds are our friends. They protect our crops and our trees, yet we kill them for our pleasure."

"And our stomachs, too!" shouted fat Alfredo whose father enjoyed hunting.

"*Si*, Alfredo, some hunters shoot birds for food, but what about the useless killing of birds for sport?"

"Crows eat seeds and corn," commented another student.

"True, Santo, birds eat kernels, but must we kill them because they are hungry?"

Lorenzo's imagination painted a picture of songbirds basking in sunlight beneath a bright blue sky with scattered white fluffy clouds. In soft winds, the graceful birds glided in wide circles across the heavens, while their melodious notes drifted down to the earth.

Silvio raised his hand. "*Professore*, do birds have spirits?"

The *professore* cleared his throat. "*Si*. Birds have spirits, of sorts. Every living thing has a spirit within it--I would think."

"Do spiders and lice have spirits, too?" asked Alfredo.

"*Si*," answered the *professore*. "Of sorts."

Silvio's hand shot up again. "*Professore*, do the spirits of animals go to heaven when they die?"

"Heaven is large enough to accommodate all of God's creatures. Surely, they must partake of the Creator's grace."

Chunky Edmundo, who sat slumped in the back row and seldom spoke, jumped to his feet. "Like the wolf who followed St. Francis of Assisi?"

"*Si*, Edmundo," smiled the *professore*.

Suddenly, Lorenzo blurted, "My grandmother told me that the spirits of birds make the music of heaven!"

The students turned to one another and chattered, for this was the first time Lorenzo had asserted himself in the classroom.

"*Silenzio!*" The *professore* turned to Lorenzo. "And have you heard this music, my child?"

"*Sì!*" exclaimed an excited Lorenzo. "In the fields and sometimes before I fall asleep."

"And why do you think no one else hears this unearthly music?"

Lorenzo shrugged his shoulders. "My grandmother told me that long ago everyone heard the music of heaven, but as people listened more and more to the sounds of the earth, their ears grew small so they couldn't hear heaven's music any more."

"Do you suppose, Lorenzo, your ears are different from anyone else's?"

The pupils snickered.

"His ears are like a donkey's," whispered one pupil.

"Hee haw! Hee haw!" brayed another.

"*Silenzio!*" commanded the *professore*.

Lorenzo continued. "My grandmother told me I can hear the music of heaven because my heart is different. Only yesterday, she said...."

"Your grandmother died weeks ago!"

Lorenzo was not surprised. "I talk to my grandmother every day. I close my eyes and I see her in my head." He pointed to the middle of his forehead. "When I see her, she always looks happy. And when she talks to me, she tells me about the lights and music in heaven with colors and sounds no one's ever seen or heard. She even told me that when I grow up God will speak to me."

The stunned instructor did not wish Lorenzo's outlandish remarks to affect his students any more than they

had, so he dismissed everyone except Lorenzo. Once the students had left the classroom, he approached Lorenzo. "Come, my child, I'll accompany you home."

An awkward silence existed between the *professore* and Lorenzo as they left the school building. During the short trip to the Malcini house, few words were exchanged between the two men. Soon, they stood at the entrance of a familiar gray house with Lorenzo crouching close to the *professore* as he knocked on the front door of the house.

Marianna appeared in the doorway, wiping her flour-stained hands on her black apron. "*Professore Strato!*" she greeted.

"What brings you here?"

Lorenzo clutched the *professore's* arm.

Observing Lorenzo's reluctance to step from the *professore's* side, Marianna shouted, "Get into the house. *Pronto!*" She forced a smile. "Some coffee, *professore.*"

"No, *grazie, signora.* I wish to speak to you about Lorenzo. I'm afraid the boy is *mal a desta.*" The *professore* tapped the side of his head with two fingers. "The poor child believes his dead grandmother talks to him and that he hears music from heaven. He even told me that one day God will speak to him."

Marianna blessed herself. "*Fuoco mio!*"

"I suggest Lorenzo take a few days off from school. Some rest may help him adjust to his grandmother's death."

Marianna spat. "Curse her! The foolish old woman filled Lorenzo's head with silly stories. Now the stupid boy babbles like an idiot! Marianna struck the palms of her hands against the sides of her head. "*Povera me!*"

The *professore*, not wishing to excite the emotional woman any more than he had, excused himself and left.

Marianna watched the *professore* walk up the road. When she saw that he was a safe distance from the house,

she went to the closet and took from it a horsewhip. Her black eyes blazing, she turned and faced Lorenzo.

Lorenzo crouched, lifting his small arms to cover his face.

"No, no, *mamma!*" Whack! Whack! The swift blows of the leather whip snapped hard one after another across Lorenzo's stooped shoulders and raised arms until his weakened body was unable to ward off the stinging lashes of the heavy whip. Like a beaten pup, he crumbled onto the floor into a heap.

"*Cretino! Bastardo!*" admonished Marianna stomping from the room.

The next day, after school was dismissed, Lorenzo waited in a nearby doorway for *professore* Strato to come out of the school building. Lorenzo followed close behind his teacher before reaching up and tugging at the sleeve of his jacket. As the surprised *professore* looked down at him, Lorenzo turned up his shirtsleeves and held out his arms.

The *professore* noted the huge red and purple bruises all along Lorenzo's arms and neck. "What happened?" he asked.

"My mother beat me. She hit me again and again. She told me I lie and make up stories. But my stories are true, *professore!*

They're not make believe!" Lorenzo cried, hurt not so much by the thrashing his mother had given him as by her attempt to destroy his grandmother's love which reached out to him from beyond the grave.

Professore Strato took the boy's arm. "Of course, my child. Of course," he said accompanying him home.

A surprised Alberto greeted the tall gray-haired priest who visited the Malcini home in the evening. "Marianna!" he called.

Marianna brushed her disheveled hair from before her face and then straightened her wrinkled dress. "*Scusa*, Don

Raffaele. I was resting. It's my head. When I'm nervous, I get dizzy, so I lay down. God knows I have enough to get upset about."

The elderly town priest nodded. "*Signora, professore* Strato came to visit me today. He's concerned about your son's mental condition. He also told me Lorenzo's arms and neck are covered with bruises from a beating you gave him."

"If I beat the boy, it's no one's business! He is my child. The idiot needs to learn the difference between what is real and what is not."

"Lorenzo makes up stories to feel better, *signora*. Unhappy children fantasize. His having a vivid imagination is no reason to harm the boy. As he grows older, he will become more realistic about life. What the poor child needs is attention and love.

Giuseppina was only trying to give...."

Marianna pulled her hair. "Curse the woman and her absurd stories!"

"Marianna!" shouted Alberto, surprised to hear such hatred vented against his dead mother, especially in the presence of a priest.

"*Scusa*," apologized Marianna regretting her lack of prudence. "It's Lorenzo. He makes me crazy. I don't know what to do with him." She covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

Don Raffaele motioned Alberto aside. "Do you have a brother in Oma?"

"Sì," answered Alberto.

"Perhaps the boy can stay with him? No one in Oma knows Lorenzo or the unfortunate circumstances of his birth."

"My brother is old and lives alone," replied Alberto. "He might welcome an extra hand to help him on the farm. Besides, we have so little here for three people."

"*Eh bene*. It would be a blessing for everyone," added the priest, pleased his suggestion was well received.

"Don Raffaele, how can I thank you," smiled Alberto. "Come into the kitchen. Have a glass of wine before you leave." He indicated a small portion with his fingers.

The priest held up his hand. "Lorenzo's well-being and your contentment will be my thanks. Give my regards to the boy."

"*Si. Grazie*," replied Alberto. After the priest closed the door behind him, Alberto hurried into the kitchen to pour himself a glass or two of wine.

In the following days, Lorenzo anxiously anticipated word from Oma. His father had sent a message to his brother with Filippo, a silk merchant, whose business took him to the far reaches of Calabria. Vincenzo's reply was expected at any time.

Alone, beneath the shade of the olive tree where he and his grandmother often sat to talk, Lorenzo glanced across at the scattered houses nestled in the distant hills. Clusters of small, gray stucco buildings with red-slabbed roofs--villages and towns all replicas of one another--rested among the steep hills.

Lorenzo imagined happy youngsters in the streets of those villages and towns, mothers embracing and kissing their children, fathers buying them *candito*, *gelati*, or *spumoni*. Why couldn't he have friends to play with? Why couldn't he have a loving mother and a caring father? Why did he have to be cursed and unattractive? He never harmed anyone. He became upset thinking about his grandmother who no longer answered his summoning, his mother who had whipped him, and his father who was sending him away.

A rustling within the nearby bushes caught Lorenzo's attention. With a stick, he thrust aside the thorny branches to find a small brown bird ensnared in the wild bush

struggling to free itself. Gently, he untangled the prickly tendrils from its leg and held the shivering bird in his cupped hands. Speaking softly, he said, "Oh, little bird without a mother, where is your home?"

The bird fluttered its tiny wings and twittered.

Lorenzo tossed the bird upward, caught a glimpse of its flickering feathers before it soared beyond the field, becoming a mere speck before vanishing in the distant horizon.

A well-dressed stranger was speaking to Lorenzo's father.

The black-haired man with broad shoulders and thick arms wore a loose fitting yellow silk shirt tucked into maroon trousers while a small gold cross dangled from his right ear. The dark man stepped closer to Lorenzo. "Ha! Ha! Ha!" The man's booming voice filled the room. "This is the young demon! He looks harmless enough. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Alberto placed his empty wine glass on the table. He attempted to smile. "Lorenzo, this is Filippo, the silk merchant who's brought word that Uncle Vincenzo will be happy to have you stay with him." Alberto added, "*Eh bene?*"

Lorenzo did not reply. Instead, he turned and hurried to his room. On the dirty sheets of the cot, his mother had placed his few belongings into a knapsack. He opened it and examined the contents--a pair of trousers, a shirt, a loaf of dark bread, a roll of cheese, and three onions. Then, from under the bed, he took his treasured sacrificial knife and put it with the rest of his belongings. He was about to leave when he turned and tucked the plaster-of-paris statue of Jesus his grandmother had given to him the day before she died into the knapsack along with his scanty possessions.

Tears filled Alberto's eyes as he tottered in the doorway with extended arms. "*Mio figlio.*"

Lorenzo felt his father's trembling hands reach into his.

"Where's *mamma*?" he asked.

"An errand...she asked me to say good-bye for her."

On the doorsteps, a huddle of sparrows burst from the branches of a nearby cypress. "Come, we have a day's trip ahead of us," said Filippo fascinated by the wildly chirping birds fluttering about them. Lorenzo and Filippo waited by the front gate of the house to see if Alberto would come outdoors to bid them farewell. When he did not appear, the two men and Pietro, the merchant's silk-laden donkey, began their trek toward Oma.

Shortly, within an hour, the trio had journeyed beyond Alba, where Filippo's booming laughter and the happy lyrics of his lusty songs echoed across the rolling hills and the deep valleys of the Calabrian countryside.

Chapter III

Lorenzo delighted in the sights, sounds, and smells of the Calabrian countryside; the twittering of birds and the shrill droning of cicadas, the pungent fragrance of peppers and wild poppies, the colorful fields of yellow and red dotted by splashes of green, plowed in irregular furrows and running down steep hills or across wide plains. And trodding the endless, dusty roads through unfamiliar towns in Reggio Calabria, Lorenzo's eyes opened wide, fascinated by the people and the communities in places with names like Bova Marina, Locri, and Giosca. His first time away from Alba, his thoughts often turned to his parents and grandmother. His mother and father had hurt him again, more than at any other time. Before--difficult as it was--at least he had a place to eat and sleep whereas now he felt like a piece of worthless luggage tossed from the house. And who knew what awaited him in Oma. Anxious, he thought about his grandmother.

Her pleasing face soon filled his mind and like heavenly rain washing debris from a housetop, her loving features quickly dissipated his fears. Alive or dead, Giuseppina's felt presence always comforted Lorenzo.

The following morning, Filippo and Lorenzo approached a settlement of shabby stucco houses which stood like silent sentinels in even rows on each side of the main thoroughfare into Oma. From the balconies, windows, or doorways of the houses, young and old women peered at the dashing merchant dressed in bright red and yellow, the

undersized boy with wild hair, and the piebald donkey mounded with bundles of silk and cloth strutting down the wide unpaved street between the dapper man and the dwarf child. Overhead, chirping birds fluttered about the two strangers while an occasional stray dog or goat tagged after them.

A stocky woman with bulging breasts shook a blanket over an iron balcony, casting a cloud of dust into the humid air. "*Buon giorno*," she shouted raising a flabby arm.

Filippo waved.

Nearby, an unshaven, middle-aged man sitting on a chair by the front steps of his house nodded, then continued his ritual of fanning flies away from his face with a newspaper.

"*Bella giornata*," smiled Filippo.

Beyond the piazza, at the end of a narrow street, stood a stucco house with green trim. Uneasy, Lorenzo shuffled his feet while Filippo knocked on the front door. Soon, a bearded man with narrow eyes and a bulbous nose appeared in the doorway. The short thin man wore a spotted and wrinkled shirt while a knotted rope held up his saggy black pants. Tucking his gray shirt into his trousers and pulling up his belt, he stepped forward and squinted. "Filippo, *come sta!*"

"*Bene! Bene!*" replied Filippo. He turned and smiled. "This is Lorenzo."

"*Sì*. I recognize him from my mother's funeral." Vincenzo embraced Lorenzo. "Welcome to Oma, my child! *Avanti*." He escorted the two men into the kitchen and invited them to sit for some refreshments. He placed a tin of anise *biscotti* and three cups and saucers on the soiled kitchen tablecloth and then heated up a pot of coffee.

The three men sat around the kitchen table. Filippo and Vincenzo chatted, but Lorenzo took little part in the conversation. Shortly, Filippo stood and embraced

Vincenzo. "Scusa, but I must go." He rested a hand on Lorenzo's shoulder. "Take good care of this child. The gods will bless you for it."

"And you, my imp," smiled Filippo covering Lorenzo's small hands with his huge brown fists. "*Buona fortuna.*" He hugged and kissed Lorenzo.

"Will I see you again?" asked Lorenzo accompanying Filippo to the door. The jovial stranger was kind to him and had taken time to explain things to him. He reminded Lorenzo of his grandmother.

"When my business brings me this way," answered Filippo. He trudged down a dirt road, yanking at the rope tied around his sluggish donkey who reluctantly submitted to his master's tug of the rope. At the end of the road, Filippo waved before he and Pietro turned and were gone from sight.

Summers and winters came and went. Lorenzo enjoyed living with Vincenzo, a gruff-mannered man, but one whose heart like Giuseppina's was filled with affection for him. With the passing years, Lorenzo's memory of his grandmother and parents grew dim.

He had not seen nor heard from his mother and father the many years since he left Alba. Disliking Marianna and Alberto, Vincenzo often belittled them, but Lorenzo paid little attention to his remarks. From time to time, however, Lorenzo experienced nightmares and flashbacks, anxious moments when childhood images of vicious beatings and verbal abuse surfaced from his subconscious, causing him anguish, but for the most part Lorenzo seldom thought about the unpleasant past with its painful memories.

Lorenzo kept to himself, feeling uncomfortable around people. He spoke to others as little as possible or whenever necessary. Besides his uncle, Lorenzo's only other friend was the *Blessed Mother*. Remembering his grandmother's advice to pray every day, he visited the tiny *Church of San*

Giorgio whenever he had the opportunity. At such times, he spoke to the lifelike, flesh-colored statue with the serene features and genial smile.

Though the *Blessed Mother* never answered him, she always listened and understood his every word and thought, loving him more than anyone on earth, or so it seemed to Lorenzo, who always left the church more content than when he entered it.

One cool August afternoon, Lorenzo went shopping in Bano, a nearby town with a cluster of stores visited by those from the neighboring villages who came to browse or buy fish, fruit, vegetables, clothing, jewelry, or a variety of household items.

In Gennaro's Clothing Store, Lorenzo purchased a sweater for his uncle, who complained about the chilly weather. When he left the store, he carried the new sweater wrapped in thick brown paper into a bar where he went to buy himself a small bottle of *chinotto*. In the bar, he placed the sweater on the marble counter. While waiting for the tasty fruit-flavored drink, he glanced about the spacious room, fascinated by the sight of men enjoying a game of cards, a refreshing drink, or simply the pleasure of casual conversation.

Four middle-aged farmers were playing cards. One of them smoked a stogie, a dark brown twisted cigar, which he held loosely between his nicotine-stained fingers as he puffed a cloud of acrid smoke into the air. Another player, displeased with the cards he received, shouted profanities while the other two players held their cards close to their chests studying them.

"*Scopa!*" yelled one of the men slamming a trump card onto a small wooden table.

His partner shouted to the bartender. "Two glasses of wine for the winners."

Lorenzo noticed a lone man in a corner of the noisy room slumped over with his face buried in his arms. He appeared asleep when suddenly his left hand swept across the top of the table sending an empty wine glass crashing to the floor.

The bartender rushed from behind the counter toward the table. He nudged the burly man. "*Professore, per favore.*"

The well-dressed man wore a dark-brown sports jacket, a white shirt, and tan pants. "Let go of me!" he protested.

Resenting the intrusion into his reverie, he swung an arm at the bartender, lost his balance, and fell from the chair onto the floor.

"Give me a hand!" shouted the bartender.

The patrons looked over, but none of them moved, although one fat young man with a long black mustache shouted, "Let him sober up on the floor!"

Lorenzo stepped across the room and extended his arm to the ruddy-complexioned man squatting with a vacant look on his face.

With the bartender's assistance, he helped the man to his feet.

Wobbling slightly, the man brushed gray hair from before his eyes and then adjusted his thick spectacles which dangled on the end of his short nose. He extended his neck. Focusing his vision, he flung an arm across his chest and bowed to Lorenzo.

"*Grazie*, gallant sir."

Lorenzo caught the inebriated man just before he was about to stumble and offered his shoulder to him as support. With some difficulty, he assisted the man slightly taller than himself toward the door. Outside the bar, he struggled to keep him on his feet. As he led the tipsy man up one winding cobblestone street and down another, he listened

carefully to his mumbled instructions directing them down the narrow streets and through a maze of alleys which eventually brought them to a large stucco house on whose wide steps sat a buxom, long-haired girl, who upon seeing the two men, dropped the embroidered tablecloth resting on her lap and cried, "*Papa! Papa!*"

With much effort, the girl and Lorenzo both lifted and dragged the limp *professore* up the stairs and into the house.

The girl caught her breath. "*Grazie*, eh...?"

"Lorenzo Malcini," answered Lorenzo staring at the girl's bright brown eyes and full red lips. His heart beat fast, he felt anxious, even afraid. He had never spoken to a girl for any length of time. If only he wasn't so nervous.

"My name's Carmelina Vercelli. I've never seen you before.

Do you live in Bano?"

"I'm from Oma," answered Lorenzo, his eyes lingering on the girl's attractive face. "I came to Bano to buy a sweater for my uncle." Suddenly, he slapped the palm of his hand against his forehead and rushed toward the door. "I forgot the sweater at the bar. My uncle will boil me in oil!"

Carmelina waved. "*Grazie* for helping my father home. He'd thank you himself if he weren't sleeping. He's a wonderful person when he's not drinking."

"*Niente*," motioned Lorenzo.

Carmelina waved.

The cry of birds echoed across the countryside. A mild breeze blew and a fiery sun was setting in a pink-tinted sky as Lorenzo strolled the long road from Bano to Oma reflecting on the events of the day. After a time, his thoughts turned to his uncle. He hoped Vincenzo wouldn't be too upset when he got home late. Everything seemed to annoy or worry him. Lorenzo had become quite good at reading his uncle's moods, knowing how to placate him when he

became unreasonable, but still he was cautious not to agitate him.

Arriving home, Lorenzo opened the front door to the house slowly, yet Vincenzo's keen ears heard the squeaking door close.

"Where've you been?" he shouted from across the room.

Lorenzo hesitated. "I helped a man in trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"He was drunk."

"An *ubriaconi*?"

"The man needed help."

Vincenzo snickered. "If a man's stupid enough to get drunk, he deserves to find his own way home."

Lorenzo did not reply. He knew his uncle had a tendency to ramble on, get more excited, and eventually upset himself.

"And the sweater?"

"I left it at a bar."

Vincenzo's face flushed.

"I went back for the sweater, but it was gone. No one saw it." He turned away from his uncle.

Vincenzo tossed a hand in the air. "Those *vagabondi* wait around to hoodwink dumb farmers like you!"

"It wasn't like that," retorted Lorenzo.

Vincenzo sighed. "You've much to learn, my child."

Lorenzo knew it would be useless to protest further. "I'm sorry, Uncle."

Vincenzo nodded. "*Eh bene*. Now, let's eat." Few words were spoken as the two men ate a light supper of hard dark bread soaked in olive oil with sliced tomato, sprinkled flakes of hot red pepper, and bits of onion. Finishing his meal, Lorenzo excused himself and went to his room earlier than usual.

Lorenzo rose early the next day to weed the neat rows of tomatoes, beans, basil, and eggplants in the garden. While he raked, his mind recalled the events in Bano, especially his meeting with Carmelina, the pretty girl with a sweet smile. And as he thought about the drunkard people called the *professore*, he felt there was something about him that he liked, though he could not name it. The work in the garden completed, he flung his rake and shovel over his shoulder. Hiking homeward, he wondered if he would ever see the *professore* and his daughter again.

At Lorenzo's approach, Vincenzo swung open the front door.

"Look! *Che bella*," he exclaimed extending his chest and running his hands over the dark blue button-down woolen sweater he wore.

Lorenzo was puzzled.

"The *professore*--the man you helped home--came here this morning," explained Vincenzo.

Lorenzo stared at the new sweater. "I bought you a red sweater."

"I know," replied Vincenzo. "Sit down and I'll tell you what happened. The *professore* bought me this sweater--a small payment for the kindness you showed him. He said no one was able to find the sweater you left at the bar, so he went to the different shops until he found the place where you bought it. Since the store was out of red sweaters, he bought a blue one. And then he came to the piazza and asked people where you lived. His daughter remembered your name and that you were from Oma."

Vincenzo nudged his nephew.

Vincenzo handed Lorenzo a piece of paper. "The *professore's* address. He's invited us for dinner this Sunday! Quite an honor, eh? Who knows what'll come of this? His daughter's about your age, isn't she?" Vincenzo chuckled with a suggestive twinkle in his eye.

Lorenzo grasped his uncle's meaning, for lately he had spoken to him about marriage, saying it was time for him to choose a wife. He promised to speak on Lorenzo's behalf if and when he should become interested in an eligible female. Although Lorenzo believed that no woman could ever be attracted to him because of his appearance, he wished it were possible for a woman to care for him. Suddenly, his thoughts turned to Carmelina with her shiny black hair and dark-dimpled cheeks. He was attracted to her the moment he saw her, but a look in her eyes of uneasiness or repulsion made him anxious. Though he couldn't identify this "something," it shone dimly in her eyes whenever she looked at him.

On Sunday morning the house bristled with excitement. Vincenzo wore a clean white shirt beneath his new blue sweater.

He clipped a number of unsightly nose hairs and trimmed his long gray beard. He scrubbed his face clean and pasted his few strands of white hair in place with water. He spat on his shoes and then with a cotton cloth rubbed them hard until they were clean of dirt. Pleased with his appearance, he smiled.

Lorenzo examined his reflection in the bathroom mirror. He ran his fingers over his shaved chin and then combed back his unruly crop of black hair which resisted the comb's persistent efforts to tame it. Finally, the wild locks rose and fell in the right places and he was satisfied. Can Carmelina ever like me, he thought, touching the contours of his face? "Am I really ugly because my ears are big and my face isn't like everyone else's? I wonder if...."

"*Pronto, pronto!*" shouted his uncle.

The *professore* and Carmelina welcomed Lorenzo and Vincenzo into their home. For a time, they all chatted in the kitchen before entering the dining room to enjoy a variety of dishes prepared for the occasion. First, they ate a

savory spinach soup consisting of vegetables and small spicy meatballs followed by a heaping dish of pasta dipped in an oil sauce flavored with spices and garlic. The main course was roasted chicken garnished with peppers, onions, and seasoned mushrooms. A large sky-blue bowl bulging with luscious fruit rested in the center of the table.

From this heaping bowl, Vincenzo picked handfuls of thick purple grapes from time to time.

After the tasty dinner everyone went into the living room, a sunlit area scented with the fragrance of fresh flowers arranged in exquisite ceramic vases designed in the shapes of satyrs, nymphs, and fauns set on marble tables around the room.

Comfortable in a soft-cushioned maroon chair, Vincenzo glanced around at the coral-colored walls decorated with idyllic scenes of Southern Italy's seashore and countryside. Then turning to Carmelina, he held up his thumb and forefinger in a circle. "*Delizioso*."

"*Excellent*," added Lorenzo. "Carmelina's a great cook, *professore* Vercelli."

"My friends call me *professore*. And thank you both for the compliment. My daughter's prepared all the meals since her mother's death."

At a gesture from her father, Carmelina left the room only to appear moments later balancing a tray of fresh cream-filled eclairs and four small cups of espresso. In a short time, the pastries were eaten, the last chocolate-covered dessert finding its home in Vincenzo's appreciative stomach. Quickly, Carmelina picked up the empty tray and excused herself to set the kitchen right.

"*Professore*," asked Lorenzo, "do you still teach?"

"No," he answered. "I retired from teaching after my wife died. Of course, I don't receive a full pension because I haven't taught the required number of years, but with my daughter's sewing and the little tutoring I do, we manage to

survive."

Vincenzo tapped his forehead with his fingers. "Better for the head not to read and study too much."

"I enjoyed teaching, but after my wife's death, I lost interest. I became depressed. I went from one bar to another, drinking one glass of wine here and another glass of wine there.

Before I knew it, I was drunk most of the time. Soon I--but enough about me." The *professore* leaned closer to Lorenzo. "Are you originally from Oma?"

"No," answered Lorenzo.

"Your skin's not as dark as most townspeople in Bano and Oma."

When Lorenzo and Vincenzo gave each other blank looks, the *professore* realized it was not common knowledge that the Greeks, a fair-skinned race, were among the early people who lived in Southern Italy. "Your ancestors may have been Greek," he explained. "Long ago, the Greeks settled in many parts of Calabria. They loved this land, which they called Magna Graecia. These Greeks were great artists. They wrote stories, poems, and plays, developed science and philosophy. And because they enjoyed creating beautiful things, they carved handsome statues and built magnificent temples."

Lorenzo listened closely, but Vincenzo resented the *professore's* lecturing them. He considered him a braggart, one who enjoyed showing off his knowledge.

Lorenzo leaned forward. "What did the temples look like?"

"The buildings were of white stone and rested on hills, mountains, or high places overlooking valleys or rivers."

A shiver passed through Lorenzo.

"And the once rich forests of Calabria," continued the

professore, "Plundered by everyone! Not only the Greeks, but the Phoenicians and the Romans cut their tall timber from our forests to build their ships."

Carmelina entered the room. "Excuse my father," she apologized. "He loves talking about Calabria. Once he starts, he never stops."

The *professore* smiled. "Ah, yes, as I was saying about your skin color."

"Was I a Greek at one time?" asked Lorenzo.

"Perhaps. If so, your blood is like the blood that ran in the veins of those early Greeks who settled in our beautiful country."

Vincenzo yawned and then looked over at Lorenzo.

Reluctantly, Lorenzo walked over to his uncle's side.

At the doorway, thanks were exchanged with Vincenzo offering the hospitality of his home to the *professore* and his daughter whenever they chose to visit.

"Thank you for the invitation. And Lorenzo, come to see us whenever you wish. Our door's always open to you and your uncle. *Mia casa du casa*."

"*Grazie*," answered Lorenzo, his eyes fixed on Carmelina.

The trip from Bano to Oma was pleasant for Lorenzo. A stretch along the Mediterranean Sea offered a stunning view from the mountainside road. Early evening, the sun hung like a sphere of gold over the sapphire sea while high above the rippling waves dazzling white seagulls circled beneath a dusky sky, delighting in the refreshing August breeze. And scattered all along the endless empty beach, whitewashed houses nestled among yellow and red flowering cactus.

"*Che bella*," commented Lorenzo.

"My feet hurt!" mumbled Vincenzo, sitting on a log by the side of the road.

"Did you like Carmelina?" asked Lorenzo attempting to focus his uncle's attention on something other than his sore feet.

"A pretty girl--and a good cook, but the *professore* talks and talks!"

Lorenzo smiled. "You think Carmelina likes me?"

Vincenzo shrugged his shoulders. "Women are difficult to understand. At times they seem to like you and they don't; other times they don't seem to like you and they do."

As the two men trod the dusty mountain road behind a creaky, slow-moving red wagon bulging with hay, Lorenzo's thoughts lingered on Carmelina. He wondered when to visit her and the *professore* again. Carmelina and I can become friends, he thought. It would be pleasant having someone to talk to besides my uncle. And who knows what will develop from the relationship?

For Vincenzo none too soon did they arrive home. On entering the house, he flung his shoes across the room. He noticed Lorenzo chuckle. "You're young now, eh, but someday you'll be old and complain about aching bones and feet. Then you won't laugh!" He limped off to his room.

"Buona sera, Uncle," waved Lorenzo.

Lorenzo fell into a deep sleep dreaming of fair-skinned boys in white tunics playing wooden flutes while nearby lambs drank from a shallow brook and songbirds fluttered about the surrounding shady trees. As he watched this peaceful country scene, he suddenly heard the sound of a gong reverberating through the cool glade, scattering the playful birds and perking the heads of the attentive lambs. At this signal, the youths lowered the flutes from their mouths and led the bleating lambs along a steep path toward a white building up ahead.

Lorenzo hurried after the youths, attempting to catch up with them. Frustrated, he shouted, but they kept their

pace, giving no indication they had heard him. He called again, but only a barely audible cry escaped from his lips. Then, realizing his body was light as air, he leaped upward, soared like a leaf in flight and landed on his feet some distance ahead of them. He waved his arms, motioning to the approaching youths, but they proceeded along the wooded path still oblivious of his presence.

He was disheartened until one of the youths, a curly brown-haired boy stopped and turned to look at Lorenzo. Suddenly, the boy's dark eyes sparkled and his clear white skin turned brown and heavy with wrinkles, changing into the radiant features of an old woman's familiar face.

Lorenzo's heart seemed to leap from his chest. "*Nonna! Nonna!*" he cried awakening from his dream. Unable to sleep, he lay awake for a time. He thought about all that his grandmother had meant to him and how her love had once again reached out to him, breaching those seemingly impenetrable barriers of time and space separating this world from the hereafter. Then, closing his eyes, Lorenzo slept peacefully throughout the night.

Chapter IV

Lorenzo walked in light steps singing and whistling to and from the fields. He worked long hours without tiring, talked effusively with his uncle, laughed often, ate huge meals, retired late, and rose early without prodding. He thought if Carmelina were to like him, people would say there must be something appealing about him to have such a pretty girl as a friend.

Maybe then people wouldn't think he was so unattractive. No matter what he was doing, Carmelina was on his mind, her pleasant face with her dark sparkling eyes vivid in his imagination. He wondered if he would always think about her every single minute of the day. Was this what a friendship between a man and a woman was like?

Lorenzo was delighted that he and the *professore* had become friends. Whenever they got together, they often talked about the early history of Italy. The *professore* was impressed with Lorenzo's eagerness to learn about the early inhabitants of Calabria, especially the Greeks. Though Lorenzo's vocabulary and comprehension were limited, the *professore* was adept at simplifying complex and difficult ideas. And Lorenzo--surprising himself--was a quick learner. He enjoyed hearing about the daring feats of Hercules, the bold adventures of Orpheus, and the courageous voyages of Odysseus. If only his life could be as exciting, he dreamed. The teachings of the Greek philosophers also interested him. In particular, he was fascinated by Pythagoras' theory concerning the "music of the spheres" and his belief that the

soul purifies itself by passing from body to body on its earthly sojourns. These fanciful conversations with the *professore* nourished Lorenzo's impoverished imagination, starved for stimulation since his grandmother's death.

One Sunday afternoon on his way to Bano, Lorenzo thought how enjoyable it would be meeting with the *professore* and the possibility of spending a few moments with Carmelina. Before visiting them, however, he went into one of Bano's shops to buy a present for Carmelina. Wishing to please Carmelina, he purchased a box of chocolates for her and then strutted from the store toward the center of the piazza, the heart-shaped box of assorted candies tucked under his arm. At Bano's Fountain of the Faun, he stopped to refresh himself. Slurping cold water from his cupped hands, he watched three young women in tattered black dresses carrying terra-cotta jugs approach the fountain. The attractive women with flowing hair and shiny eyes encircled the fountain and then stepped closer to the cold running water to fill their orange jugs.

Lorenzo dipped his hands into the refreshing mountain water for another cool drink. He brought the water up to his mouth when a dark-winged shape darted down from the sky and fluttered about him, causing the water from his hands to splash against his face. Startled, he stepped back to watch a huge crow with red eyes and a bright yellow beak zigzag around the fountain and then zoom above the housetops, its screeching cries echoing throughout the small piazza.

Lorenzo straightened out his shirt and pushed back his disheveled hair before he hurried down one narrow street and up another using a shortcut he had discovered the last time he was in Bano. One more alley to cross and he would be at the *professore's* house, he thought. Abruptly, he stopped.

"Lorenzo! Ha! Ha! Ha!" laughed the girl. "Don't be foolish."

"But, Teresa, he goes to her house almost every Sunday," shouted the girl from a balcony overhead.

"Her father likes him, but Carmelina doesn't. Why she told me just the other day...."

"What?" interrupted the other girl.

Lorenzo ears perked, but even before he heard the words, he knew they would be painful.

The girl giggled. "Carmelina said Lorenzo sits like a silly ass with his long ears listening to her father's stories."

"*Che bruto*," chuckled the other girl.

Teresa laughed. "He looks like a goat."

Lorenzo's heart beat fast, his stomach churned, and his breathing became strained. Although his trembling legs felt too weak to hold him up, he nevertheless turned and fled. He ran past strolling townspeople. He ran past the Fountain of the Faun. He ran past Bano. He ran until he was far from where he had heard those cruel words spoken about him.

Beyond Bano, deep into the woods, Lorenzo found a favorite brook where he had often stopped to refresh himself. For a time, he sat on a moss-covered rock by the bank staring at the red-ribboned box of chocolates in his hand before tossing the colorful box against a large white boulder in the middle of the brook. He watched the fragile cardboard split and the tiny chocolates wrapped in blue, green, and red tinfoil sink into the placid water, while the box's bright red ribbon floated briefly on the still water before dropping beneath the surface. Teary-eyed, Lorenzo stared at the creature in the brook with wild hair, big eyes, long ears, and a pointed chin. "Damn you! Damn you! I hate you! I wish you were dead!" He thrust a sharp stone into the water, startling a silver carp nestled behind a red rock.

Watching the ripples scatter the pathetic image, Lorenzo wept for a time before leaving his oasis in the forest and starting his wearisome trek home.

Lorenzo kept to himself, speaking to Vincenzo only at meal times or whenever necessary. One afternoon, when he finished his work in the fields early, he visited the *Madonna* in the *Church of San Giorgio*. Even as he attempted to pray to the *Blessed Mother*, his thoughts kept returning to that terrible Sunday afternoon when he had overheard the uncomplimentary remarks about him. He told himself he would never again visit the *professore*, who like his daughter, probably felt only pity for him. Could he ever believe or trust anyone again? If he didn't have friends, then the people he liked and cared for couldn't hurt him or cause him grief. But it was lonely having only Vincenzo and the *Madonna* with whom to share his thoughts and feelings.

Lorenzo clasped his hands and gazed up at the gentle face of the statue chiseled in white marble. "Why don't you speak to me, *Mother*. You hear everything I say, but you don't answer. I know when I die I'll be with you in heaven, but I need your help now. Please take away my pain. Make everything better between Carmelina and me." Lorenzo closed his eyes, imagined himself sitting on the *Blessed Mother's* lap, feeling her soothing fingers wiping his tears and stroking his hair. He heard her soft voice speak the words, "*Mio caro figlio*." For a time, he sat with his eyes closed, delighting in the comforting image his mind had created before he left the pew and walked down the main aisle of the church, confident that his prayer had been heard.

Trudging home, Lorenzo's spirits were uplifted until he thought how dreary life had become without his visits to the *professore*. It was the same every night: supper, conversation with his uncle, a glass of wine or two, and then to bed and forgetful sleep. When Lorenzo opened the door

to the house, he heard voices, so he leaned against the wall to listen.

"I don't ask him about his moods. His childhood was difficult--a lot of beatings and bad memories."

"*Capito*. But did anything happen?"

"He told me he wasn't going to Bano anymore, but he didn't tell me why."

Reluctantly, Lorenzo stepped into the room.

The *professore* embraced him. "I thought you were ill or had an accident."

"I'm all right."

"Where've you been?"

Lorenzo avoided looking at the *professore*. "Busy. More work in the fields lately."

Vincenzo excused himself and went into the kitchen, leaving Lorenzo alone with the *professore*.

The *professore* stepped closer to Lorenzo. "What's wrong, my child?"

Lorenzo did not answer, but then thinking it might help to relieve his troubled mind, he replied, "I always felt Carmelina liked me and enjoyed my company...."

"She does!"

"I thought so."

The *professore* looked puzzled.

"The last time I went to Bano," explained Lorenzo, "I overheard two girls talking. One was Carmelina's friend Teresa, who was telling another girl that Carmelina didn't care for me and...."

"Girls!" interrupted the *professore*. "Who can understand them?" He laughed a trifle sheepishly.

Lorenzo choked up. "People have always hurt me, except for my grandmother and uncle; then, to make friends with you and Carmelina only to find out that she dislikes me and thinks that I look like an ass."

The *professore* touched Lorenzo's arm.

On seeing the *professore's* concern, Lorenzo regretted having spoken so freely. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you with my troubles."

"No! No! I'm glad you felt free enough to share this with me." Then, he asked, "You will come to Bano the first chance you get?"

"*Forse?*"

"*Bene!* Whenever you decide to visit, I will be pleased to see you. Now, I must be leaving."

Lorenzo accompanied the *professore* to the door.

"And, Lorenzo," waved the *professore*, "forget what happened.

It was foolish chatter. Nothing serious, I assure you."

"*Sì*," replied Lorenzo wishing to believe him.

After the *professore* left the house, Vincenzo entered the room. "Quite a talk you two had."

"*Niente*," said Lorenzo.

Vincenzo turned to leave. "Well, if you don't want to talk to your uncle about it, who cares more for you than anyone in the world, then I don't suppose you trust me very much."

"*Sono imbarazzato.*"

"Embarrassed! You think I'm too old or too stupid to understand? You think I don't know about women and feelings? You think I'll laugh at you or call you a fool?"

Lorenzo did not answer.

Vincenzo persisted. "What is it that you can tell the *professore*, but you can't tell me, eh?"

Lorenzo had offended his uncle by not confiding in him, but he wanted to avoid Vincenzo's endless questions about an experience he wanted to forget, yet after discussing the incident with the *professore*, he felt relieved, even eager to talk further about it.

"The last time I went to Bano," began Lorenzo, "I heard Teresa, a friend of Carmelina, tell one of her girlfriends what Carmelina had said about me."

"Is that all?"

"Carmelina called me a silly ass."

"Oh," replied a surprised Vincenzo. "I thought Carmelina liked you."

"So did I."

"Women can be mean, Lorenzo. You never know what nasty words will come from their mouths. They nag and scold. They complain about this and that. You can never please them. They're never happy. Another thing, they all want their way with men. That's why I never married. I wasn't going to have any woman tell me what to do all the time."

"I don't understand women. I just know they can hurt you with their words."

Vincenzo nodded. "It's a fortunate man who finds a good wife. Myself, I never was so lucky. I pray, my child, one day you will find such a woman."

Lorenzo embraced his uncle. "*Grazie, zio.*"

Vincenzo patted his nephew on the back. "Get some sleep. Tomorrow, we rise early to pick the potatoes."

Chapter V

Lorenzo returned home one Monday morning from Bano to find his uncle waiting for him. His face flushed, he paced the room.

Lorenzo had never seen his uncle this agitated before. He walked toward him slowly. "I'm sorry I'm late," apologized Lorenzo. "I drank too much wine and fell asleep. When I woke up it was dark, so I stayed at the *professore's* house for the night and left this morning."

Vincenzo looked at Lorenzo, thinking how he had been drinking much more than usual lately. Even at meals, he drank more wine than his customary glass or two, and always he made light of it. He told Vincenzo that wine helped him forget unpleasant memories, especially the latest incident in Bano with Carmelina's friends. At this particular time, however, Vincenzo wished to discuss something other than Lorenzo's drinking habits. In a choked-up voice, Vincenzo blurted, "A letter came this morning. I asked the postman to read it to me. The letter says Alberto's dead."

Lorenzo stiffened.

"He died of a heart attack."

Lorenzo lowered his head, unable to speak.

"Alberto wasn't a bad man. He drank more than he should, but can you blame him with crabby Marianna always scolding and bitching and complaining. I warned him about her, but he was too crazy in love to see her faults."

"He's free of her now."

"And to clear his conscience, he left you the farm and the house."

"What!" gasped Lorenzo. He made the sign of the cross. "God bless him."

Vincenzo also blessed himself. "You'll have to go to Alba. Don Raffaele's letter says your mother has a copy of the deed which you have to bring to the *municipio*. No need to hurry, though, since Alberto's funeral was last week. Imagine, no one told us about his death—you, his only child and me, his only brother. That Marianna is heartless!" Gaining control of his temper, he added, "Anyway, I'll send a message to Filippo. Maybe he'll let you go with him to Alba and return with him when he passes through Oma on his route south."

Reluctant to see his mother again, Lorenzo agreed half-heartedly. "*Eh bene*."

The next week when Filippo stopped in Oma, preparations were made and soon he and Lorenzo left for Alba. Although the two men were pleased to meet again and enjoyed each other's company, the death of Lorenzo's father had saddened Lorenzo more than he had anticipated. Traveling through the numerous towns across the wide countryside, Lorenzo spoke little but drank often from a jug of wine which he had brought with him.

In Alba, Lorenzo and Filippo stopped before a shabby house, the same bleak house that appeared from time to time in Lorenzo's dreams. The stucco walls were cracked and crumbling in places while two small windows peered like eyes from each side of a huge red front door which to Lorenzo resembled a giant mouth ready to devour all who entered. Outside the house, near the entrance, a row of prickly bushes grew along the edge of a scorched yellow lawn on which lay chipped and broken terra-cotta shingles that had fallen from the roof and had not been replaced.

From a dusty patch of ground by the wild bushes, Lorenzo watched as Filippo knocked on the front door.

A heavy-set woman dressed in black opened the red door. Her dark eyes scrutinized Lorenzo before she extended her arms toward him. "Come closer and let me see you, my son. How tall you are!" The woman touched Lorenzo's arm and attempted to smile.

"*Entrare*, Filippo. *Entrare*, Lorenzo. You two must be hungry after your long trip. Let me get you some refreshments."

Marianna escorted them into the kitchen where she prepared a large tray filled with cheese, dark bread, and a bottle of white wine. She set the loaded tray on the table and motioned the men to eat.

Surprised, but pleased with the cordial welcome, Lorenzo asked, "Can I stay here overnight until Filippo returns from Catanzaro tomorrow?"

"Stay as long as you wish." Marianna patted Lorenzo's hand. "No need to hurry back."

Filippo excused himself. "I must leave, Lorenzo. I'll see you in the morning." He turned to Marianna. "*Grazie*." He embraced Lorenzo and then left for Catanzaro, a commercial city in Calabria, where he would purchase the silks, sheets, small rugs and other items his customers had ordered.

Alone with Lorenzo, Marianna asked him about Uncle Vincenzo and what life was like in Oma. During a lull in the conversation, she reached over and touched his hand. "Can you ever forgive me for what I've done. I've suffered so much knowing it was Alberto who sent you away. Often, I wanted to come to Oma, but as time passed, I was too ashamed to write or visit. Forgive me, my son."

Lorenzo did not reply. Before arriving in Alba, he had told himself over and over that regardless what his mother said or did, her actions and words would not move him. His

mother had not only repeatedly abused him but she had also deserted him. He had made up his mind that he would never forgive her, even if she was his mother.

From her pocket, Marianna took a crumpled handkerchief and dabbed her eyes with it. "*Mio figlio*, I have no land, barely enough money to live from day to day now that Alberto's dead and left you his property. Your father was a good man, but he liked his wine too much. After he sent you to live with his brother, he drank more and more until one day he got very sick and died.

He never saved any money. He didn't care what happened to me after he was gone. He left me penniless, the poor fool. What am I to do? Life's hard on a lone widow. *Povera me!*" Marianna wrung her hands.

Lorenzo felt the stirrings of pity at the sight of his sobbing gray-haired mother. He reached over to touch her hand.

Marianna yanked her hand away, wiped her tear-streaked cheeks with her handkerchief.

Lorenzo's eyes narrowed. "I came here for the deed to *papa's* land."

"*Si*, later, my son." Marianna regretted her lack of prudence. "As I always say, life is short. Pleasure before business." She tossed her arms outward. "I have a surprise!

Now that you're here, my son, I'd like to prepare a wonderful meal for you, one that you will never forget."

It was incredulous to Lorenzo that he was having a pleasant conversation with his mother whom to his recollection had never treated him with kindness. This surely was a dream. He couldn't believe his good fortune. He then wondered whether it was possible that after all these years his grandmother's prayers for his reconciliation with his mother had been answered? He thought perhaps

he had been too harsh in being adamant about not forgiving her.

Marianna covered the wooden table with a floral-designed linen cloth Giuseppina had given her as a wedding gift. At opposite ends of the table, she placed sparkling knives, spoons, and forks. In the table's center, she set a black pan of hot lasagna sprinkled with spices, peppers, mushrooms and grated cheese.

On one side of the pan lay a round loaf of crispy dark bread and on the other side of it stood a basket of fruit filled with grapes, apples, plums, and especially large pears. Marianna scooped the tangy lasagna from the pan into the clean white plates.

Lorenzo ate one dish after another until he had consumed three dishes of the tasty lasagna. His mouth covered with sauce, he wiped it on the edge of the tablecloth. He finished a third helping and patted his stomach. "I'm stuffed!"

"More wine," urged Marianna, pouring Lorenzo another glass without waiting for his reply.

Lorenzo savored the dark wine's strong flavor. "This is good," he grimaced.

"Alberto's prized wine. Your father kept it in the cellar for special occasions. And what better time to celebrate than when a mother and her son are united after so many years apart. *Mio bello*," sniffed Marianna.

A sudden knocking on the front door interrupted their conversation. Marianna sprang from her chair. "I'll get it!"

Nearly stumbling, she hurried across the room.

A silver-haired man wearing a blue gabardine jacket over a white silk shirt stood in the doorway. The tall man had a long hooked nose, dark intense eyes, and a deep white scar across the right cheek of his unshaven face.

"*Buon giorno*," he greeted, a gold tooth shining from between his thin lips.

Marianna introduced Maso, an attorney from a nearby city who did legal work for her and Vincenzo as well as for other clients in town. Motioning him toward the kitchen table, she invited Maso to join their celebration. Soon the wine and the conversation flowed freely, the three of them laughing and drinking late into the evening.

Close to midnight, Maso prepared to leave when at the doorway, he stopped suddenly. "Oh, *signor* Lorenzo, I almost forgot." From his jacket pocket, he took a long white envelope and opened it. "Legal papers for you to sign."

A drowsy Lorenzo staggered toward the attorney. "Papers?"

What papers?"

Maso's lips spread wide revealing his shiny gold tooth.

"The property of your late father."

"Sì, the farm, the house," mumbled Lorenzo, his chin falling against his chest.

Marianna stepped closer to Maso as he placed a silver pen in Lorenzo's hand and then, almost breathless, she watched the attorney point his finger to where Lorenzo should write his name on the two sheets of paper.

The intoxicated Lorenzo scribbled his signature on the lines Maso indicated before he closed his half-opened lids and fell unconscious to the floor.

Maso carried the limp Lorenzo into the storage room where he carefully placed him onto a dusty old cot. Barely able to breathe in the small stuffy room, he opened the window to let in some air.

He glanced down at the snoring Lorenzo; then, stepping over sacks of flour, he brushed his ruffled jacket and wrinkled shirt before returning to the kitchen where he carefully folded the two sheets of paper, placing one of them into a white envelope and handing the other to Marianna. "We can talk now."

"The farm's mine, the house's mine! All mine!" Marianna grasped Maso's hand. "*Grazie, Grazie.*" She then became serious. "What if he goes to the authorities?"

Maso grinned. "Don't concern yourself. Lorenzo signed the document in the presence of both of us. Besides, who's going to take his word against that of a respected attorney."

"If anyone asks, I'll tell them Lorenzo didn't want to live in Alba but wanted to stay with his uncle in Oma so he signed his property over to me for a sum of money which I promised to pay him in the future." Marianna waved a fist in the air. "Damn you, Alberto! You thought you'd clear your conscience by leaving everything to Lorenzo. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Maso drew Marianna to him, kissing her long and hard on the mouth. Preparing to leave, he assured her once again that no difficulties would arise from what they had done. It was all perfectly legal.

The following morning Filippo returned from Catanzaro. He found Lorenzo lying in bed fully dressed, his throbbing head feeling as if it had been kicked by a mule. With Filippo's help, Lorenzo managed to get out of bed and stand, gradually getting a firm hold of his balance as his stiff limbs adjusted themselves to his movements.

Briskly, Lorenzo washed his face and then apologized to his mother for drinking too much the night before. He also told her that he wasn't deserting her by returning to live with Vincenzo.

Marianna looked out the window.

Lorenzo stepped closer to her. "*Mamma.*" Getting no response, he added, "*Mamma*, I'll visit you on holidays. If you'd like me to stay longer...."

Marianna jerked her head around. "Stay!" she shrieked.

Lorenzo and Filippo stared at her.

Marianna pushed strands of gray hair away from her face.

Gaining control of herself, she straightened her shoulders and asked, "Why would you want to stay in Alba?"

"My father's land."

Marianna smirked. "The property you turned over to me last night?"

Filippo spoke up. "Not possible. Lorenzo would never give up his father's land."

Marianna held up her right index finger. "*Uno minuto!*" She turned and hurried into her bedroom where she pulled an orange handkerchief from the pocket of her black dress; then undoing the knot in it, she took a small steel key from the handkerchief and unlocked a green metal box hidden under the bed. Returning to the kitchen, she handed a folded sheet of paper to Filippo.

"Tell your friend, he owns nothing in Alba."

Filippo examined the document. "You turned your father's land over to your mother. Your signature's scrawled on the line here." He rapped the paper with his fingers.

"I don't remember signing any paper," protested Lorenzo.

Marianna spoke calmly. "You wrote your name in the presence of *avvocato* Spina and me."

The image of a tall dark man holding a silver pen flashed in Lorenzo's mind. Immediately, he understood. "You stuffed me with food and filled me with wine. I was drunk and didn't know what I was doing. You never stopped hating me! Everything about last night was a lie to steal the land *papa* left me!"

"You signed the property over to me of your own free will," retorted Marianna. "But you're right about one thing. I still hate you! You brought me nothing but bad luck since that cursed Friday you burst from my womb. Better you were born dead or not at all." Marianna glared. "I loathe

you--you're not my flesh and blood. *Le Fate* stole my child and left me a damned changeling!"

Lorenzo's face paled and his eyes blazed. He tried to speak, but no words came to his lips. Furious, he stepped closer to Marianna and raised a fist in the air ready to strike her. She was his mother, but she was vile, mean, and evil. She deserved to be punished. Suddenly, Lorenzo heard Giuseppina's words never to harm another human being pass through his mind.

Slowly and reluctantly, he lowered his fist and turned from his mother, tears running down his face and the desire to smash her face still strong, almost overwhelming.

Marianna was frightened, for she had never seen Lorenzo this angry. Quickly, she recovered. "*Andare! Andare!*" she yelled.

"You child of the devil!"

Filippo and Lorenzo hurried from the house with Marianna shouting epithets after Lorenzo. Soon, the two men and Pietro were on the outskirts of Alba, trodding the long road back to Oma. Along the way, Lorenzo was bent over, his face downcast, and every step slow and wooden like that of a mechanical man.

Concerned with his melancholic state, Filippo watched Lorenzo closely as they trekked homeward.

Chapter VI

Lorenzo studied the intense face of the old woman. High sharp cheek bones nearly pierced the onion-thin skin stretched over her brown wrinkled face while her sunken yellow-green eyes seemed to grow larger and brighter the longer one looked at them. Like a porcupine's quills, stiff dark hairs protruded here and there from her cheeks and chin. And on the sides and back of her small narrow head down to her shoulders dangled stringy gray hair. Fascinated, Lorenzo watched the town witch closely as she worked her magic to exorcise the evil influence from his life and possibly to see into his future.

The haggard woman pointed the forefinger and the small finger of her left hand at a dish of water. In her other hand, she held a spoonful of oil and mumbled an ancient incantation as she tipped the spoon to let three drops of oil drip from it into the shallow dish. Then, reciting nine *Paternosters*, the old woman touched each of Lorenzo's eyelids with her right forefinger before ending the ritual by making the sign of the cross on his forehead with her thumb. Her prayers finished, she fixed her eyes on the pattern formed by the drops of oil floating on the surface of the water.

The woman turned her head and closed her eyes. Deep in concentration, she swayed back and forth. "I hear footsteps--invisible feet--three women--dancing--a baby crying--magic words--*baste, baste!*" The woman flung her

shriveled hands against her head, pressed them hard over her ears.

The flickering flames of the dripping candles set on each side of the water basin cast dark shadows across the floor and over the walls as the wizened woman muttered magic words. Though the scene in the semi-dark room appeared unreal, both Lorenzo and his uncle sensed the power of the witch's magic in the unseen but felt presence of another dimension conjured by the witch's magic.

The witch's face twitched and her voice became low and raspy as if another person were speaking through her. "Clear water...a big rock near the shore...it sparkles in the sun...a light...stillness...thunder! A lovely lady rides the waves."

Lorenzo found it difficult discerning the witch's words. He moved closer to his uncle and whispered, "What does she see?"

"Non so. Sh. Listen."

"A chariot...white horses...six of them. The lady's hair is gold. Her dress is silver. *Che bella! Che bella!* A myrtle branch. She points the branch at...." The old woman squinted.

"Beyond the shore, a city--a church." The witch placed her skinny hands over her eyes, strained to see more of the future, but darkness blotted her inner vision, not allowing her to see any further images. The perceptive woman, however, discerned the future in the sounds of the rumbling earth and the cries of human suffering, especially the plaintive wailing of children for their parents.

On awakening from her light trance, the witch made the sign of the cross, then walked toward Vincenzo and stood beside him until he placed money into her palm. Suddenly, she turned to Lorenzo. "Beware, my child!" she warned.

Lorenzo's voice quivered. "Of what?"

The old woman was about to reply, but decided instead to remain silent.

Vincenzo and Lorenzo left the small room where *la strega* had attempted to demonstrate her sorcery by perceiving and placating those invisible but powerful forces which fashion the lives of individuals. Her magical words and actions had impressed the two men although they were uncertain how to interpret what she had said and seen.

On their way home, Lorenzo asked, "What do the witch's visions mean?"

"*Non so*. They can mean one thing or another. They can mean something or nothing. Who knows what they mean?"

"The next time I talk to the *professore*, I'll ask him. He'll tell me what they mean."

Vincenzo smiled. "*Si*, if anyone knows about visions, he does. He knows everything."

The following Sunday when Lorenzo visited the *professore* he told him how the *la strega* had used candles, water, and oil to cast a magic spell. With enthusiasm, he related how the witch while in a sleep-like state had seen a huge rock by a seashore, a beautiful lady riding over the waves in a chariot, and a church beyond the sea.

The *professore* rubbed his chin. "The rock sounds familiar."

"You mean it's real?"

The *professore* was silent. Shortly, he exclaimed, "I have it! The rock may be the one on the shore of Scilla by the Straits of Messina. The old woman probably visited the site or someone might have mentioned it to her at one time or another.

The *Rock of Scilla* is well-known. It's even possible the woman's clairvoyant."

"Clairvoyant?" asked Lorenzo.

"An ability to see places one's never visited. It's a

mental power. For instance, if you saw in your mind a building or place in Naples that you never visited or heard about, you would be clairvoyant or have a special mental gift. But the witch's visions probably were pictures in her mind of stories she heard as a child. As to what those images mean, I don't think anyone can say for certain." The *professore* sighed. "Now, that's settled, let me tell you about next week--I'm going on a pilgrimage to Sicily."

"Sicily?"

"As a child, Carmelina was close to death from malaria. The doctors could do little to help her. She took medicine and was bedridden for a long time. I prayed to St. Rosalia and promised I'd visit her shrine if Carmelina got better. St. Rosalia answered my prayers, and I've gone to Palermo every year since Carmelina was cured."

"Sicily!" thought Lorenzo, becoming excited. Whenever he heard anyone speak of picturesque Sicily, it was with nostalgia and admiration for the scenic land and its friendly people. "Can I go with you?" he asked.

"Of course. Talk to your uncle about it. The trip lasts about two days. I'd be happy to have you come along." The *professore* paused. "Holy Mary! The witch's vision! The attractive lady in it may've been pointing to St. Rosalia's shrine in Sicily."

"Is it possible?"

"Not likely, but possible," answered the *professore*. He suddenly tossed up his arm. "Enough about magic! Let's forget the witch and her visions. How about a game of cards and a glass of wine?"

Lorenzo smiled. "*Eh bene.*"

The following week Lorenzo and the *professore* were in Scilla, a tiny village deep south in Calabria, standing on the village's windy shore gazing across a choppy sea at an enormous cliff, a formidable barrier ready to shatter any ship or boat foolish enough to venture near its perilous

passageway. The two men watched the rushing waves pound against the towering cliff and listened to the wailing cries of the sea wind whistling through its sundry crags and crevices.

The *professore* pointed to the imposing structure of rock rising from the rough waves like a miniature mountain. "Odysseus--the Greek adventurer I told you about--sailed between this stone sentry and a deadly whirlpool called Charybdis." He looked down at the sand and stamped his foot. "And on this shore, many years ago, a ruler named Frederick had a vision. The witch may have heard the story. Early one morning, Frederick strolled along this beach enjoying the scenery when to his surprise he saw a golden-haired lady riding a chariot over the waves. He watched the beautiful lady for a short time before she vanished. Though Frederick searched for the lovely woman the rest of his life, he never saw her again."

While listening to the enchanting tale, Lorenzo looked out at a lone seagull circling about the *Rock of Scilla*, the same rock resembling the one in the witch's vision. High waves splashed and sprayed over the massive stone as the alchemy of the sun's beams changed it into a huge sparkling diamond. Beyond the glistening rock, Lorenzo glanced at the expansive Tyrrhenian Sea, expecting to see a vision of his own, but instead saw only the reflection of speckled sunlight dancing over the rippling waves.

Lorenzo and the *professore* arrived in Palermo on the morning of September fourth, St. Rosalia's feast day. In the capital of Sicily, people milled about the wide paved streets and garden squares. Acacia, eucalyptus, and cassia blossomed everywhere in the flower-filled city while geraniums and begonias decorated the fronts of stores and shops with plentiful tables and chairs set outside their entrances for the occasion. Horse drawn buggies carried festive Sicilians from one end of the city to the other. Most

Sicilian women dressed in black, others in bright-colored silks while all wore gold chains or magical charms around their necks and wrists to ward off bad luck or the evil eye.

Filling the streets and avenues, Sicilians of both sexes and of all ages strolled about conversing, laughing, and sampling the tasty delicacies sold at the various food stands.

The afternoon in Palermo passed quickly with the *professore* and Lorenzo visiting memorable sites such as the catacombs of a Capuchin convent where fully-clothed mummified bodies rested, the impressive *Palazzo dei Re' Normanni* with its decorative chapel of blazing red and gold mosaics, and the three-domed *Church of San Cataldo*, renowned for its uniquely designed mosaic floor. The two men enjoyed these and other attractions in the city Sicilians proudly referred to as the "Pearl of the Mediterranean."

In the evening, Lorenzo and the *professore* joined the throngs of pilgrims visiting the shrine of St. Rosalia. Young and old, ill and well, believers and skeptics, came from throughout Italy to seek blessings at the shrine of their beloved saint. Pilgrims in single lines treaded like ants up the crowded stone steps toward a blue-lighted grotto at the top of *Monte Pellegrino*. Along the way, some stopped and prayed at each step; others knelt on bruised and bloody knees, lifting themselves step by step toward the holy shrine. Many pilgrims gripped rosary beads, reciting *Paternosters* and *Hail Marys*; others held candles and chanted hymns.

In a glass tomb at the top of Monte Pelligrino, Lorenzo admired the lifelike pink-tinted replica of St. Rosalia. The saint's serene face was bathed in a soft light which formed a halo over her black hair and the diadem of many jewels resting on her head. Lorenzo's eyes passed from her tranquil face to the dress of fine spun gold tied with a large golden cord.

The *professore* made the sign of the cross. Looking over, he noticed Lorenzo was moved by the sight of the sleeping saint.

"What're you thinking?" he asked.

Lorenzo hesitated. "I know Saint Rosalia is dead, but I have a strange feeling that I'm going to meet her again. I don't know why I feel this way."

The *professore* smiled. "St. Rosalia's virtue lives in every woman. You probably wish the girl you marry will be like her."

Lorenzo nodded.

Finished praying at the coffin of St. Rosalia, the two men turned and walked down the long stone steps, leaving the holy shrine to seek lodging for the night.

The following morning on the outskirts of Palermo, a rotund middle-aged man traveling homeward with the pilgrims tripped and fell. A light brown-haired girl of about sixteen attempted to raise the man to his feet, but having difficulty holding him up, she lost her grip and he slipped to the ground.

"*Signorini*, let us help you!"

The appreciative girl looked on while the *professore* and Lorenzo each took an arm of the heavy man and assisted him to the side of the road.

Catching his breath, the large man wiped perspiration from his forehead before leaning against a boulder to rest. He motioned to Lorenzo and the *professore*. "*Per favore*, some wine." He held out a goat-skinned canteen.

As the three men drank from the canteen, the traveler introduced himself. "My name's Carlo and this is my niece, Maria."

He patted the girl's cheek. "Maria's like a daughter to me since her parents died in a landslide. Where're you from?"

"Bano," answered the *professore*. "This is my friend Lorenzo. He's from Oma."

"We raise goats and sheep near Serra San Bruno."

"We're almost neighbors," said Lorenzo looking from Carlo to Maria, who stood quite close to her uncle. "*Professore*," added Lorenzo, "since we're neighbors, why don't we travel back together."

The *professore* agreed.

Carlo was pleased with the arrangement. "*Eh bene*."

Lorenzo noticed Maria avoided eye contact with him and the *professore*. He wondered if she was shy or disliked the idea of two strangers accompanying her and Carlo home. Perhaps she feared he and the *professore* were thieves waiting for an opportunity to steal their goods or money. It wouldn't be the first time thieves traveled among pilgrims, thought Lorenzo, examining Maria's pleasing features. Her small plain face had a slight ridge along the length of her nose; her lips, thin and slightly parted, almost resembled a smile; and her shiny, rich chestnut-colored hair was tucked beneath a black silk kerchief, except for one lone curl which fell across her forehead. Whatever Maria's face lacked in beauty, her sparkling brown eyes made up for by illuminating her small round face, making it appear that of a cherub sculptured on an altar or drawn on a church mural.

Although Lorenzo had known Maria briefly and she had not spoken a single word, he nevertheless felt attracted to her.

During the journey home, the three men enjoyed one another's company, talking, joking, and indulging in an occasional drink of wine. Maria, however, kept to herself seldom initiating a conversation with Lorenzo or the *professore*. It was a long trip home trodding the endless dirt roads through squalid, sparsely populated towns and villages, past still bare hills and parched dry fields, and up steep mountain highways by the Mediterranean Sea. And

everywhere the group traveled, Lorenzo marveled at both the richness and the barrenness of Calabria, the proud and resilient land that over the centuries had survived nature's ravages of droughts, floods, landslides, and earthquakes. Though tired and eager to return home, for Lorenzo all too soon did he and his friends arrive at their destination.

A chipped and water-stained statue of the *Blessed Mother* stood in an alcove by the roadside. The *Mother's* robe was a faded blue, her arms chipped and cracked, but her face was clean and white as snow. The *professore* pointed to the statue. "Well, Carlo, we're almost home." The group bowed their heads and offered silent prayers to the *Blessed Mother*.

Catching his breath, the shepherd clutched his staff. "It's been a long trip, but last winter, I vowed if St. Rosalia cured my illness, I would visit her shrine. Maria insisted that she come with me because of my arthritis. At times, I could barely stand from the pain in my legs, but with Maria's help I was able to make the trip." He smiled at his niece.

Carlo grasped the hands of the *professore* and Lorenzo.

"You've been kind. Please visit us." He gave them directions to his house, then waved as he and Maria turned homeward.

It was late in the evening when Lorenzo arrived home so he crept into the house not to awaken his uncle. For a time, he lay awake thinking of the different people he had met and the interesting sights he had seen on the pilgrimage to Sicily.

Especially, he delighted in the lovely image of the sleeping St. Rosalia. Tired, Lorenzo watched the panorama of pleasing mental pictures pass from view as he fell asleep.

In a dream, Lorenzo stood by a ruined building on a green hill spangled with daisies, watching an enormous purple cloud drift across the sky. The huge cloud rose

higher and higher blocking the light of the sun when suddenly, booming thunder reverberated throughout the heavens. At that moment, zigzagging lines of brilliant gold appeared on the surface of the cloud and like a cracked egg shell, the jagged golden lines spread apart, releasing beams of resplendent light from within the cloud's core. Through one narrow line of gold, which had opened wide to reveal a blazing light, Lorenzo beheld a rapturous sight, the radiant face of St. Rosalia shining like a miniature sun. As he looked at the saint's gracious face, she opened her eyes and gazed down at him for a moment before her serene features turned sorrowful and a shower of golden tears fell from her eyes, washing over him like a heavenly rain.

Lorenzo awoke, impressed with the vivid and colorful dream; but the more he thought about the unusual images in the dream, he became confused. St. Rosalia's eyes seemed familiar--he knew he had seen them before, but where? Restless, he lay awake for a time before falling into a sound sleep which lasted well beyond his usual hour of awakening the next morning.

Vincenzo shook Lorenzo. "Get up! Do you want to sleep all day?"

"Huh," grunted Lorenzo turning from his uncle.

Vincenzo shouted, "We've work to do!"

Rubbing his eyes and getting out of bed, Lorenzo got dressed. He went into the kitchen where his uncle had set on the table a *cappuccino*, a drink of coffee and milk, and some *biscotti* to soak into it.

Vincenzo was annoyed by Lorenzo's silence. "Too tired to talk?"

Lorenzo yawned. "I'm not awake yet."

"You took a long trip."

"It was tiring, but I enjoyed it. And, Uncle, more people than I've ever seen before were on the pilgrimage to St. Rosalia."

"Is the saint as beautiful as people say?"

"St. Rosalia was dressed in a gold dress and looked like a princess. She slept in a glass coffin and wore a crown of jewels."

Vincenzo nodded. "And the Sicilian *pasticceria*? I hear the Sicilians make delicious pastries for their favorite festivals."

"*Magnifico*! The *professore* and I filled our stomachs with them. And almond cookies, sponge cake, biscuits, and candy. We visited a convent with mummies. We saw a palace with a red and gold chapel and a church with the most beautiful floor in the world. And on the trip home, we met a shepherd and his niece who live near Serra San Bruno." Lorenzo jumped up, knocking over the chair.

"*Che c'è*?" asked Vincenzo taken back by Lorenzo's behavior.

"Maria's eyes...."

"Who's Maria?"

"St. Rosalia's eyes are Maria's eyes!"

Vincenzo blessed himself.

"They are! They are!"

Vincenzo hurried to Lorenzo's side. "Stay inside today. You look tired. They say the scorching Sicilian sun sometimes bakes one's brain."

Lorenzo smiled at his uncle's concern.

"I'll do the hoeing myself," continued Vincenzo. "You rest."

Lorenzo put an arm around his uncle's shoulders. "I'll help you." He pulled his uncle toward the door.

As they walked to the fields, Vincenzo listened to all that Lorenzo told him. When he finished, Vincenzo commented, "A dream is all it was."

"Didn't *la strega*'s visions mean something important would happen? I told you about the scene by the shore of

Scilla. The *professore* said the rock was like the one the witch described."

"A coincidence," responded Vincenzo.

"You told me the old woman talks to the dead and sees the future. Now, you tell me you don't believe what she said. I don't understand."

Vincenzo touched Lorenzo's shoulder. "At times I'm a foolish old man, my child, but I've lived a long time. I hope I've learned some lessons in my days in this world. Maybe the witch's prayers will keep evil from you. And maybe the witch's visions mean something good is going to happen. I hope so. But remember, Lorenzo, people sometimes expect good things in their lives and end up with lots of trouble. They expect one thing and often get something else. I don't want you to be disappointed."

"And my dream? I know it has meaning."

"So do all dreams, but what?" Vincenzo sighed. "Let the future be. Take what comes, good or bad, and live with it as well as you can."

Lorenzo agreed with Vincenzo's reasoning, but he still felt his visit to the witch, his meeting Maria, and his vivid dream of St. Rosalia were all events portentous of his future. For his uncle's sake, however, he answered, "*Eh bene*. I'll wait and see what happens."

The two men listened to the distant melodious notes of a reaper on the far side of the field whose touching words were of a lost love. Lorenzo leaned on his hoe, moved by the melancholic lyrics of the singer. Suddenly, the cawing of a flock of crows overhead drowned out the song, filling the air with harsh screeching cries. When the crows had flown away, Lorenzo listened again, but the singing had stopped.

Chapter VII

Lorenzo hiked the mountain road toward Serra San Bruno until he noticed a path where two enormous oaks with long, thick branches reached out across a narrow dirt road. Trekking up the steep rocky road for about an hour, a tired Lorenzo spotted a red-roofed house among a cluster of lofty pines and beeches. He approached the small house and knocked on the front door. When no one answered, he shouted, "*Pronto!*" He waited, expecting to see Maria or Carlo, but no one came to the door. From nearby, he heard the sudden loud bleating of lambs, so he hurried from the cottage.

Within an enclosure of trees, some lambs dipped their muzzles into a stream of cold mountain water drinking long draughts while others waded leisurely about in the shallow refreshing water. Above the running stream, like drifting snowflakes, butterflies lingered in the cool winds which rolled down from the distant mountains and settled in the niches and coves of the lush valley below. And everywhere in this idyllic spot, birds sang melodic tunes, filling the grove with the pleasant notes of their songs.

Lorenzo smiled when he saw a young girl leaning on a staff watching over the lambs.

"*Ciao,*" he shouted.

Surprised, Maria looked up.

"*Come sta!*"

"*Bene.*"

I came to see you and your uncle," explained Lorenzo.

Maria blushed.

"Is Carlo here?"

Maria pointed to beyond the trees.

"Will he be back soon?"

"Sì."

"Can I wait for him?"

Maria nodded.

Lorenzo watched the lambs scurry in and out of the stream. A playful lamb pursued a smaller one that stopped from time to time to kick up its tiny hind legs. In a shady spot beneath the trees, another lamb sat closed eyed with its drooping head against its crossed front legs while a chunky lamb sniffed sun-yellow flowers and chewed on long blades of grass along the edge of the stream. Having satisfied its hunger, the lamb poked its mouth into the stream, quenched its thirst, and then bleating loudly wobbled toward a thorny bush where it stood still as a statue gazing at Lorenzo with its large dark eyes.

Remembering a story about a lamb that his grandmother had told him long ago, Lorenzo walked toward the motionless animal to pet it; however, when his fingers touched the lamb's soft fleecy wool, the startled creature sprang forward, knocking Lorenzo's hand against the bush.

"Ouch!" yelled Lorenzo as the prickly thorns of the bush pierced his wrist.

Maria noticed blood seeping from Lorenzo's punctured wrist.

"Hold out your hand," she said uncorking the canteen tied to a rope around her waist. Carefully, she held the goat-skinned container over the wound, letting the red liquid run over his skin.

"This heals like medicine," explained Maria pouring more wine on Lorenzo's wrist before wrapping it with the black kerchief draped around her neck.

Lorenzo touched his wrist. "It feels cool." He smiled,

delighted with the attention Maria was showing him.

Maria nodded. "*Eh bene.*" Turning, she walked toward the stream.

"Maria," Lorenzo called.

"*Sì?*"

"*Grazie.*"

"*Niente,*" she replied.

The whining of goats came from across the flower-filled meadow. In the distance, Carlo, breathing heavily, straddled behind a noisy herd of goats, swinging his staff and shouting obscenities as he struck an occasional stray goat on the rump to keep him from wandering from the herd.

Noticing Lorenzo, the shepherd hurried his pace. Soon, he and Lorenzo exchanged embraces. "What a surprise!"

Lorenzo was pleased with the shepherd's enthusiastic welcome.

Carlo yelled, "Maria, some ricotta, some wine!" He turned to Lorenzo. "*Entrare, entrare!* Have some cheese made from the best goat milk in all Calabria--my goats." Carlo laughed.

The men sat at the kitchen table while Maria got them a bottle of red wine and a wooden bowl of fresh ricotta covered with wet leaves which she placed on the table between them.

Lorenzo dipped his fingers into the soft white cheese.

"Delicious!"

Carlo reached for a second helping. "Maria made it," he said between mouthfuls.

"*Molto buono.*" Lorenzo reached for another serving as Maria poured the men more wine.

Maria excused herself while the men talked about a variety of topics including the low price of fruits and vegetables, the quality of the olive crop, the expected yield of olive oil for the coming year, and the fickle fall weather

with its unpredictable days of bright sunshine, sudden winds, or heavy rain. The afternoon passed quickly and before long it was time for Lorenzo to leave. He thanked Carlo and Maria for their hospitality and invited them to visit him and his uncle whenever they wished.

Lorenzo said good-bye, expressed his well wishes, and then left for home. Fall passed into dreary winter with its short days and long nights filled with thoughts of Maria. Always, upon awakening, in the fields, and when falling asleep, Lorenzo imagined how happy he would be if Maria were his wife. The more he thought about his love for her, the more convinced he became that Maria was the girl with whom he wished to spend the rest of his life. And he believed that Maria felt the same way about him.

One evening at supper as a jovial Lorenzo hummed to himself, Vincenzo said, "You've seen a lot of Maria, eh. Don't forget what happened with Carmelina."

Lorenzo leaned forward. "Carmelina never cared for me. I wanted her to like me, but I know that with Maria it's different."

"How'd you know?"

"The way she looks at me and talks to me...."

"Bah!" interrupted Vincenzo. "Don't confuse how a woman acts with what she feels."

"Then how can you tell if a woman likes you?"

"With women, nothing's certain. You have to be on your guard. Not think too much about them up here," said Vincenzo pointing a finger at his head, "or feel too much for them in here." He tapped his fingers against his breast.

"I know you don't want me to be hurt again, and you think Maria might not care for me, but I feel she's the one."

Vincenzo blinked. "The one?"

"The girl I'm going to marry."

Vincenzo pressed his hands against his head. "Lorenzo," he moaned, "you will break your poor uncle's heart a hundred times before he leaves this world!"

Lorenzo chuckled at his uncle's feigned distress. He then got up and pushed the chair closer to the table. "Zio, I'm going to visit the nativity scene at the church."

Vincenzo nodded.

In the *Church of San Giorgio*, Lorenzo prayed before the statue of the *Blessed Mother*; then he went to a corner of the small church and knelt before the life-sized figures that townspeople and visitors from the surrounding villages came to see each Christmas season. He glanced from one realistic figure to another until his eyes rested on the infant in the straw-strewn manger, a happy baby with a handsome and calm face. "Oh, Jesus, let me find love with Maria," he prayed. "Please let her care for me. Let her be the one."

Lorenzo gazed on the flesh-colored figures of the three kings dressed in regal robes of purple, orange, and gold. The attractive colors of their garments possessed a hypnotic attraction, for as he fixed his eyes on the bright hues of their splendid costumes he fell into a dreamlike state. Soon, a light gray mist appeared about the statues of Jesus' parents and the oxen and sheep standing near the manger. Blurry at first, the scene gradually became clear. Immediately, Lorenzo saw that the three kings had moved! Instead of kneeling before the baby Jesus, they were now linked hand-to-hand, encircling the infant while Mary and Joseph stood outside the ring they formed. Watching the three kings step closer to the manger, Lorenzo heard a tiny inner voice telling him to leave the church and not to continue observing the nativity scene any further, but Lorenzo--fascinated and curious about what was happening--had neither the will nor the strength to obey the warning.

The three kings joined hands, kicked up their feet, and pranced around the manger. Their uncoordinated steps

became more graceful as they danced around and around the Christ Child with their bright robes twirling so fast that soon, only the colors gold, orange, and purple were visible weaving a circle of colors around the sleeping infant. And all this time, Mary and Joseph, outside the ring of blazing colors, neither saw nor heard anything unusual--or at least so it appeared to Lorenzo. Like apparitions, the three kings vanished and in their place three beautiful women wearing the kings' robes hovered over the weeping child in the manger, holding gifts in their out-stretched hands. One woman leaned closer and dabbed the crown of the baby's head with oil from a shiny silver dish. Another stretched forth her hand and pressed the deep-red petals of a rose hard against the child's temples as he struggled to turn from her touch. The third woman, whose complexion was as radiant as her companions, held a gleaming gold goblet in her slender fingers. Moving closer to the manger, she placed one hand under the head of the infant and nudged him forward, forcing the red liquid in the cup to his lips. Tears running down his flushed cheeks, the crying baby tossed his head and kicked his feet, sobbing even louder than the previous times, but since the woman's hold was firm, the reluctant child was unable to avoid drinking the bitter liquid. And as these incidents were happening, neither Mary nor Joseph saw the three women nor heard the heart-rending cries of their infant.

"Poor child! Poor child!" mumbled Lorenzo as a hand shook his shoulder. He opened his eyes and looked up, not immediately recognizing the old man leaning over him, but then he replied,

"Zio?"

"I expected you home hours ago!" exclaimed Vincenzo. "I was concerned so I came here to the church where I find you on your knees mumbling 'Poor child! Poor child!'"

Lorenzo rubbed his eyes. "I must've fallen asleep."

Vincenzo helped his nephew to his feet. "Let's go home. You must be tired."

The unusual experience in church upset Lorenzo, bringing past anxieties and insecurities to mind. He felt alone and rejected, moody and tense. He slept little and was often on the verge of tears. Other times--remembering painful childhood experiences--he trembled uncontrollably, perspired freely, and breathed with difficulty. At such times, he retreated into his bedroom where he curled himself into a ball and cried himself to sleep. Unable to control this undesirable behavior, Lorenzo avoided visiting Maria and Carlo. Instead, he spend weekends with the *professore* drinking and attempting to forget all that troubled him.

One Sunday afternoon at the *professore's* house, Lorenzo drank much more wine than usual. At the kitchen table, he sat with his face resting in his open hands to ease the thrusting pain in his head.

"You're white as snow!" gasped the *professore* "Come lie down."

Carmelina walked into the room. "What's wrong?" she asked seeing Lorenzo sprawled on the couch moaning.

"He has a headache."

"Can I do anything?"

"Get me a cold towel."

"*Si, Papa,*" answered Carmelina, who soon returned from the kitchen with a towel and a basin of cold water.

"Place the wet towel on his forehead," said the *professore*.

"I'll get him something for his headache. I'll be back shortly."

Carmelina hesitated, for she had not been alone with Lorenzo since the time he had overheard the uncomplimentary remarks she had made to Teresa about him. Though she had apologized to him as her father had

requested, the relationship between them was never a comfortable one. As time passed and she found Lorenzo to be a kind and considerate person, she was ashamed that she had hurt him with her unkind words. Carmelina took the towel from Lorenzo's forehead and soaked it in the basin of cold water.

"Feeling better?" she asked.

Lorenzo opened his eyes. "*Un poco.*"

Carmelina felt this was an opportune time to tell Lorenzo what had long been on her mind. "Lorenzo, I know I've told you this before, but I want you to know I'm really sorry about what I said to Teresa. It was stupid and cruel."

"I understand," mumbled Lorenzo.

Carmelina smiled. "*Grazie.*"

The *professore* entered the room with a steaming cup of dark liquid resembling tea. "I'm sorry I took so long, but I had to get some herbs from a neighbor."

Lorenzo drank the hot concoction. "Ugh!" He grimaced, moving his lips away from the cup.

"Sip a bit at a time," chuckled the *professore*. "Your headache will be gone in a few minutes."

After Lorenzo drank more of the bitter liquid, he shut his eyes. When he opened them, he noticed his head no longer throbbed.

The *professore* helped Lorenzo up from the couch. "Would you like me to accompany you home?"

"All I need is some fresh air." Lorenzo felt foolish for having drunk too much wine, so he thanked the *professore* and Carmelina, said good-bye, and hurried from the house, relieved once he was on the open road far from Bano.

During the night Lorenzo developed a high temperature. On the following day he stayed in bed until late in the afternoon.

Upon recovering from the fever, he refused to work in the fields or rise early in the mornings. He puttered around

the yard outside the house, spent his afternoons praying in church, and took long strolls in the countryside. He also sat and stared for hours at the mountains and the trees, the clear sky, and the distant hills and valleys.

One bleak windy afternoon, dressed in a heavy woolen jacket and a warm hat, Lorenzo wandered into the woods. He stopped at a favorite stream, listening to the pleasant sound of cold water rippling over twigs, sand, and stones. In the glade, an occasional bird's shrill notes mingled with the steady harmonious sound of the brook's rushing water. Suddenly, a cold breeze ruffled the bare branches of an almond tree, disturbing a single lark which darted from a swaying bough and flew toward the bright sunshine beyond the woods. Watching the tiny bird vanish in the horizon, Lorenzo heard someone call his name. Whether he imagined it or whether it was the sound of the wind, birds, or the stream, he could not tell--but the name was clear. "Lorenzo, Lorenzo," the gentle voice beckoned--and the voice was Maria's!

Chapter VIII

After Lorenzo finished eating his evening meal of a heaping plateful of tasty Calabrian fried peppers, beans, and sliced eggplant, he pushed the dish aside and leaned forward. "Huh...Uncle, will you do something for me?"

Vincenzo wiped his oil-stained lips on the corner of the tablecloth and then sat straight in his chair waiting for Lorenzo to speak. "What is it you want me to do?"

Lorenzo hesitated.

"Well?"

"Ask for Maria's hand in marriage for me."

"What?"

"It's time."

"Time to be hurt again!" exclaimed Vincenzo. "Give Maria a chance to know you better."

"Maria won't hurt me like Carmelina did. I can't tell you how I know this, but I do."

Vincenzo sighed. "If you're convinced, I'll speak to her uncle for you, but don't be disappointed if the decision isn't what you expect."

"*Eh bene*," replied Lorenzo, optimistic that Carlo's response would be a positive one.

The following week, Lorenzo and his uncle paid a visit to Carlo and Maria. Greetings were exchanged and then the group sat and conversed at length around an oak table by the blazing logs in the fire place. In the center of the round kitchen table rested a large wooden tray filled with bread

rolls and an assortment of meats, fruit, and cheeses while on each side of the tray stood a bottle of red and white wine. As everyone ate and drank, Carlo told how he and Maria's father helped build the house and the difficulty they had finding the proper size stones for the enormous oven and fireplace in the kitchen. He talked for a time about Maria's parents and what a great loss it was to him and his niece when they died. When Carlo saw that Lorenzo and Maria were paying little attention to the conversation, he said, "Why don't you youngsters take a walk." He winked at Vincenzo as he took two stogies from his pocket.

On the right side of the house, Maria and Lorenzo stood by a bare magnolia tree watching a snowy white owl with bright yellow eyes perched on the peak of the cottage. For a time, they listened to the owl's loud hooting before it fluttered over the tree's leafless branches, soaring beyond the field toward the distant dark forest. As the couple continued their stroll, standing close to one another, Lorenzo's hand reached over and touched Maria's hand. When their hands made contact, he felt a pleasing sensation pass through him, while Maria's bright brown eyes sparkled and her small round face flushed a crimson red.

Without realizing it, they had walked some distance from the house to the very center of the field where low-hanging clouds touched the earth and the tall bare trees brushed the sky. In this wide space, the blistering wind whistled across the open field. Seeking refuge from the fierce wind, they huddled within a nearby cluster of trees. Leaning against a large oak, Lorenzo moved closer to Maria, hesitated, but then placed his hands on her shoulders and looked into her upturned face. "Maria," his voice trembled, "*T'amo*."

Maria's eyes filled. "Lorenzo," her voice quivered. Unable to speak the words to express her love, she rested

her head against Lorenzo's chest while his encircling arms held her tight.

"For myself," explained Carlo, "I like Lorenzo. He's not good looking, but he's a fine young man, an *uomo di cuore*. Maria feels the same way, I'm sure. I will approve of the marriage if Maria agrees to it."

"Don't you think parents know what's best for their children?" asked Vincenzo, whose father had asked for his wife's hand in marriage for him as his grandfather had done for his father before him.

"What parent knows the heart of his child?" retorted Carlo.

"A parent helps a child fulfill his destiny, but a child must make his own choices, especially in important matters. What others do is their business, but my Maria will decide whether or not she wishes to marry Lorenzo."

Vincenzo didn't agree with the shepherd's reasoning, but he wasn't going to argue with him. "*Eh bene*," he sighed. Vincenzo had hoped to entice the shepherd by offering his farm as an endowment for Lorenzo and Maria. And once Carlo agreed to the arrangement, Maria would marry Lorenzo. Whether she loved him or not, Vincenzo believed that in time Maria would learn to live with him or at the very least tolerate him as her husband. And if she did not learn to care for him, it wouldn't be the first marriage without affection between husband and wife. Vincenzo had thought everything through carefully, but he hadn't anticipated Carlo's allowing his niece to decide for herself whether or not to take Lorenzo as her husband.

When the cottage door swung open and Lorenzo and Maria entered the kitchen with their faces beaming, Carlo and Vincenzo looked at one another and smiled.

In the following months, Lorenzo found it difficult concentrating on the ordinary, everyday chores. He was excited and restless. Whenever possible, he visited Maria.

During the late spring, he relished the scenic view of her cottage among the wild flowers, the giant trees, and the blue and purple minarets of the distant mountains; he reveled in the refreshing scented winds that swept down from the sloping green mountainside; he enjoyed watching the young sheep stumble clumsily after their mothers.

When he saw the wobbly lambs, he wondered whether their babies would follow after Maria and him on unsteady feet? Thinking of the children he and Maria would conceive, he felt a deep sense of pride. He was determined that when he became a father his children would not know the heartache caused by uncaring and brutish parents. He knew all too well the suffering he had endured because of an abusive mother and father. His children would be loved, cherished, and cared for. And his beloved Maria would be the woman to make this dream come true.

The endless days of waiting for the wedding passed. On a Sunday afternoon in June, Lorenzo wearing a new blue suit and a white silk tie stood straight and proud at the church altar admiring his happy bride who glanced at him with tears in her shiny eyes. Maria wore a long silk dress with a laced scarf over her head which draped her wavy chestnut hair that fell beyond her shoulders. At the altar, a smiling Don Giuseppe pronounced the final words of the ceremony and Lorenzo kissed Maria. For a moment, the ecstatic couple faced the delighted priest before turning and stepping down the aisle as husband and wife.

At the jubilant reception, Carlo toasted the newly-weds.

With help, Vincenzo rose to his feet balancing a wine glass in his hand. "Friends, another toast to the happy couple. To my beloved nephew and his lovely wife. May they have healthy children. May their crops be rich. May the sheep's white be soft and the best...."

Everyone laughed.

The *professore* came to Vincenzo's rescue. He placed one hand on Vincenzo's shoulder and held up his wine glass in the other hand. "*Tutto buono* for Lorenzo and Maria!"

"*Augure!*" shouted Filippo sitting nearby.

"*Grazie,*" smiled Lorenzo. "And my thanks for the fine silk for Maria's wedding gown."

Filippo waved his hand. "*Mio piacere.*"

Late into the evening the festivities continued. Thick red and white mountain wine flowed freely while succulent Calabrian dishes, trays of various meats and cheeses, and delicious cream-filled Italian desserts along with tall bottles of green and yellow cordials lined the linen-covered tables. Lorenzo and Maria with their families and friends had a grand time eating, drinking, and conversing. In the midst of this joyous celebration little would anyone have imagined the incredulous future the Fates had planned for the unsuspecting happy young couple.

Chapter IX

The passing years were healthy and prosperous ones for Lorenzo. Unpleasant memories of the hurt, rejection, and abuse he had experienced in his childhood still caused him occasional periods of anxiety, but they were usually of short duration and of little discomfort. Happy in his marriage, he had come to believe that his grandmother's prayers and the witch's powerful incantation had broken the curse of the Fates. His uncle's nuptial blessings also came true. The sheep yielded thick masses of wool while in the cellar were shelves filled with sacks of flour, jugs of wine, oil, and rolls of cheese. Even the cottage was repaired. He painted each of the rooms and plastered the cracked walls and ceilings where needed. And these were the least of his blessings. He was most grateful to his affectionate Maria, who had allowed him to experience the unique joy which exists between a man and a woman in love. Also, he was proud of his family, two handsome sons and an attractive daughter, and soon--within weeks--another child would spring from Maria's fertile womb. He thought of the newborn infant nestled in Maria's comforting arms, but when he attempted to imagine the baby's face, he was unable to see its features.

Two dark-haired boys ran toward Lorenzo. "*Papa! Papa!*"

"My little ones," laughed Lorenzo, tousling their black curly hair.

Guido, the older of the two boys, handed his father a hot, aromatic bundle. "*Mamma* sent this."

Lorenzo untied the knot to get into the steaming bread wrapped in cloth.

"*Mamma* just made it," said tiny Giorgio standing beside Lorenzo, who seemed a giant to him.

Lorenzo glanced about for a suitable spot to watch the sheep. He stepped beyond the bushes and pointed to a tall evergreen which towered above the other trees growing on the hill's edge spangled with pansies. Beneath the shady evergreen, he sat with his two sons who watched him eat the tasty oven-baked bread soaked in oil and spices.

Lorenzo held out the bread. "*Mangi.*"

"I had some at home," answered Guido, but Giorgio, whose eyes never left the bread, leaned over and took one small bite and then another.

When he finished eating the bread, Lorenzo wiped his oily hands on his shirt sleeves. Standing, he thrust his hands out to his sons and pulled them up. "Let's go home! I'll tell you a story along the way."

Leaving the green hillock, Giorgio and Guido strolled across the field with their father as the sheep scurried on ahead of them. An hour later, they approached a red-roofed cottage where a little girl with long brown ringlets and a dirt-streaked face darted across the field toward them. "*Papa! Papa!*" she shouted flinging herself into Lorenzo's arms.

Giorgio rushed into the house and tossed his tiny arms around Maria's bulging belly. His face beamed. "On the way home, *papa* told us a story about a princess and a magician." He looked over at Lorenzo standing in the doorway. "*Papa*, will the Princess ever wake up?" he asked.

"*Si*," answered Lorenzo. "And when she does, everything in the world--the flowers, the trees, the hills--will shine bright as the sun. And in the sky a huge rainbow will appear."

Maria smiled.

"*Mamma*, why are papa's stories sad?" asked Giorgio.

Maria shrugged her shoulders. "Ask your father."

Giorgio turned. "Why, *Papa*?"

Lorenzo shrugged his shoulders. "When the words come to me, I speak them. I don't know if the story will be happy or sad."

"I want to hear the story about the princess!" cried Lucia.

Lorenzo kissed his daughter on the cheek. "Later, *mia cara*."

Maria scooted the children. "Go play until supper." She then lifted her apron and took a letter from her dress pocket and handed it to Lorenzo.

"From Alba," said Lorenzo studying the stamp mark. "Do you think after all these years my mother's decided to write?"

"Open the letter and see."

His hands trembling, Lorenzo ripped open the end of the long envelope and pulled out the letter to examine it. He looked puzzled. "*Sindico* Cantori's signature is on the bottom of the letter."

"The Mayor of Alba," said Maria, and then added, "the letter must be important."

"It's filled with words I don't understand."

"No use worrying about it. When you visit the *professore*, ask him to explain it. Now, let's have supper." Maria shouted to the children who soon plunked themselves around the kitchen table to eat their heaping dishes of macaroni garnished with pepper, mushrooms, and cheese.

Early the following day, Lorenzo left for Bano. The *professore* was pleased to see Lorenzo with whom he spent some time catching up on the latest events. "I'm sorry I haven't visited lately," apologized Lorenzo, "but since Carlo's

death there's much work to do. I haven't even seen my uncle in weeks."

The *professore* sighed. "With Carmelina and her husband living in Martone and not visiting often, I get bored. I miss our former Sunday talks now that I'm getting older and living alone."

Lorenzo rested a hand on the *professore's* shoulder. "You can never get old, my friend."

The *professore* chuckled. "Not with wine in the house, eh?" He went to the cupboard and returned with a gallon of white wine and two empty glasses. "How's everyone? Maria? The Children? And Vincenzo?"

"Everyone's fine. Vincenzo's still stubborn. He says he won't live with us and be a burden."

"Sounds like Vincenzo!"

Lorenzo took a letter from his pocket. "This came yesterday. It seemed important."

The *professore* put on his steel-rimmed glasses, looping the ends over his ears. "Hmm," he muttered as he read the letter.

"What is it?"

"You remember a lawyer named Maso Spina?"

Lorenzo shook his head. "The only lawyer I know is the one who was at my mother's house the night I signed my property over to her, but I don't remember his name."

The *professore* thrust his fingers against the letter. "He's the scoundrel! Along with your mother, he cheated you of what was legally yours. This letter states that since your mother's death, *avvocato* Spina's conscience allowed him no peace until he confessed his part in her plot to steal your inheritance. You can claim your father's land and house whenever you wish, simply by signing the proper documents in Alba."

Lorenzo heard little of what the *professore* said. "Did you say my mother was dead?"

The professore poured more wine into Lorenzo's glass. "Si."

"How did she die?"

"The letter does not say."

Lorenzo raised a trembling fist and slammed it hard against the tabletop. He then covered his face with his hands and sobbed softly. Shortly, he wiped his eyes and became very quiet. "I'm confused. I want to laugh and cry. I feel happy and sad at the same time."

"Death does strange things to our emotions," explained the *professore* before excusing himself to go to the bathroom. When he returned and saw Lorenzo in better control of himself, he asked, "What do you want to do?"

"Will you come to Alba with me?"

"Of course, if you wish."

"I want someone I trust there when I sign the papers for my father's land and house."

"When do you want to leave?"

"Tomorrow? You can spend the night at my house. We can start for Alba early in the morning."

"*Eh Bene.*"

The two men arrived at Lorenzo's house late in the afternoon. After Maria and the children greeted them, they all stood around the front steps chatting and enjoying one another's company. During the conversation, Giorgio tugged at the *professore's* jacket sleeve to get his attention. "Zio, remember how you taught us to watch and listen to everything around us."

"Si, mio caro," answered the *professore*, whom the children always referred to as uncle.

Holding a leaf and a blade of grass, Giorgio ran his fingers over the blade of grass. "The grass is like silk." He ran his finger over a leaf. "The leaf has tiny bumps on it."

"Bravo!" praised the *professore*. "You've done well, but why is the grass smooth and the leaf isn't?"

Giorgio paused. He looked from the *professore* down at the blade of grass and the leaf. "Because--because--God made them that way."

"Sì," agreed the *professore*. "But why?"

"Non so."

"If everything we saw were one size and one color, people would get bored with nature, but with so many different shapes and colors in the world, people never tire of God's creation."

"Zio," interrupted Lucia pointing to the drooping branches of a weeping willow. "In the tree--those chirping sounds--that's a sparrow!" A squawking bird hopped along the field.

"That's a crow," she smiled, and then pointed to the roof of the house. "A cooing dove."

"And why do these creatures of the air all make different sounds?"

"God gave each bird a different voice to please us. No one wants to hear the same sounds over and over. It gets boring. With all the different songs that birds sing, we can listen to them all the time and never get bored."

The *professore* kissed Lucia. "*Benissimo!* And you, Guido, what do you know?"

Guido glanced from the *professore* to his father. "I...I...."

He broke into tears and ran into the house.

"What's wrong?" asked the *professore*.

"He's a baby," answered Lucia. "He cries about nothing."

"He'll be all right. He's moody," explained Lorenzo.

Looking up, he saw Maria in the doorway beckoning them to enter, so they all went into the house for supper. Falling asleep that night, Lorenzo thought about the land his father had left him, the property his mother had deviously

taken from him and which now would be returned to him. When he sold the land and the house, he would use the money to buy more sheep and goats and put the rest of it away for the children's future. He and Maria could barely read and write. For his children, he wanted much more. The *professore* had often told him how important it was for children to develop their minds through reading and writing and by learning music, art, and literature. He thought how fortunate for his family that the sinister deed of his mother and Attorney Spina had come to light.

Hearing a low whining from outside the window, Lorenzo jumped out of bed, dressed quickly, and picked up the heavy staff which rested by the door. He hurried toward the corral where he saw the agitated sheep rushing against the corral fence. Listening closely, he glanced about the yard until he heard a rustling from the bushes beyond the corral. He stepped toward them, his staff ready to strike. When there was no movement or sound at his approach, he probed the thick bushes with his staff. The moon provided sufficient light for him to see a dead lamb crumpled on its side with blood rushing into a dark red pool from the gnawed flesh in its soft belly.

"*Papa!*" exclaimed a frightened voice.

"Guido! What're you doing here?"

"I couldn't sleep. I heard noises. What is it?"

Lorenzo pointed toward the bushes. "A wolf killed another lamb."

Guido started toward the bushes.

"No," said Lorenzo taking the boy's arm. "It's too late."

Guido wrapped his arms around his father's waist and would not let go. His body shook uncontrollably.

"*Che c'è?*" asked Lorenzo.

"I'm afraid, *Papa*. I'm afraid."

Lorenzo carried the trembling Guido into the house and tucked him into bed with Giorgio. Comforting the frightened Guido, Lorenzo sat on the edge of the bed stroking his forehead before he kissed him on the forehead and whispered, "*Buona sera.*"

Although Guido tried hard, he was unable to sleep, for he was certain something dreadful was about to happen.

A wolf's howl pierced the languid night air, its shrill cry echoing over the fields and hills. Swift moving clouds shadowed the clear full moon, and the mild evening breeze became a fierce wind rattling shutters, jarring doors, and shaking houses before an eerie stillness filled the land. Soon, in the mountains, in the forests, and in the valleys, birds and animals fled from their nests and lairs, fearing the presence of an invisible terror.

Chapter X

The robust man with slick black hair and a pencil-line mustache extended his hand. "Anything I can do to help make up for this injustice, be assured I will do so."

"*Grazie*," said Lorenzo.

"What's become of the scoundrel Spina?" asked the *professore*.

The Mayor of Alba shrugged his shoulders. "*Non so*. When I received his letter, I sent it to the authorities. Be assured he will be disciplined or disbarred. I suppose he's too embarrassed to face the people who trusted him."

The *professore* nodded. "Unfortunately, the world's filled with those seeking to profit from the misery of others." He shook hands with the Mayor. "You will make it known that the Malcini property is for sale."

"I'll take care of the matter personally."

"*Tante grazie*."

"*Niente*," smiled the Mayor.

Lorenzo and the *professore* slept at Lorenzo's house in Alba that evening. Late the following morning, the two men arrived in Bano, pausing at the town's ancient stone fountain to refresh themselves. By the fountain stood an attractive light-haired girl whom Lorenzo recognized from his previous trips to Bano, holding a bucket under the running water. Hearing screeching overhead, she glanced up at the swarm of raucous blackbirds casting a long shadow across the sunny piazza. Then noticing Lorenzo and the *professore*, she pulled her bucket from the fountain and

hurried across the piazza, turning from time to time to look at them with a pained expression on her face.

Lorenzo's shivered and perspiration covered his face. His voice trembled. "Something awful has happened!"

A short skinny man with brown wiry hair rushed across the piazza and clasped Lorenzo's hands. "I'm very sorry about your family."

Lorenzo and the *professore* looked at one another and then stared at Peppino, the owner of the bar where Lorenzo had first met the *professore*.

"*Mia famiglia?*" asked Lorenzo.

"A lovely wife and children. Who would ever think--" Noting the bewildered expression on the two men's faces, Peppino slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand. "You don't know!"

Lorenzo clutched the barkeeper by the shoulders. "Know what? What're you talking about?"

Peppino's head dropped, his face contorted by his effort to keep from weeping. "They're dead—Lorenzo. Maria...the children...Vincenzo."

Lorenzo's lips parted and his eyes opened wide as he crumpled into a heap in the dusty piazza.

The *professore* and Peppino carried the half-conscious Lorenzo into the bar where they propped him up in a chair. From the sink behind the counter, Peppino drew water into a glass. Returning to Lorenzo, he held it to his lips forcing him to drink.

Lorenzo slouched in the chair muttering, "Maria...the children...Vincenzo."

"An earthquake killed those in Oma and in the mountain near Serra San Bruno," explained Peppino. "Santa Maria! I thought you knew. I was the first--oh, God! What a messenger of ill fortune I've been." He continued to chastise himself in broken phrases.

The *professore's* eyes filled.

"In seconds, the earthquake came and went," explained Peppino. "Many died. The bodies of the dead were quickly buried to avoid an epidemic. It was like the hand of God swept the helpless victims away."

"Poor Maria! Poor innocent babies!" sobbed the *professore*.

Lorenzo jerked his head forward. "Death came to my house.

Guido's gone?"

"*Si*," answered the *professore*.

"And my angel, Lucia?"

"*Si*."

"Giorgio, too? My brave Giorgio?"

The *professore* sniffled, barely able to restrain himself.

"And *mia cara* Maria? And *zio* Vincenzo--not them, too?"

"*Si*, Lorenzo! All of them!" sobbed the *professore*.

Wiping his tears, the *professore* watched a glassy-eyed Lorenzo bury his face in his arms. He sat by him for a time before helping him to his feet. "Lorenzo will stay with me," he told Peppino as he helped his friend up from the chair and led him from the bar.

In the days that followed, Lorenzo emptied many bottles of wine, slept long hours, and sat on the balcony watching those in the streets below. Everything seemed unreal. At any moment, he expected to awaken from a horrible dream and find that the terrible earthquake had never occurred and that his family and uncle were alive and well. Beside an overwhelming sense of unreality, an inner pain gnawed at Lorenzo, an anguish always present, day and night, asleep or awake, sometimes hurting so much it took his breath away or made him wish he, too, were dead. Also, he was angry at God for having taken his beloved family from him. His life had been difficult enough, but now

to have found happiness with a kind, gentle woman and loving children only to have them taken away in the blink of an eye. God had no heart and life was cruel. Why did he have to suffer so much? Absorbed in grief and self-pity, he seldom spoke more than a few words to anyone.

One morning, two weeks later, he initiated a conversation with the *professore*. "I must see the cottage," he said.

"I understand. I'll go with you, if you wish."

"I have to go alone."

"Anything I can do?"

Lorenzo grasped the *professore's* arm. "You've done more than enough. You've been the father I never had."

The *professore* choked up. He patted Lorenzo's arm. "If you must go, be careful."

In the early evening, Lorenzo hiked the long road to his cottage on the outskirts of Serra San Bruno. Reluctantly, he approached a forlorn gray shell of a house with broken windows, shattered doors, and a wide open roof. The wrecked cottage rose askew among fallen, splintered trees, dusty cracked beams, fragmented walls, broken terra-cotta shingles, and smatterings of wood, concrete, and glass strewn everywhere about the field.

Lorenzo stepped over the scattered rubble of the house which had once been a loving home to him and his family.

Near a fallen beam, he stepped on a round rubber object. Looking down, he noticed next to it, partly buried, a familiar figure. He cleared the clutter from around it and immediately recognized the plaster-of-paris Christ his grandmother had given to him the day before she died. The statuette's arms and legs were broken while across the chest were wide zigzagging lines through which he saw a cluster of small round beads. Quickly, he drew the dusty black rosary beads from inside the Christ figure and clutched them

against his breast, remembering his grandmother fondly. He put the beads into his pocket and then picked up the red-and-blue rubber object resting against his foot. Tears filled his eyes as he thought about the times Guido and Lucia played catch with the ball or little Giorgio chased the rolling, bouncing ball across the kitchen floor. He recalled his happy children playing about the house or yard or running to greet him on his return from the hills or fields, their eager arms outstretched as they called, "*Papa! Papa!*" He heard Maria whisper, "*Mio caro.*" He felt her warm body snuggled next to him in bed as they spoke about how their abundant crops and herds would provide a promising future for the children. Unable to bear the endearing images, Lorenzo rushed from the ruins and sat on a trunk of an uprooted tree in the backyard, his arms limp by his sides. He opened his clasped hand, letting the striped rubber ball drop from his grasp and bounce across the ground. As his eyes watched the rolling ball, his head fell to his chest and he sobbed. "Oh, God, how can I live without them!"

Lorenzo wiped the tears from his face, picked up the ball, and hurried across the upturned field and down the rocky mountain path. Glancing up at the eerie white moon, he felt uneasy at what the night might portend, but he was determined to visit the graves of his wife and children.

At the entrance to Serra San Bruno's cemetery, Lorenzo noticed that the gate was locked. Encircled by a tall cement wall, the cemetery's only entrance was through the picket gate directly facing him, so Lorenzo grasped the black iron pickets, climbed nimbly to the top of them, and jumped down into the enclosed graveyard.

The names of those who had died in the earthquake were barely legible on the plain wooden crosses staked into the freshly dug earth. Scanning the newly cut crosses, Lorenzo noticed four of them set in a semi-circle with the

names of his wife and children scrawled on them with white paint.

At Giorgio's grave, Lorenzo dug into the loose graveyard soil with his fingers, then took the red-and-blue-striped ball from his pocket and buried it in the earth. "Now you can play ball in heaven." Tears filled to his eyes. "Do you hear me, my little ones?" He waited for an answer, but heard only the sharp cry of crickets and the melodic rustling of the night wind moving through the tall cypresses encircling the graveyard.

Remembering how as a child he had communicated with his dead grandmother, he shut his eyes and cleared his mind. He concentrated on seeing a field of lights, but the images of those whom he had known and loved and who were now dead kept appearing. The harder he tried to suppress the images, the more active they became. Finally, he drew a deep breath and relaxed his body. A sudden tingling sensation rushed through his limbs and the few remaining pictures in his mind blended into one another like a stream and passed from his consciousness.

Pinpoints of light flashed in Lorenzo's mind, becoming larger and brighter until the dots merged, forming a luminous whirlwind. As he viewed the swirling tunnel of light, Lorenzo called the names of his wife and children. Soon, a new scene appeared before him.

Refreshing breezes blew through the blossom bearing boughs of the flowering trees on the aromatic fields at the bottom of the green hills. In the blue water, a towering, three-masted ship docked with its gangplank lowered. A throng of men, women, and children milled about the tall ship with soaring white sails while others from the crowd moved up the ship's wide gangplank.

Many passengers boarded the massive ship. From among those yet on land, a boy shouted, "No, *mamma*! No! I want *papa*!"

The small voice was familiar, thought Lorenzo, watching the scene more intently.

Maria--his beloved Maria--was holding Giorgio's hand and urging him up the gangplank!

"I want *papa!*" cried Lucia.

"*Papa! Papa!*" cried Guido.

The ship's whistle pierced the air.

"*Avanti!*" pleaded Maria. "See, Uncle Vincenzo is already aboard.

"From the top of the plank, a beaming Vincenzo beckoned to the children.

Suddenly, Giorgio stopped sobbing--something small and round was moving fast down the distant hill. Giorgio, Guido, and Lucia watched their favorite red-and-blue ball bounce down the steep hill and then roll across the lush field before stopping at their feet.

"*La pallina!*" exclaimed Lucia.

Giorgio picked up the ball and gazed at it wondrously.

"Now we can play," laughed Guido.

"*Sì,*" smiled Lucia.

The children pranced up the gangplank to meet their uncle.

Close behind them, Maria was the last to board the ship. Before reaching the crowded deck, she turned to look in Lorenzo's direction, smiling as she waved goodbye.

Lorenzo watched the ship hoist its plank and then sail silently across the still water toward the bright distant horizon. Amid the cries and shrieks from the passengers on shore came a sharp "Hoot! Hoot! Hoot!" A bulky snow-white owl perched on a slanted cross, blinked its bright yellow eyes before flapping its huge wings in flight. For a moment, its silhouetted form was outlined against the full silver moon before it glided down to the earth and vanished in the dark woods.

Chapter XI

Lorenzo was stricken with severe chills and a high fever after his experience in the cemetery. When Carmelina visited her father and noticed Lorenzo's frail condition, she insisted he recuperate at her house in Martone where she and her husband Salvatore could take better care of him. Though the fever lasted only two days, the acute stress of losing his family affected Lorenzo's behavior and emotional state. He seldom smiled and often mumbled to himself during long solitary walks in the country or about town. He refused to shave, wash, or wear shoes. His clothes were dirty and unkempt, serving both as day and nighttime attire. The most unusual change, however, was in his speech. He spoke disjointed sentences, rhymed words or phrases, and recited childhood jingles. Other times, unexpectedly, he would laugh or cry in the middle of a conversation. And, always, whether speaking or silent, a deep sadness shone in his eyes.

One day, passing through Martone, Filippo stopped to visit Lorenzo. Concerned about his friend's state of mind, he suggested that a change of setting might be beneficial. On his route, he had to pass through Golla, a scenic mountainside village north of Martone. Filippo thought there wasn't much to be lost in Lorenzo's accompanying him to Golla and possibly his improved health to be gained from the trip.

Filippo and Lorenzo left Martone in the afternoon. During the trip, the silk merchant--noting Lorenzo's odd

behavior-- questioned whether he had made a mistake inviting Lorenzo to travel with him to Golla. His eyes watered, remembering the forsaken child whom many years ago he had accompanied to Oma because his parents wanted to be rid of him. He thought how the terrible curse of the Fates had wrought its havoc on the disoriented young man who sat beneath a nearby poplar tree chatting inanely to himself.

Lorenzo twirled his hands in the air. With his forefinger, he drew an imaginary circle in the air and dotted it. "Death is inside." Around the first circle, he drew a larger circle.

"Death is inside, outside, everywhere, nowhere." He brushed the invisible circle away and then clapped his hands.

"We better leave," suggested Filippo. "Golla's still a distance."

Lorenzo stared at a pebble by his feet. Shortly, he looked at Filippo and smiled feebly. He then got up slowly and loosened the silk-laden Pietro tied to a tree and led the obliging donkey up the steep road with Filippo close by his side.

Late in the afternoon, they arrived in Golla, a village perched high on the side of a mountain. The weather was hot and the lack of wind provided no relief from the summer humidity.

The dusty serpentine road leading into the heart of Golla was lined with tall cypresses while on both sides of the narrow street in front of the gray houses blossomed potted flowers which had been set out for a special occasion. From the windows and balconies of the small houses, curious villagers peered or stopped their daily chores to gawk at the well-dressed silk merchant and his bare-footed companion with jutting eyes, long hair, and lengthy beard.

"*Che brutto!*" exclaimed one woman at the sight of the two men strolling down the main road of Golla. "A wild man," whispered her friend. A young mother snatched her child who had dared venture from her side to approach Lorenzo. The anxious woman covered her eyes and jabbed the index and small finger of her right hand toward the earth to ward off whatever evil might be present.

In Golla's jammed piazza, some stared at the ragged Lorenzo as he passed; others ignored him as they talked, laughed, or strolled from one concession stand to another buying souvenirs or Italian delicacies. In the right corner of the busy piazza a throng of people had gathered to admire two enormous black oxen whose long shiny white horns were draped with streams of flowing red and white ribbons. The huge black oxen were hitched to a freshly painted red wagon piled high with wooden crates.

"Tonight's the *Festival of the Dead*," explained Filippo.

"After sunset, these black beauties will draw the red wagon filled with boxes of holy beads to the cemetery where towns-people will place them on gravestones in memory of their dead."

Filippo took a coin from his pocket and paid the man behind the concession stand for a handful of beads.

Filippo held up a set of the colored beads. "These *corone* made from sugar are for the dead."

Lorenzo snatched the *corone* from Filippo's hand. "Food for the dead. The dead eat! Ha! Ha! Eat, Lorenzo, eat!" His laugh was loud and raucous as he tore the *corone* apart and stuffed the sugared beads into his mouth.

Filippo gripped Lorenzo's arm.

A tall muscular man behind one of the food stands glared at Lorenzo. "Blasphemer!" shouted the red-faced man, "Eat our sacred food, will you?" shrieked an angry young woman picking up a stone and flinging it at Lorenzo.

Some of those in the piazza followed her example. Soon other villagers picked up stones and pelted the two men, bruising and bloodying their arms, faces, and necks. Shouting, Filippo attempted to appease the angry mob, but no one cared to hear his explanation for what they considered a sacrilege of one of their cherished customs.

Filippo and Lorenzo fled Golla. Miles from the enraged villagers, they stopped in the woods to clean the dried blood from their cuts and bruises with cold water from a stream.

Filippo suggested that since the sun had set and the villagers might still be pursuing or waiting for them, they should camp in the forest for the night.

After midnight, certain that Filippo was asleep, Lorenzo stole away from the camp. A mile down the road, he scanned the countryside until he spotted a farmer's field which he and Filippo had passed earlier on their flight from Golla. Finding a small vegetable patch in the field, he uprooted the scarecrow protecting it, balancing the wooden man on his shoulders as he plodded up a steep rocky path toward a cemetery on a nearby hillock.

Entering the graveyard, Lorenzo rested the heavy scarecrow made of cypress by one of the tombstones in the small cemetery. When the scarecrow's wooden leg struck the earth, a large hairy rat with glowing red eyes scurried from behind a tombstone where it had been munching on crumbs of a broken *corone* that had fallen to the ground.

Breathing heavily and perspiring, Lorenzo fell on his knees and crawled over the damp earth. "Dig! Dig!" he shouted burrowing into the soft ground with his bare fingers. Satisfied with the depth of the hole, he lifted the scarecrow and thrust his wooden leg into it, then dragged the loosened earth into and around the hole with his naked foot, stamping the mounded soil until it was packed hard enough to hold up his ragged friend.

Lorenzo brushed dust from the scarecrow's frayed black cap and patted his ripped white stocking cheeks. He then straightened out his uneven button eyes and tucked his patched red shirt into his black trousers. "Now, you can greet everyone." Lorenzo pointed around the graveyard. "You and me--we're like them, but enough of words--let's eat. Ha! Ha!" Lorenzo skipped over the graves, snatching one *corone* after another left on the tombstones by the villagers in remembrance of Golla's dead.

Lorenzo held up an armful of purple, blue, yellow, and green beads. He pulled apart one *corone* and flung the sacred beads into his mouth, enjoying each morsel of the holy food; the other *corone* he placed like wreaths around the scarecrow's neck.

Pleased with the scarecrow's appearance, he sauntered across the graveyard and soon returned to deck the scarecrow's outstretched arms with row after row of colored beads.

Opening his arms wide, Lorenzo shouted across the cemetery. "I want to live! My friend wants to live!" Quickly, he inhaled and exhaled the chilly night air, but unlike the previous occasions when he had practiced deep breathing in communicating with his dead grandmother, this time his body did not relax. He shivered. Like an aroused serpent of flame, a fiery sensation suddenly passed through the length of his spinal cord and into his spleen, solar plexus, heart, and throat. As the intense internal heat spread through his limbs, Lorenzo felt he existed neither inside nor outside of his body although he sensed himself in both places. Unable to comprehend this peculiar state of mind, he became confused and frightened as well as anxious about what would happen next.

The excruciating pain in his body becoming unbearable, Lorenzo fell to the ground and curled himself into a fetal position.

Feeling close to death, he stretched his arm and reached into his pants pocket for his grandmother's rosary beads which he always carried with him. Too weak to pray, he moaned as he clutched the black rosary beads, assuring himself he would die with the cherished beads in his hand should Death come for him.

A sudden breeze blew through the cemetery, flapping the scarecrow's torn trousers and ragged sleeves. Hearing the sound of the scarecrow's garments tossing back and forth in the whistling wind, Lorenzo struggled to his feet, the means to prevent the searing internal heat from consuming him revealed to him in the rapid movement of the scarecrow's shirt and pants.

With great effort, Lorenzo rose from the earth and glanced at the clear sky, fixing his eyes on a point beyond the pale skull-shaped moon. "*Madre...Madre*," he called. Shortly, the noisy wind became still.

For a time, Lorenzo continued gazing at the clear dark sky, then turned and paced once around the scarecrow before stopping to face him. He thrust out his hands, holding the index fingers and thumbs of each hand open and the other fingers pressed against his palms.

His fingers extended in this peculiar manner, he threw up his arms and kicked his feet, treading faster and faster over the graves of the deceased. He repeated this macabre action, moving back and forth in dance-like fashion in each of the four directions of the cemetery until he stopped beneath the scarecrow whom--without realizing it--he had planted in the very center of the graveyard. Exhausted and perspiring, he fell unconscious to the ground just as a ray of white moonlight fell upon the scarecrow's face, making his yellow button eyes shine with an eerie unearthly light.

The next morning a half-asleep caretaker entered the cemetery, astonished to see a decorated scarecrow decked with *corone* of many colors about his neck and arms looming

over the graves. More surprising was the sight of a wild-haired man, still as death, with bloody hands and feet, sprawled beneath the scarecrow. Blessing himself, the aged caretaker closed his eyes and then opened them again. The grotesque scene remaining, he fled from the cemetery shouting, "*Guardia! Guardia!*"

Chapter XII

The *guardia's* beady eyes were fixed on Filippo's billfold, ignoring the money resting on the mahogany desk. "Signor Malcini has trespassed, desecrated religious articles, erected stolen property in an unauthorized area, and aroused unnecessary alarm among the villagers."

"Signor Malcini's ill and needs a doctor," protested Filippo.

"Your friend has broken the law."

Filippo pulled more bills from his wallet and one by one placed them on top of the other lire.

The *guardia* glanced at the money, showing neither approval nor disapproval.

From his wallet, Filippo yanked a bill of a large denomination, slapping it hard across the other bills. His temper flaring, he watched the *guardia* reach across the table.

Sweeping the *lire* together, the *guardia* folded the paper money and put it into his breast pocket. "Since you have been good enough to pay *signor* Malcini's fines, he won't have to appear in court." The *guardia* led Filippo through a heavy wooden door. Inside the room, he turned and said, "You better watch him. Who knows what he'll do next?"

Filippo ignored the remark. He turned to Lorenzo, slumped in a chair staring at the ceiling lamp. Reaching down, he helped his mute friend to his feet and led him from the room.

Wherever the two men passed on their journey south, people gaped at the sight of a hunched merchant loaded with bundles of cloth on his back, strutting alongside a black and white donkey carrying a slumped, semi-conscious man. During their travel, Filippo was solicitous of Lorenzo's condition. When the air was chilly, he unwrapped some of his precious silks and covered Lorenzo's shivering body with them. When Lorenzo was delirious from a fever, Filippo untied the kerchief from his neck and soaked it with water from his canteen, pressing it against Lorenzo's burning forehead. Filippo watched Lorenzo closely, concerned with whether or not Lorenzo would survive the trip home.

In Martone, Lorenzo stayed at Carmelina's house. And since he was despondent and barely able to walk, he was put to bed.

One day, soon after his arrival, a friend of Carmelina's visited. "How is he?" asked the woman unwrapping three eggs from a large sky-blue handkerchief.

"Not much better," answered Carmelina. "He pecks at his food. His color's like death, and he doesn't speak."

Filomena placed the eggs on the kitchen table. "They're fresh. I plucked them from the hens just this morning."

"*Grazie*," smiled Carmelina. "Sit for a while. I'll make some coffee."

Filomena joined her fingers together and rested them on the kitchen table, watching Carmelina prepare the coffee.

"*Coraggio*, my friend."

Carmelina nodded.

"Didn't the doctor say his illness will pass?"

"*Speriamo*."

Filomena walked toward Carmelina. Standing beside her, she rested a hand on her shoulder. "We can pray."

Carmelina sniffled. "Prayer is what *dottore* Calvi suggested the afternoon Filippo brought Lorenzo here and Don Franco gave him the last rites."

Carmelina's words drifted into Lorenzo's mind. He wanted to shout that even though he couldn't speak, he understood every word spoken. He wanted to tell everyone that he felt very much alive and alert, but a prisoner within flesh and bones. He felt much like a scarecrow as he unsuccessfully tried to gain control of himself. He commanded his hands to push him out of bed, but they didn't move. He bid his tongue to speak, but no words came to his lips. He attempted to pray, but he possessed neither the strength nor the will to do so. For some days, he experienced this frustrating lack of bodily control.

Weeks passed with Lorenzo showing little improvement, though he did recuperate enough to get out of bed from time to time and sit with Carmelina and her family. One afternoon after everyone had finished lunch, Salvatore asked his seven-year old daughter, "Would you like to take Lorenzo for a walk?"

Frizzy-haired Aurora jumped from her chair. "Can I, *Papa*?"

"Only to the piazza and back."

Aurora nodded and then nudged Lorenzo from his chair. With her tiny hand wrapped around his fingers, she led him from the house and down a narrow street toward the town piazza. They circled the piazza twice, stopped and rested, and then started homeward. Suddenly, Lorenzo grunted.

"What is it?"

Lorenzo's mouth moved, but only muddled sounds came from his lips.

"We've got to go home! I promised *papa*."

Lorenzo pulled Aurora's hand as an incoherent jumble of words rushed from his mouth. Aurora did not understand

what he meant until he pointed to a tall beige building with a large wooden cross decorating its entrance door.

Aurora's small round face beamed. "Oh, the church! We'll go in, but only for a while."

The man and the child knelt in a candle-lit alcove at the far right of the altar, Lorenzo doing so with some assistance from Aurora. With her hands joined, Aurora was about to pray when Lorenzo nudged her. He held a set of black rosary beads out to her. Wrapping the black beads around her little fingers, she made the sign of the cross and looked up at the snow-white *Madonna* resting on a gold-veined marble pedestal. "Dear *Mother*, hear my prayer. I love my uncle Lorenzo, and it hurts me to see him sick. Please, please make him better."

Aurora's eyes focused on the loving face of the *Madonna*, pleading with the *Blessed Mother* to answer her prayer. Then, as she looked over at Lorenzo, who knelt with clasped hands beside her, she noticed in the flickering light cast by the circle of candles set around the *Blessed Mother* a large glistening tear rolling down his cheek. And watching Lorenzo's lips move, Aurora heard him enunciate slowly but distinctly the words, "*Madre mia, mia Maria.*" At the sound of those precious words, Aurora's heart burst with joy. They were the first words Lorenzo had spoken since returning from Golla.

That evening, the *professore* came to visit. After an exchange of greetings, he asked, "How's Lorenzo today?"

"He's resting, but he seems better," answered Salvatore.

"He spoke a few words and even smiled since...."

"The *Madonna*!" interjected Aurora.

"*Si*," agreed Carmelina putting an arm about her excited daughter.

The *professore* looked confused.

With enthusiasm, Aurora related to her grandfather how she and Lorenzo had gone into the Church of *Santa Maria Assunta* and knelt before the statue of the *Madonna*. "I prayed very hard for the *Blessed Mother* to hear my prayer."

The *professore* blessed himself. "The *Mother of God* often works miracles for children."

"Perhaps?" said Salvatore.

Carmelina shook a finger at him. "Miracle or no miracle, Lorenzo's much better since he spoke in church. That's all that matters."

Salvatore agreed. "Sì. Lorenzo is better, miracle or no miracle."

The following weeks were pleasant for Lorenzo. Growing healthier each day, he felt a tinge of excitement, a vague sense of something momentous about to happen. One humid, cloudy day he visited the ruins of his former home on the mountainside.

Unable to bear for long the endearing images conjured by the remnants of his former cottage, he hurried through each of the barely recognizable rooms, the cheery faces and the happy voices of his wife and children vivid in his mind as he relived memorable incidents which occurred in each part of the house.

Overcome by these cherished memories, he was about to cross the field and head homeward when he noticed a cluster of glowing daisies growing against one shattered wall of the cottage.

Looking closer at the shiny petals of the daisies, he reached down to pick one of the radiant flowers. His fingers barely touched the stem when several large white butterflies scattered from among the luminous daisies.

Like giant snowflakes the fluttering butterflies zigzagged about in the cloudy sky until a sudden breeze whisked them from sight. Immediately, a rush of cool rain

fell to the earth, providing relief from the unbearable humidity. Holding up his head, Lorenzo let the refreshing rain run down his face and over his body. Within minutes, the downpour stopped, and a loud reverberating clash of thunder resounded throughout the countryside.

In the dark sky, purple-fringed clouds drifted apart to reveal a rectangular patch of deep blue. Through this doorway in the sky flew hosts of snow-white doves. Briefly, the luminous birds basked in an enormous iridescent rainbow arching the heavens; then circling down to the earth, the multitudinous doves vanished and in their place myriad specks of flickering lights illuminated the dusky sky. At that moment, the clear blue rectangle in the sky became larger and brighter, allowing a rush of golden beams from beyond the opening to fill the heavens with its light.

A small glowing sphere of spiraling light sped from the rectangular passageway in the sky and then rested within the radiant hues of the rainbow. Slowly, the heavenly circle of light grew larger and brighter, shaping itself into a magnificent sight. The motionless woman with long wavy hair wore a shimmering dress of pure white. Her face was like the sun and her serene smile the spiritual boon granted to those heavenly blessed.

Instantly, Lorenzo recognized the beautiful female figure as the woman of all his dreams and the light of his life. His heart brimming with joy, tears streamed down his face as he gazed with awe upon the resplendent image of the *Mother*.

The celestial vision vanished, leaving the trees, hills, and fields ablaze in a shower of ethereal light. Everywhere Lorenzo looked nature unveiled herself to him or to an inner vision that saw with far greater vividness and clarity than his sight. He saw the various hues and the unique design of each individual flower; the bright blue anemone, the rich scarlet poppy, the deep yellow asphodel. The sundry trees,

the slightest twig, the least sliver of grass, the tiniest insect, the smallest pebble--everything glowed and swayed in the light surrounding it. And as he watched nature reveal her wonders to him, he felt himself embraced by a benevolent loving presence which filled him to bursting. At that moment, he realized that all people rested in this splendid power, and those not fortunate enough to experience it in this life would surely do so in the world to come. He realized, too, that through this force all life was kindred, all men and women brothers and sisters, bonded by a magnanimous energy striving to express itself in and through humans to transform them into more loving and caring persons.

Lorenzo hurried to Carmelina's house, where the *professore* was visiting, eager to share with him all that had happened. This second time, Lorenzo would break the solemn promise he had made to his grandmother never to speak of his unusual experiences.

He never forgot the terrible consequences he suffered when he had spoken freely about such an experience as a child in *professore* Strato's class. Besides, this occurrence was so extraordinary he had to tell someone, and what more reliable and more understanding person to share it with than the *professore*.

Lorenzo suggested that he and the *professore* go for a walk, since he was too excited to stay in the house. As the two men strolled in the piazza, Lorenzo spoke. "The woman looked like the *Blessed Mother* in church. She stood in the rainbow with light shining from her in every direction. Words cannot describe her. She was unlike any woman I've ever seen. And after she disappeared, everything was still and bright--it's difficult to explain. Anyway, as I looked about the countryside, everything swayed back and forth in a sort of dance."

Lorenzo stopped and tapped the side of his head. "You don't think I'm crazy?"

"No, no, go on!" answered the professore.

"Watching the dancing trees, flowers, and grass, I felt my home was in the sun, the stars, the wind, and the rain. Suddenly--from the sky--I heard the woman's voice. Her words were like music. She told me that each person is a creation of her love, a *Child of Wonder*. She also told me many other things, but I don't remember them."

"Wonderful!" exclaimed the *professore*. An incredible, but marvelous experience." He made the sign of the cross. "I've read about such visions. Truly blessed are those who experience them. You, Lorenzo, are most fortunate among humans."

As the two men talked further, Lorenzo noticed a bevy of noisy boys in the piazza. He watched one of them poke at a winged insect while the others looked on. He walked toward the fat boy wiggling his hand back and forth. Lorenzo's voice showed no anger. "Would you like it if I tied your arms so you couldn't play with your friends?"

Surprised, the boy hesitated, but then brought his closed hand from behind him, holding it open while Lorenzo loosened a long stem of grass looped around a butterfly's wings. The tiny butterfly shook its mangled brown and golden wings, hopped along the palm of the boy's hand, hesitated briefly, and then leaped from his hand. Momentarily, it folded its bruised wings, seemed to fall, but then flew higher and higher soaring past the buildings and beyond the piazza.

Lorenzo watched the freed butterfly vanish into the sunlight. He turned to the *professore*. "I must leave Martone. I will ask Filippo if I can travel with him."

The *professore's* eyes moistened as he placed an arm on Lorenzo's shoulder. "I understand, my friend."

Filippo was pleased to have Lorenzo assist him in peddling his silks and wares to his many customers throughout Calabria.

On a set date when the silk merchant passed through Martone, Lorenzo was packed and waiting for him. After repeated emotional good-byes were exchanged with the *professore's* family, the two men prepared to leave. At the doorway, Lorenzo took from his pocket his cherished black rosary beads. He bent down and gave them to Aurora. "*Mia cara*, remember me in your prayers." He squeezed her small hand holding the rosary beads.

Aurora flung her arms around Lorenzo. "*Si*, always," she wept.

Lorenzo's eyes filled. "*Ciao, bellissima.*" Least he relent and stay, he hurried from the house of the people who were more than family to him and whom he treasured beyond measure.

Summers and winters came and went until the years were many since Lorenzo left Martone. Wherever he and Filippo traveled through the villages and the towns of Calabria, people talked about the silk merchant's assistant. He was called a poet, mystic, and saint. To these titles, Lorenzo simply replied he loved stories, delighted in creating them and in sharing them with people, especially children. And the children came. They waited in fields, streets, marketplaces, and doorways to hear his extraordinary tales. Many who heard his marvelous words were moved; some grew the wiser or the better; others considered his tales charming fables with hidden meanings. None, however, ever forgot his wondrous stories as they were planted forever in the hearts of his listeners.

The passing of many years saw the death of Lorenzo, the weaver of enchanting tales. Mourners came from every part of Calabria to honor the man whose words had touched their hearts and the hearts of their children; the man who had opened their eyes to the beauty found in the dreams of men and women but seldom in the world of reality; the man whose stories often repeated the theme that each person is

much more than he or she seems, that even the poorest and humblest of humans is enshrouded in glory and in time will blossom like a precious flower. This was the man the people honored. Some prayed for him while others wept openly. Many brought portions of their prize fruits, vegetables or flowers to his wake, a gesture of esteem in memory of the *uomo di cuore* who had lived and walked among them.

A mother with her husband and three children came to Lorenzo's wake. The mother motioned Elena, the youngest daughter, to present Salvatore and Carmelina with a basket of figs. The family was proud of the especially large and tasty figs which grew on their farm in Alba. Much would have been their surprise had they known that many years earlier the same tree which now gave forth abundant fruit was bare and withering until a boy of twelve pointed a finger at its empty branches and commanded, "Fruit grow! Fruit grow!" And the barren tree growing firm and strong blossomed, bringing forth rich fruit.

The End