

**CONCETTA LA MAZZA**

# **Beyond the blue sky**



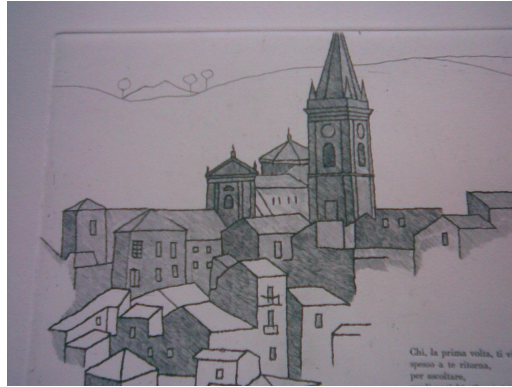


## **Biography**

*Concetta La Mazza was born in Novara di Sicilia in 1936, the eldest daughter of Domenico La Mazza and Teresa Correnti. In 1950, after a painful period of "entrustment" to her maternal aunt, she joined her parents in Domodossola, where she still resides together with her husband Giuseppe. He has three children: Armando, Luciano and Daniela. Recently the overwhelming desire to remember his childhood in Novara has crept into his mind and here is the birth of this intimate, personal diary, but full of anecdotes and references to the environment of that era: the town, the countryside, the people, habits, traditions of that territory in the dark years of the Second World War.*



## The primordial energy of writing



*Little Concetta is entrusted to her uncles and unwillingly forced to live in Castrangia in a hovel far from the town and her companions. Thus he travels his personal Via Crucis in solitude during the hard years of war between hunger, ignorance of the time, superstitions and mistreatment. After the war, the inevitable emigration and the naturally difficult beginning in the north.*

*All of this is told through the eyes of a little girl who revisits the phases of her growth in memory and who with surprising freshness and a subtle thread of irony gives us back the pleasure of reading - finally - an emblematic story of our family community, capable of moving us deeply and that belongs to each of us.*

*In this short novel by Concetta La Mazza, writing subverts every rule and returns to its origins, free from any formal schematism, driven by an arcane internal vitality, it becomes a raging river that overwhelms everything, it is the torrential rain of the soul.*

*The figures of the uncles, Antonia and Michele, are memorable, just as the image of Novara remains as generous, enveloping and sweet as it is harsh and hard.*

*Finally, the difficult transition to adolescence when the irreparable happens, but little Concetta does not surrender to the tragic destiny, thanks to her courage and unshakeable hope in the future, thanks to her eyes that have been able to look... beyond the sky blue!*

**NINO BELVEDERE**



*"For me the ordeal began. It was probably a hot day, the summer of 1938 began, I was two years old and my aunt came to pick me up. In a cloth bag she put a blouse and two pairs of panties, then unaware of everything I left my house. I was so little that I couldn't realize that my Via Crucis would begin that day."*

# Beyond the blue sky

## Chapter one - The paternal home



By now it is an old uninhabited ruin, suffocated by cobwebs and gnawed by moths but, a long time ago, in Novara, a town lying under a majestic fortress on the Messina mountains, in an alley in the Engia district there was a house near the fountain. The entrance door opened onto an internal staircase which led to the first floor where there was a small room with a wooden plank: it was the bedroom. You went upstairs and there was the kitchen, if you could call it that. In one corner there was a stone slab on which the fire was lit and an iron tripod which was used to support the pot of pasta. Opposite, hanging on the pitch-black wall, a wooden shovel, two sieves, one small and one large, the

oven for baking bread, to one side a half-rotten chest, a table, two "furrizzi" and some rickety chair. Finally there was a room, with a small balcony overlooking the alley, where there was just a single bed. That hole was the kingdom where his grandfather, widowed in 1934, lived. A stone latrine with a wooden lid had been created under the stairs. Since there are no sewers, the latter must have served to mitigate the stench that was given off. Naturally, the house lacked running water and electricity, conveniences that even the barons did not have in those days. Alongside was a wooden gate that led into the beam where the hens perched on wood.

In this corner, out of this world, my mother, who was a seamstress, lived together with my grandfather, two brothers and a sister, all older than her, were married and also lived in Novara. My mother was blonde, thin, very frail in build, she had very delicate features and what was most noticeable about her face, white as milk, were two large blue eyes, almost always frightened and sad. Perhaps the sudden death of her mother, when she was twenty-four, had been the cause of her physical and moral frailty.

A few years after my grandmother's death, my mother, thanks to the intervention of one of her godmothers, met her prince charming. My father belonged to a noble family from Badiavecchia, who ran a tavern with a tobacco shop and foodstuffs. It was a family of hard workers, and my father was a man, by all accounts, very handsome, tall, dark, self-confident and enterprising. He lived in a hamlet far from the town: on foot, at a good pace, he arrived in half an hour. His father hauled charcoal. The mother was a dynamic woman, in the morning she went to Novara with the mule to buy the items she supplied in the shop: tobacco, salt and edibles. He always dressed elegantly with a large black shawl around his neck, he also bought the



newspaper to keep customers informed. It was the only shop in the hamlet and well-being in that house, although there were eight mouths to feed, was not lacking.

Late in the evening he would ostentatiously help his by now tipsy patrons - and his wallet - by diluting the wine with colored soda. Since children don't always inherit their parents' work, my father had learned the cobbler's trade. After an engagement that lasted a few months, my father and mother, once married, went to make their love nest in the house by the fountain in the Engia district. Exactly nine months later I arrived in this world and, according to a sacred Southern custom, I was named after my paternal grandmother, Concetta. Despite my tender age I had dark and wrinkled skin, I was always crying. Grandpa, since we didn't have a cradle, was forced to rock me all day long in his arms, at night I slept in the big bed with dad and mom. By all accounts I was very ugly and unbearable. A few months later, as work was scarce in the country, my father decided to go to work in Sardinia. When he left for the other island he left his mother with the crying baby and another creature kicking in her womb.

When I was twenty months old my sister Rosa was born. The name was from the maternal grandmother. Unlike Concetta, Rosa - again according to my mother - was beautiful, with a white and pink complexion, brown hair that framed a harmonious face embellished by two beautiful blue eyes: a flower, like her name! So much so that when my mother went to the fountain to get water with Rosa in her arms, her friends asked her how it was possible to give birth to two completely different daughters. - Chista cà, Rusina, s'è ch'ievi billicchia, ma l'otra... - This one, Rosina, yes she's beautiful, but the other one... the friends said with a grimace. Meanwhile in this situation I continued to be uneasy, as if I sensed the premonition of my ordeal, which,

thanks be to God, I endured, even if not with resignation.

To tell the rest of the story, first, I have to introduce you to my aunt Antonia, in short, zì 'Ntuoia. She was my mother's older sister, between the two there were seventeen years of difference. She was a short, plump woman, with dirty hair falling over her eyes. His neglected face looked older than he actually was, and there was just so much humiliation in his blank stare. At the age of twenty, at that time marriageable age, she married a first cousin of hers, who had just returned from work in the Sempione tunnel, who was widowed and had a three-year-old son. This man, my uncle Michele, zì Micheri, was a short man and looked like a plebeian copy of King Vittorio Emanuele III, he lived in a house he owned in a street of the town which was very characteristic for the steps almost two meters wide. It was a beautiful house. On the ground floor was the carpenter's shop with a large central counter with a vice, two wall cabinets where he kept rasps, chisels, gimlets, gouges and augers, a lathe for rounding the feet of the tables he built, a for sharpening planes and blades, a wood-burning stove with a saucepan to liquefy the glue, boards piled up everywhere, a few saws attached to the wall, some lucky charms such as horseshoes, goat horns and turtle skins, in short, one of those places that by now they belong only to the world of memories.

A wooden staircase led to the first floor, where there were two spacious rooms with ceramic tiles, a luxury in those days, a sideboard made by my uncle, a sofa, a table and some chairs woven with raffia, a kind of vegetable rope. From the balcony overlooking the street in mid-August, when the procession of the Assumption went up towards the Abbey, it was possible to touch the crowned head of the Madonna with the hand. On the other hand, from the second floor you could see Rocca Salvatesta and

opposite, through a crack between the houses, you could admire the splendid landscape of the mountains which gradually extended beyond, beyond the blue sky, until you reached the sea where, especially in the cool spring days when there was no mist, you could see Vulcano on the edge of the horizon and then Lipari, Stromboli and all the other islands: a natural spectacle, a glittering multicolored postcard.

Another staircase went up to the first floor, where the kitchen and bedroom were, the first being very spacious and equipped with a wood-burning oven for bread and a cast-iron coal stove for cooking. It was undoubtedly a beautiful house, apart from the inconvenience of the kitchen without a sink with a drain to do the more essential household chores. In those days some conveniences were still inconceivable. In fact, the water was taken from the public fountain in a zinc quart and then carried to the second floor where it was poured into a large terracotta basin for washing the dishes. Since there was no drain from the sink, the water from the basin was brought back to the ground floor and flushed down the toilet. For a woman it was very tiring work. The servile and humiliating condition, at the limit of any human endurance, reached its climax at dinner time when Aunt Antonia, out of respect for her husband, had to eat from the same plate where he had eaten before, and perhaps the godson repeated the same thing, but I don't have a certain memory of this.

Uncle Michele was a gloomy and surly man as much a worker as he was a fool, instead of a heart he had a sandstone mallet. In his eyes I have never seen a glimmer of tenderness or compassion towards others. She segregated her aunt at home to look after her son, she had to prepare food, be his servant and always say yes, yes, yes. He couldn't even look out on the balcony otherwise there would be trouble, while almost every

evening after work he went to the tavern with his friends to drink.

He would come home staggering, drenched in sweat and with a stinky breath that was impossible to be around. Instead my aunt, by the oil light, waited for him until late at night without even eating. When the little king came back - he often didn't even have the strength to climb the stairs - exhausted, he abandoned himself on the dusty workbench and stayed there all night to sober up. In spite of everything, Aunt Antonia covered him with a coat and lovingly sat next to him to watch over him until morning. Thus the years passed and, in exchange for such devotion, she could not even go to visit her relatives to avoid scenes. He, jealous, petty and overbearing, went to buy her darning thread, combs, hair clips and other things, to prevent her from leaving the house. When they were invited to a wedding ceremony, Uncle Michele did not return home until the last moment and Aunt Antonia could not go alone until the relatives managed to track down her husband. Every now and then they managed to convince him, other times he arrived in time but then, in the middle of the party, he disappeared and Aunt Antonia, disappointed and displeased, returned home all *mogia mogia*. Over time she accumulated bitterness and sadness, unable to vent to anyone because she was isolated, she was prey to terrible headaches and toothaches that tortured her for whole weeks.

One day a neighbor, so good and pious, called zio Michele and reproached him for all the ill-treatment he made his wife suffer: - You should be ashamed - she screamed at him - making such a woman suffer... Antonia needs to get some air, you don't have to segregate her at home, she should go out, go to mass, go to relatives, as all Christians do. Above all, she needs to walk, only in this way will the headache go away...- the neighbor took a

short break, then continued saying: - less than an hour from here, walking down a mule track, we have some land and a small house very modest with a kitchen under the roof and another slightly damp room which can be used as a bedroom in the summer. In this land there are plants of hazelnuts, figs, tangerines, medlars, grapes, zizzole, apples, pears, olives, in short, every good thing.

As you know, after my brother's death, I have to look after my aunt and I can no longer take care of the countryside, so I thought of selling it. Why don't you buy it? So your wife would be able to breathe fresh air... Uncle Michele initially hesitated but then went to visit her and even convinced himself to buy it. In a short time the contract was stipulated and the property became his. Thus, Vittorio Emanuele III's impersonator, increasingly shrewd and treacherous, proposed to Aunt Antonia: - you will learn to pick figs and dry them. When you have to wash your clothes, you will go down to the river and get the water you need for drinking and cooking by digging a hole in the sand to purify it. We could retire to live in the countryside: I will work as a carpenter for the families who live in the nearby hamlets of San Basilio, Vallancazza, Badiavecchia and Piano Vigna. It will be uncomfortable in winter when the river swells with water but I will overcome this obstacle. You, on the other hand, will be able to enjoy the countryside. With her gaze downcast, once again Aunt Antonia did as she was ordered: - Cuomu tu voi, eu fazzu. - As you wish, I'll do it, the poor thing replied obediently.

## Chapter Two - Out of this world



In the early spring of 1936, the poor woman and uncle Micheri moved to Castrangia, in the countryside, near the bed of the stream. In the various hamlets of Badiavecchia, San Basilio and Vallancazza word spread that in any case he was available and people called him for the work. In those days there was the custom, even if today it may seem strange, that when they needed a table, a window, a door or a wardrobe, they called the carpenter and hosted him in their home: they improvised a workbench and provided the necessary wood. Uncle Michele brought the tools and stayed on site until the work was completed.

They called him to cut down a tree and left it to dry for a couple of years. The trunk of the tree was then mounted on a wall. The carpenter held the saw from above and an assistant below: "Serra serra mastro dascio che dumè fagimmo a cascìa" (Saw saw o great master that tomorrow we will make the chest).

The tree trunk was mounted on a wall. With a huge saw they obtained the tables and with these they built windows, beds, wardrobes. To do this job, he got up at 4 and set off with his haversack and irons. When he arrived at his home, customers

offered him freshly milked milk with onion and a loaf of bread. At noon, a plate of pasta and a piece of cheese. At dusk he stopped working and they gave him homemade bread as the first down payment before settling the bill on Sunday in Novara.

A few years went by and his son, Turillu, had grown up and understood firsthand that he did not intend, for anything in the world, to spend the rest of his life isolated in the countryside. He had learned his father's trade but wanted to specialize and become a cabinetmaker. He managed to convince his father to send him to a city where there was the possibility of learning that art. He moved to Catania and after two years of apprenticeship he became very good, he felt ready to do that job, and since he was now nineteen he thought the time had come for him to start his own family. He had known a shepherd's daughter for years and decided to get married but it went against the will of Zi Micheri who would have wanted his son to marry a woman of his caste. In those days, incredible, but it was like this: for a craftsman to marry a shepherd's daughter was a great cause of dishonor. A great conflict suddenly arose between father and son which prompted Turillu to detach himself definitively from his father and stepmother. With his new family he left the country and moved to Como where he made a lot of fortune with his work.

The uncles had no children, so, with Turillu's departure, they were left alone for good. The one who suffered the most from this isolation was Aunt Antonia who spent the whole day talking to the birds, the flies and the mosquitoes that buzzed around her. In that cave in the countryside, he didn't have the opportunity to talk to anyone. Only on the occasion of important holidays such as Christmas, Easter or the feast of the Madonna Assunta in mid-August did he have the opportunity to go to the village to visit

my mother. During one of these visits, after having complained for a long time about her condition, she proposed to her sister: - Dear Teresa, I noticed that with two little girls you have too much trouble, entrust Concetta to me so you will be freer to devote yourself to the little one. I'll take her to the countryside where the air is nicer and will do her good - My mother was initially insecure but then, as always, given her easily conditioned nature, behind her sister's pressing insistence she agreed.

The ordeal began for me. It was probably a hot day, the summer of 1938 was beginning, I was two years old and my aunt came to pick me up. In a cloth bag she put a blouse, two pairs of panties and unaware of everything I left my house. I was so small that I could not realize that my Via Crucis would begin that day. We walked along the mule track until after half an hour or maybe more we arrived in this solitary place with the not very reassuring name of Castrangia (Cassandra!) as if to herald misfortune, in short, the name was already a whole program, even if I couldn't realize it at the time. The husband initially welcomed me, the aunt occasionally bought me some sweets to win my sympathy and when she accompanied me to Novara to visit my mother she always insisted that I didn't have to go home but it was better to grow up with her who was alone and that she would be my mother. I could do nothing but obey.

Meanwhile my father returned from Sardinia, stayed just a week, enough to get my mother pregnant, and left again. We were in 1939 and the following year Antonietta was born. I still vaguely remember that my aunt Antonia took me to Novara to see my mother and I saw my sister for the first time. I wanted to stay at home to cuddle little Antonietta but my aunt, more and more in control of my life, stiff as a soldier, said to me: - Turnemmu a casa, ti fazzu eu 'na bella causitta - (Let's go home,



I'll take care of you a beautiful doll).

When we arrived at the hovel he put in my arms a rag "causitta" with painted red, terrifying eyes. I got scared. It was a period that I always cried because I wanted to go back to Novara to my grandfather and mother but there was no way to convince Zi Antonia: her heart was petrified and deaf to my every complaint. In the first three years we spent a lot of time in the country house in Castrangia, where there wasn't a living soul, only rarely did we see vacationers in the houses scattered around.

On Sundays we went to the village and I went to visit my mother, my little sisters and my maternal grandfather. Grandpa was a nice man with a mustache. He carried a snuffbox with him which he sniffed from time to time. In winter he would take me under his cloak and take me to the square to buy some sweets and to taste the wine at the "Sciancaditta" tavern above the hospital. In the evening we returned to Castrangia.

Some evenings my uncle went to rehearse with the band, where he played the trombone, then he stopped to drink at the inn and returned to the countryside sprightly. 500 meters from Castrangia he began to call "Concettina, 'ntoia...". At home, in the meantime, the aunt had prepared the earthenware pot to heat the water on the tripod. Halfway through cooking, he had a ladleful of boiling water poured into him, perhaps to dispose of the wine. In an iron pan, my aunt prepared the onion with the tomatoes to season the pasta. The onion was undercooked and made me vomit. "Eat, otherwise I'll take the belt and give you the bodies...".

In those days a woman of Venetian origin was the midwife of San Basilio. When the river was full in winter, uncle Michele carried it on his shoulder (a ciancalea) for purchases in the pharmacy in Novara. He would stop at home and say "Antonia,

give her a shawl as it's cold". Poor aunt, I don't know if she understood that she was Michele's lover.

I was now five years old, isolated in the countryside, without speaking to anyone I had become like a wild animal. I was ashamed of everyone. When we went to Novara I hid because I was afraid of people. The neighbors realized this transformation and so they advised my uncles to send me to kindergarten. Luckily the uncles were convinced. So one morning my aunt sent my uncle Michele to buy me a biscuit and put it in the white straw basket my paternal grandmother had given me. Along with the biscuit he put a fresh egg. He accompanied me to the kindergarten located near the village abbey. When the nun opened the door to welcome me, I began to scream. Seized by fear, I threw the basket on the floor, the egg shattered and went to dirty the floor everywhere. My aunt punished me by spanking me hard and took me home. So my first day of kindergarten also became my last.

It happened, from the time I was four, that my uncle would say: "Concettina, go to Novara to get me some carmieri (sedatives) for my headache." I ran along the mule track like a ferret, I passed through the district of Greco, sometimes I stopped at the fountain to quench my thirst, and I arrived at the "du Surcittu" pharmacy. He, the pharmacist, amazed, told his friends that in a short time I was going to and returning from Novara like lightning. At the age of five they took me to Barcelona to distant relatives. There I saw and listened to my surprise for the first time... the radio! We also went to a store to buy a piece of pea-colored cloth. The sales assistant proposed: - Also buy the hat and the white scarf -. In the end they were convinced and the salesgirl gave us two free remnants of shiny blue and light blue satin. The next day we took the fabrics to my mother who made the clothes in a few days. On

Sunday I felt like the daughters of the marquises and barons of Novara.

In the winter of 1941, in the middle of the war, my father, having finished his work in Sardinia, decided with a friend of his to seek his fortune in a northern city and to live by taking up his old job as a cobbler. There was the feeling in the air that my mother wanted to join my father and I was disturbed by this, so much so that one day I slipped under his bed, undressed and observed the two grains of rice of future nipples with scabs because my aunt never washed me. I violently took them off. I remember that I saw blood because I had injured myself. I put on the canvas shirt that was needed day and night, then the dress, and no one noticed.

Before leaving, the mother tried to leave the grandfather's house in order, and the poor fellow was left alone. He thought of putting in electric light, in those days the prerogative of the lords. Previously, "u lusu" was used for petroleum. Uncle Michele was upset: a few days later he called the electrician in turn and had him too install the light in his house, so when I went to the village I too enjoyed a little light on the steep wooden stairs. When I had to go to the toilet (a latrea), basically a simple hole that was on the ground floor behind his laboratory, coffins were always stacked alongside, which my uncle built to be ready in case of request.

On the morning of March 1, 1942, dressed in blue satin with light blue sleeves, together with my uncle and grandfather Tore, I accompanied my mother and little sisters to Piazza di San Sebastiano by post, that is, yes, by bus, which would take them to at the Vigliatore railway station. Her 4-year-old sister Rosa didn't want to go up and to convince her uncle said: - if you don't go up, you'll be ietto du pidti - (I'll give you two farts).

I, the eldest, influenced by my aunt, did not leave and stayed in

Novara. I couldn't stop crying. I sought comfort in my grandfather's arms. He too was left alone and for that day I stayed with him to keep him company. After about twenty days the first letter from the mother arrived, telling of the success of the trip. Dad had let her find a cozy apartment with water in the house and a gas stove, a novelty for her. Continuing the story, the day after her arrival she had called a hairdresser into the house to give her a fashionable haircut. In the village almost all the women wore their hair long with a tupe. In short, my mother was happy and satisfied for the first time in her life. At the end of the story he recommended me to my aunt. He certainly didn't imagine my suffering in Castrangia.

The day after we left, Aunt Antonia took me back to the countryside and told her husband to buy me the first grade book to teach me how to write and be able to attend the second grade instead of the first in October. Poor me: I couldn't play anymore, but I had to spend my time writing rods and numbers. From Castrangia every now and then the teacher passed by on her way back from San Basilio where she taught. Her name was Maria, she was the daughter of a captain her aunt knew. He offered her a glass of water. Meanwhile I showed her the notebook and she gave me a caress. He took a red pencil out of his bag and wrote "brava". What joy, what happiness to see me praised, something extraordinary for me. I became more melancholic every day, I begged them to take me to my paternal uncles and grandparents, but my aunt said it wasn't necessary.

She was afraid I might tell them how I was treated and fed. Indeed, the food was not enough for a little girl who had to grow and develop: in the morning they gave me a piece of hard bread with some cheese, at midday a salad of tomatoes and two olives. In the evening, when her husband was there, Aunt Antonia

cooked some pasta with an improvised sauce made with raw onions. And if I didn't eat it, I risked taking a beating. To vary some evenings he cooked pasta and beans or a kind of soft polenta. Only at Christmas, New Year's, Carnival and Easter did they kill a hen or a rabbit. In January they killed a pig from which they made spicy salami and lard, but you had to consume them with a dropper otherwise they wouldn't be enough for the whole year. Every now and then on Sundays my uncle would buy dirty tripe that just thinking about it, even now, makes me disgusted, or intestines rolled up on a branch of parsley, the stigliole, which were then fried. They were all cheap foods because, according to them, you shouldn't be wasteful like your grandparents and they kept repeating to me: - You see, they always have pans full of sausages and stock fish, they eat and drink. You have to stay away from those people - they said -. My uncles feared that other relatives would convince me to insist on joining my mother and father on the continent. They worked so hard to make me hate them that sometimes, meeting them, I put my hands over my eyes so as not to see them.

September had come and I had to take the entrance exams for the second class. My uncles took me to the village, they consulted with the janitor to keep an eye on me, with the teacher I was to have in second grade and with the teacher of the examination board. They all brought gifts of eggs to secure my promotion. I had never had contact with those people, the classroom had several two-seater wooden desks with inkwells. There were other girls with me who were taking their remedial exams. They made me solve addition and subtraction on the blackboard. Both the inkwells and the blackboard were completely new to me. I was shaking like a leaf with fear and embarrassment, I didn't know how to solve the operations,

because Aunt Antonia had only taught me to write the numbers from one to ten. They then asked me to write a sentence, a little thought in the notebook, but I didn't know where to start. When those troubles were over, the janitor took me home. Her aunt asked her how the test had gone and the janitor replied that it hadn't gone very well, but that the final judgment rested with the teachers.

Surprisingly, the result was positive and I was admitted to the second class: I was ready to go to school, but the apron problem arose. Uncle Michele had gone to the shop the previous day and bought a remnant of black fabric. Aunt Antonia made me a uniform within a day. More money was needed to buy the briefcase. My uncles had money but they had an obsession with saving so he, the miserly man, got the hang of it and made me a plywood briefcase with a window clip. They didn't even buy me a pen. His uncle made one out of a thin piece of wood with a nib attached to the end. The two notebooks and the pencil could not replace them and had to buy them by force. On October 1st of that 1942, my aunt accompanied me to school. First she had gone to the podestà to ask for a birth certificate which the school required because I was out of class. The teacher was full of kindness and welcomed me with sympathy, but I was afraid of her perhaps because instead of her right arm she had a rubber prosthesis due to an accident that occurred as a child in her father's pasta factory. I was assigned a place in the first benches. My new companions, who hadn't seen me the year before, were intrigued by my presence and muttered to each other: - Ma cù ievi is this cause sicca-sicca? - (Who is this thin skinny little girl?). I was very intimidated and ashamed, I couldn't open my mouth and I didn't even answer the questions that the teacher lovingly asked me.

I was a wild child and didn't have the courage to ask to go out to pee, and once I peed myself. So when I got home my aunt beat me up because she had to wash my dress which, in any case, wouldn't dry in time for the next day. Days went by and the same thing happened every time. When the teacher found out about it in the middle of the day, she sent me to the toilet, but sometimes she forgot it and I did it again. The companions ignored and avoided me as if I were plagued and did not even try to make friends with me.

They knew each other because they met in the village, while I had to walk almost an hour to get to the house in the country and therefore I had no occasion to become friends with them. The uncles came to the village only on Sundays to meet friends and spend a few happy hours with them in front of a bottle of wine. But most of the time the aunt stayed at home to receive work orders for her husband. At the age of six I used to walk the long uphill mule track. Halfway there I stopped to pick up a bouquet of violets surrounded by leaves to offer to the teacher.

I arrived at school exhausted. After noon I would return to the countryside accompanied by the deafening chirping of cicadas and a scorching sun, without ever meeting a living soul.

I shut myself up in that hovel and was left alone to fantasize about myself in that not very serene atmosphere with my aunt who was increasingly strict towards me. The uncle, after work, almost always went to the tavern and came home late at night, always drunk. Sometimes, more tipsy than usual, he got lost and didn't come home. His aunt and some neighbors went looking for him in the middle of the night along the stream by the light of lanterns. When they found him slumped on the ground, they persuaded him to go home.

Meanwhile, I couldn't do anything good at school. At the end of

the first quarter the teacher distributed the report cards, then with the insignia of the fasces and unfortunately with all the subjects insufficient: my report card was the poorest in the class. To encourage my aunt I told her that the other report cards were like mine too and the aunt almost took the bait. So, day after day, I encouraged myself and in class I tried to make friends with some classmates. I wanted to approach them, but they excluded me from their conversations, perhaps because in their eyes I was a poor country girl.



## Third chapter - Games on the sand



In the years spent in solitude in Castrangia, time never passed because the only thing one could do was listen to the chirping of birds all day long and in summer the deafening chirping of cicadas, when the sirocco crept in from the sea along the zigzagging course of the stream and set the valley on fire. The animals of the countryside were my friends. So I spent my time daydreaming. I made a world of my own starting from the figures that appeared to me against the background of the sky or among the branches of trees: wild animals that spoke, knights that I lined up on the edge of the Rocca Salvatesta and then with my magical powers I made them fall, I watched them annihilated by fear. Then I transformed the Rock into a dragon that suddenly detached itself from the mountain and flying high sowed terror throughout the countryside. I transformed the clouds, which became flying boats and I traveled in the sky thinking of going beyond the distant sea, where my mother and sisters awaited me. Crabs that came out of the stream water and swelled up to transform themselves into gigantic animals which, advancing in

the stream, also uprooted the plants.

Sometimes I recalled the unpleasant face of my aunt Antonia. She didn't love me, she didn't love me and I hated her: my mother had entrusted me to her sister but she had also promised me that one day she would come and get me: this is why I often climbed trees, scanned the horizon, hoping to see her arrive on the back of a white horse with my father. In the nearby hamlets of San Basilio and Vallancazza the men had all gone away. Only women, children and some old people remained. They were silent villages that life barely touched. Time had stopped and people believed that everything would change, that one day, when the war was over, civilization would make its triumphal entry into that swarm of scattered, dead, rickety houses. I would have liked to have friends, to know that I was not alone and abandoned, to be able to be protected, to know that I could take refuge in this or that's house. I didn't even have the right to say that I was without a family, that my parents were far away on the opposite side of the sea, beyond that endless blue, that between me and them there was like a high and impassable mountain. Instead I was forced to live with my aunt who abused me. When I thought about it and saw her appear, she annoyed me with that harsh, brutal voice. A voice made to shout, to yell, insult and prevaricate.

Even animals were afraid of his voice. Only with her husband did she lower her crest and the volume of her voice changed completely, turning into the bleating of a sheep. My aunt thought that a little girl couldn't understand what was happening around her. Not only did I understand everything, but, moreover, I did not remain silent or passive. It was a constant fight. An endless and exhausting struggle. Every now and then I thought about the future: she was old and helpless, I was young and strong, but

despite everything I wouldn't have treated her badly, it wasn't part of my nature.

Sometimes I approached the river where I found people who went to wash clothes, to do the liscia, that is, they washed the sheets and blankets, first soaking everything in ashes. Or when, after the shearing period, they came to wash the sheep's wool and dried it in the sun to whiten it and then use it to stuff the bed mattresses. I went to collect the flakes that remained among the stones of the shore and with them I dressed my rag doll. When I didn't know what to do, I began to lift the stones on the bank of the stream in search of the prawns, with mastery I hooked them with my fingers above my head, to prevent them from pinching my fingers with their claws. I took them home and in the evening when my aunt lit the fire I roasted them and ate them: for me it was a special dinner. Sometimes instead of crabs, as soon as the stone was lifted, little terrified frogs would jump upwards, with a vertical jump, making me jump with fear. I thought they were my playmates and sometimes I even felt sorry for having to leave them alone in the dark for the whole night. When I had to go home in the evening, I called out loud to Uncle Michele, taking advantage of the echo that was created in the valley. Sometimes in the summer when there was the Scardino family who lived in a house further up the valley, I would visit them. I played with Mimma who was the youngest of the brothers.

Pippo used to build chairs and tables for the dolls. How nice it was to spend a few hours together. In the morning they called me when they went to the other side of the river to get milk. They had the bucket to fill, "Concettina" was content to see him milked. The mistress of the cows, Micca a Cappellea took pity and offered me half a glass. In my aunt's house we saw the milk twice a year: when she made the biscuits and at Easter when she prepared

the doves with the colored ring egg. When the milk boiled, I skimmed it to the last. In the room of the country house there was the bed of the uncles, if it could be called a bed, with the boards placed on two iron trestles with a straw mattress, since the horsehair one they had left in Novara. I had to sleep on a pallet with only an old military blanket, greasy and frayed. I went to bed in a canvas shirt that I wore even during the day without panties. It is not possible to describe the cold I felt every night. When it rained it was necessary to arrange containers that served to collect the water that penetrated from the roof. If I needed to pee at night, I had to leave the house and do it near the step. If I didn't realize it, because I was dreaming, and I was doing it in a straw mattress, in the morning I would also take a heap of barrels. Aunt Antonia also went to sleep in the same shirt she wore during the day, while Uncle Michele crouched down like his mother had done.

The sleeping ceremony took place according to the usual ritual: first I went to bed, then it was the turn of the aunt, then the uncle took off his trousers and striped canvas knickers. With the rather baggy shirt he wore during the day, he walked towards the bed, turned off the kerosene lamp placed on a table against the wall. I, who was mischievous, pretended not to look and peeked anyway: when she stooped to put out the flame I saw projected on the wall, like a Chinese shadow, her silhouette with the dangling din-don. - Oh how cool! he said, because all the wine he had drunk made him so hot. Next to their bed there were two headsets, i.e. two large cane baskets where they kept the dried figs. They covered them with dirty, greasy rags, and over these were their uncle's clean knickers. In a chest near my bed they kept bread and a scarf that they wrapped around my head when I went to school in the winter, my underwear and my aunt's. I only

used them on Sundays when we went to mass in Novara. The uncles said that we shouldn't put them in the countryside because we would have used them up in vain.

In January they killed the pig. They made some sausages and salted the lard. Boiled feet were kept in an earthenware pot immersed in lard. They were usually eaten in May with fresh broad beans because traditionally they could not be eaten earlier. Once, it was April, I asked my aunt for some because I was very hungry and didn't know what to eat with bread. My aunt started yelling that I was crazy. One day as I was returning from school, along the mule track I met Ofelia with her sister. They had lost their mother and had returned with their father from France.

They were much paler than me, I took pity on them and told them: come in where I live, at this hour my aunt is out getting water, in the oven there is a pot with food, take it, feed yourself but then don't say anything to no one.- They thanked me and, driven by hunger, followed my advice without hesitation. In May, when my uncles had cooked the broad beans, they went to get the pig's feet and instead found only the pot with the lard: naturally thinking it was me, they raged against me for many days to make me pay. That time I felt very proud because for the first time I had the pleasant sensation of having won a great battle against their greed. Due to the lack of hygiene, fleas reigned undisturbed throughout the house. At night they pricked my neck and my aunt anointed me with olive oil every night to stop the fleas from sucking my blood. In the morning my neck looked painted on. Like my aunt, I too had lice, not having gotten used to washing my head. On the other hand, my aunt made curls in my hair and to keep it in place she anointed it with water and sugar.

My classmates, on the other hand, were always clean. Not even the poorest of them was as dirty as me. The teacher also

contributed to the work of marginalization, by throwing me away from everyone in the back row. My body was indescribably filthy. They washed me in the river once a year, on the occasion of the Ferragosto festival, the most important in the town. Once when I was thinking about my mother, I was about seven years old, I fell into the hot ashes of the brazier. I burned my right hand and my aunt didn't take me to the doctor, but she treated me with herbs every day. I had two bubbles similar to two pigeon eggs, I cried out in pain but she never moved. I looked like it was being eaten by mice.

I healed by a miracle after a couple of months and I still keep the sign. During the school period, while I was on the balcony one Sunday, a little girl who was coming down asked me if I wanted to go with her to a catechism lesson with Signorina Vincenzina. I didn't know what it was because my aunt only took me to mass on the occasion of the most important holidays, I didn't understand what it meant to go to church. Opposite our house lived a priest, Father Buemi, but I met him very few times and looked at him reluctantly. My aunt kept repeating to me ad nauseam: 'If you talk to him that priest will cut out your tongue.' However I asked and unexpectedly obtained permission to take catechism lessons. I immediately found myself at ease in that environment. The young lady gave me a booklet and a magazine. I felt immense joy hearing about Jesus. One day he told me that he would prepare me for First Communion. I spoke about it at home and they told me I was still too young. I replied, lying, that all the girls in the group would do it. In reality they were already confirmed, however the young lady and I agreed and fixed the date with the priest of San Nicola: the day of Corpus Christi.

The problem of the white dress arose, but someone informed the aunt that the nuns rented it. The long-awaited day came: in

the morning he accompanied me to church fasting. She assumed that there were the other girls because she had never taken the initiative to get in touch with the catechism lady. Realizing that I was alone, she insulted me: - Liar, rude -. My teacher was also at mass that morning with other people. Some women present calmed her down. The priest arrived and taking me by the hand he took me to the sacristy for confession. He spoke beautiful words to me that I had never heard before. I felt like I was flying to Heaven and I said to myself: - It's not true that priests cut out their tongues, on the contrary they know how to understand the suffering of a little girl -. If I could I would have hugged and kissed him with joy.

He made me recite five Hail Marys in penance and I returned to my seat. Immediately my aunt asked me what I had told the priest for staying there so long, and I: - The young lady taught me that confession is secret -. - Yes, but you have to tell me the first time - insisted the harpy. No way. There was Mass, Communion, and when I left they forced me to kiss my uncle's hand and say: - Please bless me -. I started with my grandfather, always the same sentence, then I went around all the relatives. Aunt Gaetana gave me a booklet. I was hungry, but no one offered me food. Usually, after the ceremony, it was customary to go to the bar to get the granita with biscuits, but they were taken by the mania for saving: at noon we ate a plate of pasta and in the afternoon we went to the photographer because the relatives suggested sending a photo of mom.



I had finished the second class and passed with very low grades. That year you had to stay in the country all summer. I objected: - At least on Sundays I have to go to mass and see my grandfather who is alone -. He was a very good man, suffering from asthma. His daughter neglected him, partly out of negligence, partly because she was conditioned by her husband, who was always angry with his neighbours, relatives and father-in-law.

I took the laundry to be washed and secretly brought it to the aunt from Micherillo otherwise there would be trouble. He didn't even feel love for his father: one day a half-sister of his came to Castrangia to report that he was dead. "If you don't leave, I'll take you a cauci to curo (kick your butt)" he told her.

When there was a party in the village, the members of the musical band were offered the "pezzo duro", an ice cream so called due to its particular consistency. Uncle Michele, it was never understood whether it was because he didn't like it or because he was driven to an unusual gesture of generosity.



Seeing me pass, he called me: "Concettina, come and get some ice cream". And so I took the opportunity to enjoy something good on those rare occasions.

Some time ago Dr. Cosentino di Baceno reminded me of a detail that had been lost in my memory. While the band played through the streets of the town, the kids tried to join the parade. But in order to justify their presence, it was necessary to "know" a component. To prove it he was holding a hand in his jacket pocket. In this way I followed my uncle Michele, while Gianni Cosentino, son of an elementary school teacher and fatherless, kept his hand in the pocket of the ringleader.

In the middle of the war, a few bombs began to fall in Novara. Everyone ran away and some acquaintances took refuge in Castrangia with us. For me it was a party because I could be in company. From time to time you could hear the whistle of shrapnel. The tragic news also arrived of the son of the owner of the pastry shop Orlando being torn apart by a bomb. The mother in Domodossola, pregnant for the fourth time, was left alone with Rosa and Antonietta. My dad had been called back to Sicily to be a bersagliere. A few months after his departure, he learned that his mother had given birth to a girl named Emma and that he had the possibility of returning home as he was expected to be exempted with four children.

Unfortunately, when he arrived in Domodossola he found a bitter surprise: Emma had ceased to live after 12 days. Two days later he had to return to the front. A few months later - it was the period of uncertainty and instability following 8 September - he managed to escape military service and returned to Novara waiting for the war to end to join his mother. He opened a small shoemaker's shop. Every day I went to see him. Shy but shrewd

for my age, I had the intuition that papa was going to sleep with a married woman but with a military husband. One day I entered the box office on the slope of Piazza Bertolami. The person next door was chatting with Dad. I pounced with index and middle fingers pointed to gouge out the eyes of my father who was cheating on my mother. The neighbor managed to hold me back, while my dad with a smile told me "Mind your business". In 1944 a brown child was born, curly like him...

In Badiavecchia the paternal grandfather fell ill with stomach cancer. I obtained permission from the aunt to go and see him. I often came down from Castrangia and walked along the stretch along the river. I remember him in bed, serene. Grandma was still busy with the shop and could spend little time on it. She put an olive branch in his hand to chase away the flies, but he got worse and no longer had the strength and I chased them away. On November 2, 1944 at the age of 66 he flew to Heaven. Dad was still in Sicily. The uncles also attended the funeral.

Every now and then I received some letter from my mother. In 1945 my father returned to Domodossola and in 1946 my brother Giuseppe was born.

## Fourth chapter - Oil, cobwebs and the evil eye



War was raging all over the world, communications were difficult, and we never heard from Mom again. Luckily, my father had been recalled to Sicily to join the Bersaglieri corps and when he had a few days of freedom he came to see me. Because of the war there were many people in the countryside. The displaced people usually stayed for a fortnight, but then the town was in danger of bombing and they preferred to stay in the countryside all year round.

Every now and then I took refuge with those people. There was a family with four children who were always in a good mood despite their lack of food. I saw the greed of my uncles who owned so many dried figs and gave none to anyone: I took a good handful and secretly brought them to him. Some of the beans they gave me for breakfast I saved for them. Even hard bread: a slice that my aunt put in my pocket before going to school I shared it with those children and in return they gave me a few sheets to write on, they made me play on the swing and one of them built the toys, chairs and beds for dolls that she destined for me and her little sister, while her older sister made

rag dolls for us.

It sometimes happened that I went down to the river, where the women of the neighborhood went to wash their clothes with ashes, and I stood and marveled at the fire lit to heat the water in a container held up with two large stones. I never saw my aunt do these operations. He hardly ever washed or went to the river when no one was around so as not to show off his greasy and very dirty clothes.

Other times I observed the women who for two or three days spread the linen cloth woven at home on the stones. They wet it and let it dry under the scorching sun until it turned white. My aunt always called me at home but I pretended not to hear. In wartime, the daughter-in-law had also returned from Turin with a baby girl. Out of respect for Salvatore, her stepson, she was treated like a queen. During that time they stayed in the village and for the occasion the aunt brought out the perfumed soap, linen towels, dish dryer, tablecloth and napkins to make a good impression. Instead I was treated like a servant girl, being sent to run errands and get water from the fountain, because sending a guest was a disgrace.

Christmas came and, according to northern custom, in the morning the bride found a beautiful gift from the Child Jesus to her daughter: a beautiful set of pots and saucers for a doll. I rejoiced for her, but at the same time I was bursting with anger having never had those things happen to me. I was getting weaker and weaker. There were grapes but woe to eat them: you had to squeeze them for the wine. You could only eat the one stolen from the neighbors. The hazelnuts were collected but to sell them. I ate some secretly like the squirrels in the woods. My uncles bought milk only at Christmas and Easter to make biscuits and I skimmed it with a spoon while it boiled. Rarely did my aunt

prepare fried egg for me. I often hoped she'd fry it for me: 'Let's put it away like this when we have some and the hen passes (he was a young man from Messina who went around the countryside collecting eggs, passing them off as fresh) we'll sell them and get the money.' He collected the eggs for two months and then sold them.

Those from Messina who bought the eggs probably found themselves holding a chick. The figs had to be sipped, only a few could be eaten, the others were left to dry in the sun to sell or keep for the winter. In the month of October, beautiful chestnuts were held in the evening. If there was a few peeled ones left over, my uncle left them on the table in the small room (not on the plate but on the mat greasy with oil dripping from the lamp) and in the morning, when he got up at four to go to work, he woke me up and handing me the chestnuts he said: "You have breakfast". I obeyed and ate them out of hunger, but they tasted of oil and inevitably gave me a stomach ache. The uncle boasted around: - I love my niece, I even prepare her chestnuts when it's still late at night -. Actually my uncle had hate in his eyes. Sometimes they were yellow, fiery red when he was angry: though small, those eyes invaded his face. They were small and deep like narrow holes from which hatred escapes. Meanwhile dysentery and worms triumphed. My aunt gave me a teaspoon of petroleum every now and then. This keeps the worms away, she mumbled to convince herself... then she began with the "prichentu": - Mazzai un vermu gruossu quennu ìa pagana, ùa u mazzu chi sugnu all Christian. O luridì sentu, o tuesday sentu, o mercuridì sentu, o giuidì sentu, o vinardì sentu, o sabutu sentu, matteia du jurnu di Pasqua u viermu sturdudu a tierra casca.-

(I killed a fat worm when I was a pagan and now I kill it as a Christian. On Holy Monday, on Holy Tuesday, on Holy Wednesday, on Holy Thursday,

on Good Friday, on Holy Saturday, on the morning of Easter day the stunned worm falls to the ground).

I don't know how I was able to survive.

Here we open a parenthesis.

After many years the stomach ache gripped me. I used to go for x-rays with machines the size of a room. They gave me some white pap to see if there was any ulcer. Unfortunately you couldn't see anything. The radiologist said it was gastritis and gave me some palliatives to ease the pain. I've gotten to the point where I can't stomach a spoonful of water. I was about fifty. Paolo, a friend of Armando di Piacenza, proposed to take me to a specialist. He too came to Dr. Mazzeo. The gastroscopy instrument couldn't get past the throat. "I don't know how to save this woman," said the doctor, "the pylorus is closed." All the people who did the gastroscopy walked out of the room on their own legs. Me on a stretcher with an IV. The doctor prescribed me a strong cure for two months. When I returned the instrument was still not going through. Another cure even stronger for three months.

Five months after the first visit the instrument began to break through the pylorus. "Miracle!" said Doctor Mazzeo. Once the tube was removed, he asked me many questions to understand if it was something congenital or caused. I started crying: "Maybe it's the petroleum that Zizi used to give me every now and then for the worms." The doctor put his hands in his hair: "Oil? And you're still alive!". Continuing the treatments, every now and then I repeated the gastroscopy.

Thanks to Dr. Mazzeo who saved my life, now after many years I can enjoy food with just some containment medicine.

When someone called her from the balcony, her aunt kept her head spinning. They then advised her to take a small glass of ferroquine on an empty stomach. She convinced her husband to buy it and in the morning he gave me a glass too.

In that house, moreover, superstition also reigned. The uncle always had a headache from the wine he swallowed, but according to him the cause was someone's evil eye. His wife had to beg him: she took a plate of water, poured some salt and a drop of oil and then began with the prichentu for the headache: - Oglu biridittu, ogliu santissimu, trasi ta sta casa e scaccia stu marocchiu, ogliu biriditto get out and drive away this mammucca... (Blessed oil, holy oil, enter this house and drive away this evil eye, blessed oil, make yourself strong and drive away this devil...).

This spot of blessed oil as it expanded away, according to their belief, the evil eye. A little later that water was sprinkled on the four corners of the room and his headache went away.

To heal wounds, cobwebs were associated with oil, and a piece of meat to make broth. That horrific mixture was, they said, infallible! In the morning they gave me a glass of water with magnesia. After a while, all shivering, I had to go out into the cold to free myself. When I recovered they sent me to a woman who played magic tricks: with a thread she measured me from head to foot and with the same measure my horizontal arms. If a piece was missing it averted death for that year.

Even if in their own way the uncles had faith in God, in the Saints, in the Madonna. Every year on September 8 they went on foot to Tindari, to the sanctuary dedicated to the black Madonna about forty kilometers away from the town. From the age of five I had to do that penance.

On the occasion of pilgrimages to the Sanctuary of Tindari the day before, the aunt made the caps (slippers) of rags. Uncle punctually went hunting and brought home a wild rabbit or two to cook. To make a good impression, the aunt also prepared stuffed aubergines. She looked in the mirror and wiped her face with a cloth. At the time the song "Dove sta zazà, my beauty" was in vogue, from which I got into the habit of calling it "zizi".

We left for Tindari around eleven in the evening to arrive at dawn. Tired and exhausted due to my frailty, I asked many times for a little fresh water, but they didn't buy it from the stalls like all the other weary people: they queued up at the only fountain located near the church from which hot water gushed it did not help to appease the heat. According to tradition, they bought chickpeas, fava beans and cannelline beans, then went to mass, prayed the Madinuzza and on the way out they met the fellow villagers and my paternal relatives. At noon we went to eat under the surrounding olive trees. Too bad I was so tired, in fact that day there were always appetizing dishes to make a good impression in front of friends. Lunch included wild rabbit cooked in the oven, which my uncle invariably went to hunt a couple of nights before, stuffed aubergines and peppers, grapes and homemade biscuits. To get home, friends took a means: the car or horse-drawn carts. I watched, already resigned to walking again. Only if there was an uncle could I afford to go horse riding, otherwise it was pain.



## Chapter Five - The owls



Still on the subject of religion, my uncle being a member of a confraternity, they had the obligation to go to confession and communicate on Palm Sunday in the church of San Giorgio. The ceremony took place at five in the morning, the priest first confessing all the men in a chapel, then moving towards the confessional for the women.

When it was the turn of the aunt, who wore a thick black shawl, she carried the garment near the grate to cover herself as much as possible: it seemed she had to inhale chamomile tea. He confessed and then: - Now it's your turn - he said to me. Even if I wanted to make confession during the year, I couldn't. My aunt scolded me: - You mustn't make fun of the Lord, once a year is enough, otherwise you're not worthy of taking the wafer because you can sin even with your eyes -.

Around nine o'clock Holy Mass, communion and immediately home. As usual, for futile reasons, her uncle began to curse, she developed a nervous cough. Indescribable scenes happened: if that day for some reason one had the need, he could not spit, otherwise he would throw the Lord out of his mouth. If by misfortune it happened, he would take the lid of the pitcher, spit in it and drink the liquid again with water and sugar. For Holy

Week, people stayed in the village even at night to attend the evening sermons given by the monk. On Thursdays doves were prepared, a biscuit dough in various shapes with hard-boiled eggs boiled with water and ring, a toxic coloring ingredient. On Good Friday in the morning, fasting, all the churches adorned with wheat sprouts were visited, then three nephew leaves were swallowed (medicinal herb with a very intense scent) which guaranteed well-being for the whole year.

You didn't have to work during the day to avoid hurting Jesus Crucified, if you sewed the needle would prick, if you saw there was the risk of hurting your body, and so on. For that day, whatever I did, I didn't even get hit, otherwise Jesus would cry. At eleven on Saturday there was the mass of peace and resurrection. All the children brought the doves to receive the priest's blessing and then eat it. I have never been able to take away that satisfaction because I had to keep my dove with two eggs for the school trip that was organized on the Tuesday after Easter. I had to offer an egg to the teacher. On Easter day they bought me a marzipan lamb, the smallest one so as not to spend too much. The uncle was stingy enough to shine his shoes with the soot from the pan that formed on the fire. If the aunt knew that a job was finished and they were paying for it, she would recommend me: - Ask your uncle if he brought the money -.

She and I almost had to adore him like two slaves until he was moved and gave her ten lire and me five. I couldn't spend my money because it was destined for the piggy bank. Once I told my aunt that I wanted to play the lottery. She agreed because she hoped to win. Mine was a lie. In reality I also felt impaired in dressing compared to my companions: they had skirts, but my aunt didn't like them and I was forced to wear whole dresses. All wore white, brown or blue cotton knee-high socks, I had to make

do with her orange socks, which cost less than the others. I wore them above the knee supported by an elastic band, but the biggest problem is that, without a foot, they reached up to the ankle. Over it I wore a pair of short cuffed socks. I was already marginalized enough and I had to distinguish myself also for clothes. With the five lire I thought of buying myself a more decent pair of socks that I would wear in the morning before going to class. The shop was closed that day. I couldn't go home with the money because my aunt would have tracked it down. I thought of hiding them under a stone along the mule track. It rained at night and being paper they completely disintegrated, as I realized the next morning when I went to retrieve them.

Fifteen days went by and my aunt asked me if I had won the lottery. Even then I was not sincere and said yes. That money never came. On Good Friday, during the procession in honor of Our Lady of Sorrows, meeting the teacher, she asked for explanations. I was dying of shame. Naturally, she was unaware of everything, so I took two slaps from my aunt under her stern gaze. I always went to school willingly, but with poor results. Nobody understood me and I was always promoted thanks to recommendations, so my mother was calm that they always made me study. I was fine with just the cat, until one day the drunk uncle returned from the village with some tripe and the animal took a piece to feed itself. Taking a musket left by the soldiers, he killed him in the open countryside. For me it was a great disappointment.

At threshing time I would go and pick the grains of wheat and barley left on the neighbors' farmyard, put them in a bag and take them to Signora Tindara's mill on the river. I then brought the flour to Novara to my mother's cousin who, as a profession, being a widow with two small children, in the morning went to collect

wood in the woods and lit the oven to prepare bread for whoever brought her the flour, obtaining some money and a little of bread for the children.

In September, when the figs were ripe, I climbed the trees and collected the tasty fruits, depositing them in reed baskets hung from the branches with a hook. The figs were cut and left to dry in the sun on a canes. After a few days they became dry. Planted in large baskets, they were eaten in winter. In those good times, Signora Maria, a neighbor in the countryside, used to come to prepare dried figs. I often went to see her. She was the mother of many children. One of them, Carmelo, was epileptic. Sometimes it was no longer to be found. The worried mother went to look for him and I almost amused myself with her.

When I was in the fifth grade, the teacher had asked to inform the parents that she would take us to the cinema to see the film "The little alpine boy". The uncles: "You don't go to see that filth". The nephew of the priest opposite had heard: "You have to send her, I haven't seen it either." Then they were moved and I was able to go.

A package had arrived from mom with sweets. I had brought some to school. It was a time of famine and candy was also in short supply. My teacher's sister taught fourth grade while I was in fifth grade. She asked for candies for a poorer girl than me who was ill and I left them all for her.

In 1945 my father returned to Domodossola. I saw him again in April 1946 and with him was my mother who was expecting a baby.

I spent ten happy days with my parents. I often went to visit my grandparents and uncles, so I ate as much as I wanted and drank many sodas from my grandmother who sold them. In the end my mother wanted to take me with her to upper Italy, but my aunt,

always false and selfish, convinced her to leave me with her. I attended the fifth grade, always with difficulty given my fragility. In the days of the exam came the news of the birth of his little brother. All happy, but sorry at the same time I cried with joy and pain. Maybe for this reason the teacher promoted me even though she didn't open her mouth about the exams. That year they set up a gymnasium section in the village and almost all my companions had prepared for the entrance exams to access it. For me there were no possibilities: my uncles were convinced that only owls attended that kind of school. In fact, after finishing high school, one had to go to Messina for the masters. My parents had to take care of sending the money for the books, they wouldn't have done any shopping. I kept crying because I wanted to continue my studies. They then offered me the possibility of enrolling in the professional biennium, a kind of very poor middle school lasting two years. The poorest went there, in any case I accepted. Walking back and forth, morning and afternoon I attended the course. The school was mixed: the rowdiest boys raised their hands against the director who taught mathematics, they also tripped up the Italian and French teachers. Housework was taught to the girls and agricultural notions to the men. In reality, nothing was learned at all. My profit was good being shy and with a great thirst to learn.

Before the end of the school year the teachers had prepared us for a charity theater. I had to make an appearance dressed as a street urchin. The uncle's flat cap was there, the shorts were missing. When I told my aunt, she exclaimed: "You're nice to put up the bail." I didn't lose heart: I went to the barber's wife Liezza to ask to borrow her son's trousers. So on the evening of the recital I dressed as a street urchin, amid much applause and the desperation of my uncles, who were present in the audience for

the occasion.

Unfortunately those two years also passed and I finished school forever thinking that I had remained as ignorant as and more than before.

## Sixth Chapter - Please forgive me (Starlight)



I was twelve when in August my mother came to visit me with my father and little brother whom I saw for the first time. Seeing her little face made me happy and I remember that day as one of the best days of my life. My parents were determined to take me with them to get me back to school, but my aunt for the umpteenth time distracted them from the idea: she would have sent me to be a seamstress with the prospect of learning the trade well. And so it happened, against my will. My parents left and I stayed in Sicily like an idiot. Since then I had no more peace and I always cried secretly. My uncles said that my parents certainly wouldn't have loved me like they did, that they had raised me like a daughter (a daughter would certainly have gone through the same pains as me). One day my aunt went to the best seamstress in the town, where my mother had also learned the trade, to ask her if she would hire me. The seamstress replied that she already had eight girls and could not increase the number. The next day her aunt brought her some eggs to convince her and she said: - Come back in a month, perhaps one of the apprentices is leaving for Turin and there is

still a free place for your niece -. Punctual, after a month my aunt sent me to the laboratory. The young lady, who was no more than a meter and a half tall, welcomed me: - All right, I take you because I pity you, I guess you'd rather come to me than stay in the country with your aunt -. He wasn't entirely wrong to think so. The next day at eight I introduced myself. - Start sweeping the laboratory - he said to me - then you will wash the floor -. The story was starting to piss me off. I set about cleaning as best I could. I was small in stature, I was twelve, but I looked eight.

I didn't know how to wash the floor: in the countryside it was made of stone and in the village, where there were tiles, my aunt never washed them so as not to wear them out. I tried to do my best, but the seamstress called me a donkey because I hadn't washed well. At nine o'clock the workers arrived and began to take an interest in the new causita (little girl). They all looked at me pityingly. I heard their speeches and fell from the clouds not knowing the essentials of life. Every now and then they gave me some little work as a seamstress, things I didn't do willingly, always embittered at not having been able to study. There was a positive side to the day: at noon, not having to go back to the countryside, I ate quietly at home, spread a napkin on the table, arranged the glass, the bottle of water and a plate. In short, to eat a piece of hard bread and cheese I enjoyed setting the table like all ordinary people. After lunch I went to a neighbor who was nine years older than me and was a seamstress. She helped open my eyes to my naivete. With her lived her mother, a sister with elephant legs and another invalid.

Sometimes they invited me to have a bowl of soup. The seamstress asked me to help her cross-stitch baby clothes. Once I had a fit of sadness and quit work halfway through. Another time, out of spite, I took the ashes from the brazier and scattered



them along the stairs. They said: "Who eve paccia? Did I catch a disease?". Eventually they understood me and forgave me.

Sometimes I went up to the nuns of the Antoniano orphanage to play with the orphan girls. I envied them a little because they lived their days in order. They ate with the table always well set, then they played and finally at set times they dedicated themselves to the devotion of God by praying. I thought: - They're lucky, they no longer have parents and yet they live well with the nuns, while I have parents but I'm forced to live with these bearish uncles -. Unbeknownst to them, to avoid a subsequent tedious interrogation, I occasionally went to visit a paternal aunt who lived in the village. I asked her for money to send a letter to her parents begging them to take me with them.

In November of each year they took me to the Sant'Ugo fair which took place in Piano Vigna. In this locality the paternal grandparents set up a shed where they prepared grilled meat and sausages which they sold together with a good glass of wine. For me it was an opportunity to be together with my paternal relatives, enjoy good meat and drink a colored soda, look at the stalls selling braziers, lanterns, earthenware pots, quartare and bumbaelli.

The next day we went again to Badia Vecchia for the feast of Sant'Ugo, a mass, a small procession and after that in the shop of my grandparents who offered me sausage, bread and soda, this one tapped from a closed bottle with a ball in the indoor.

Once before Christmas we went to Messina for 3 days. We slept with a relative. I didn't like her a bit: she used to tell her uncles that she stole eggs from a peasant woman at the market, distracting her. I had learned in catechism that one shouldn't steal. With the daughter in the evening we went to a gentleman who built figurines. To be generous, my uncles gave me money

to buy them. On the anointed table of Castrangia I was able to build a crib. With asparagus branches and some cotton flakes I formed a hut. In the evening I enjoyed the atmosphere of two candles created with walnut shells soaked in oil and a piece of string next to the Child Jesus. Uncle Michele also appreciated the idea and wanted to reward me: "Ntoia, peel two prickly pears", and my aunt went to get them under their bed where they were kept.

When I stopped to sleep alone in Novara, during the Christmas novena I went with my neighbor Antonietta to the function that was held at 5 in the morning in the Annunziata church. At the back of the church the sacristan provided the chairs for a fee. We brought them from home. On our way back we visited Carolina, the engineer's laundress, already at work early in the morning under the stairs. By that time she had already gone to draw water from the fountain of San Francesco with large quarts, to fill the wooden tub. He said: "Caùsi, wait here, I'm going to see if the gentlemen had any biscuits left over yesterday evening, so you can have breakfast". He almost never returned empty-handed. I invited Antonietta to come up and we lit the brazier. When Carolina couldn't find anything else to eat, I went to the kitchen to get a piece of hard bread and a glass of water from the "bumbaello". Until 8 we stopped to make doilies, then we said goodbye: I went to the workshop, Antonietta went to her house to help her mother being the only daughter with 8 siblings.

In Novara alone I felt like a citizen. When I went to visit grandfather Turi I cleaned the windows for him and he gave me "a srea" (a tip). I went to buy nail polish. I also bought the solvent to remove it when I sensed that I would meet my uncles. I used talcum powder as a face powder. Alas: one day I left it on my face and went through my troubles, slaps and insults. "Where did

you get the money for that crap?" And I: "Don't you see that it's flour?". Meanwhile, the neighbors had moved to another neighborhood. One day they invited me to go to the circus. "I have no money ...", I said. They lent them to me. In the afternoon, I went to the laboratory to enjoy the show: monkeys on the trapeze, children on horses, elephants, clowns, things never seen before. Unfortunately I had to get 8 lire.

A few days later, on my way to Castrangia, in San Salvatore I met the mother of a schoolmate with a bag full of vegetables bought from the farmers. He asked me if I could go back to the village (for the mentality of the time he felt ashamed to go to the square with the bag!). I agreed, thinking I'd scrape together some money with the tip. Unfortunately, having reached her house with difficulty, she rewarded me with four peanuts. I didn't lose heart. I got a lira by selling a doily to a lady from Fantina. I built cardboard Pinocchios with legs and arms moved by a string. Some kids bought them for pennies. Another idea: sunglasses for poor children. I was looking for transparent colored candy wrappers in front of the bars. With sugar paper I cut out the frame and I was able to recover other cents. After two months I managed to return the 8 lire.

Despite his advanced age, the grandfather had asthma and a hernia that he had been carrying since the age of five, he tried to distract himself in the countryside, since his daughter almost never went to visit him. He was fine for the two summer months when his daughter-in-law arrived from Messina: she washed his linen and ransacked the house to clean it of everything that had accumulated during the year.

When we met she would say to me: 'Your aunt is shameful, you can't make a poor old man suffer like this in filth.' In the evening I went to report, but the aunt criticized her sister-in-law: - She's a

citizen, she can think for herself what she wants -. And I retorted: "You're right, I've seen the cleaning you do: you've even washed the urinal with acid and it's shiny again". At this point he slapped me because we shouldn't talk about these things and I was disgusting.

One day my grandfather gave me some money and I bought a songbook that the girls in the workshop were talking about. For some time I managed to hide it, but one evening I didn't have time and my uncle, realizing it, began to curse: "Even this nasty rubbish, now you're becoming a bully." At those words I tore it in his face before he did. In the face of my rebellion he saw no more, he pulled down the waistband of his trousers and began to beat me violently. I was about thirteen and it was the only time he said to his wife: "I heard that a lady is leaving for northern Italy, to accompany your niece to the village and send her with her to her parents." At that moment I felt happy, I also forgot the pains of the beatings I had taken, then I went and sat down on the grass thoughtfully. Darkness was beginning to fall, I thought, as the shadows of the night infiltrated the branches of the trees and a light cold wind came up from the river.

I leaned against a walnut tree and fell asleep looking at the clouds. I dreamed a lot, a swarm of colorful dreams. A light breeze caressed my face. I opened my eyes and strangely loved that place that I had always hated and I realized for the first time with astonishment that it was illuminated only by the light of the stars. I let myself go in this state of abandonment, I dreamed again. Happiness like a mysterious fluid entered my little being drop by drop. I was not a sweet little girl. My feet were wrinkled from having walked on the sharp pebbles of the stream, but my whole body, and even my soul, were by now accustomed to loathing anything that could seem sweet and tender. But I

confess that that brief sleep that evening was wonderful and I have never found it again. Maybe that's why I still remember it. Suddenly a hand rested on my shoulder, Aunt Antonia arrived and in her own way abruptly roused me: "Let's go home. When we get there, you will kiss your uncle's hand and tell him - Please forgive me -". And so it was.

That evening I lay down trembling, couldn't sleep at night, and spent the hours in spasmodic anticipation of the day. If I slipped into sleep without realizing it, I would suddenly start as if by a call or a jolt of conscience, which demanded me awake and in pain and would not allow me any respite. I spent the rest of the time with my eyes open scrutinizing the monsters that the darkness of the night drew on the walls and, without having the strength to do anything, I cried and cried. But it wasn't a sad cry, it was something else I couldn't hear. The next day I didn't go to the lab because my body looked like a map, it was so bruised. I only went back after a week when the marks started to fade.

## Chapter Seven - Emilia



On Sunday afternoon I went to the orphanage with some friends: a nun explained the Gospel to us in a nice way with some relevant jokes. What a joy to spend that hour in joy. One day he told us that in October the Bishop of Messina would arrive for Confirmations.

- Raise your hand if you want this sacrament so I can communicate it to the archpriest Monsignor Salvatore Abbadessa. - Not knowing what to do, I timidly raised my hand. A few days later I told zizi. She was embarrassed: she had to look for a godmother. I proposed the postman's daughter, Miss Rina, a young teacher. How can we ask him? The next day we went to her house and she agreed. On October 9, 1948 in the afternoon I went with my friends to the Mother Church to confess. The following day I went to the godmother's house in the morning and she gave me a filigree bracelet intertwined with little hearts. I began to rejoice. At 11 we went to church. The bishop arrived and began to celebrate Holy Mass. In the intermission we lined up in the central nave and one by one he confirmed us. After Mass, the uncles did not even offer the godmother a coffee. They just greeted her by simply calling her "commare".

I remember that as a child when returning from Castrangia

before arriving in the village there was a chapel dedicated to the Savior. The zizi would stop for a moment and say aloud "oh mothers, oh mothers...". I thought it was a prayer. When I got older I realized that instead she called her deceased mother, as the cemetery is located just above the chapel. I had never visited the cemetery because zizi didn't even go for the feast of the saints. I knew that on that occasion people bought flowers from Signorina Signorino in a place called "Fussadello" and almost in procession they went to decorate the tombs of their loved ones. Once I proposed to zizi: "Why don't we go and visit your mother's grave too?"

She replied that she would be sorry. - It's useless to invoke "mothers - mothers" if you don't want to bring her even a flower. - At these words he was almost moved. We went to Fussadello to buy some chrysanthemums. On All Saints' Day I went to call grandfather Turi to take us to the grave of "mothers", for me grandmother Rosa. Grandpa had recently had that grave rebuilt because in wartime the only bomb dropped in the cemetery had destroyed it.

Although proud of having won another battle, my thoughts went day and night to my parents. I tried to distract myself when I was in the lab. I began to enjoy sewing: I prepared the wadding for the shoulder pads, I blew on the charcoal iron. When the iron was hot the big girls ironed the pieces to make clothes. To keep it taut it was customary to put lead weights sewn between two tapes on the edge. I used to buy them from my godfather who sold material for rifles. They were pellets that I had to flatten with a hammer. Sometimes I even flatten my fingers... Meanwhile Mrs. Orlando held paid cutting courses for older girls. I was sitting far away but straining my ears to understand something from the lessons. Once the uncles said that we would go to Fantina to find

the "commare" and the "compare", those who, when they came to Novara for important errands, slept with us. Once the godmother asked zizì "How old are you?" And zizì: - Mi orbu da vista i l'occhi, nun mi riguordo - (if I lacked my sight, I don't remember).

With grandfather Turi's tip I went to buy a piece of green fabric, to test my ability I made a skirt. The day of departure for Fantina arrived (two hours of walking). We got up at 4. I wanted to surprise Zizì by putting on my skirt. It was so narrow that I could hardly walk. When they saw my creation they began to say: - We raised it and now that it's starting to grow up, it's a coquette. It makes us feel ashamed. And I pointed out: "I won't- take this one off, if you want it is like this, otherwise, you go!" But in my heart I thought "how can I walk in such a tight skirt...". We arrived at our destination anyway. The commare asked where I had had such a beautiful skirt made. - Sa figi illa - (she did it) said zizì. - So when we have to sew something we come to her -. Owl's pride...

Sometimes in the village I saw things that saddened me. Emilia was a deaf-mute, perhaps homeless. Most days he passed by the street where I lived. If he met someone he put his hand to his mouth. Sometimes people offered her a piece of bread, but there were those who unscrupulously gave her crusts of cheese and then hid to see the reaction: the poor thing sat on the step of a door and banged her head against the wall. One day going to the shop to get some thread I heard the loud voice of Antonio, the blind man. From the abbey, located at the top of the town, he announced that the sardines had arrived. With a few lire from my grandfather's tip that I had left over, I went to the fishmonger's to buy a couple of ounces. At noon I lit the stove with charcoal, cooked the sardines and put them in a piece of sugar paper. When I saw Emilia go by, I gave them to her. She looked at them



in amazement and smiled a little to thank me. I saw her sitting in the usual doorway, not banging her head against the wall, but putting her thin fingers to her mouth. I didn't eat that day: I had to clean the remaining embers off the stove so as not to let my uncles understand my initiatives.

Angela passed along that road around noon with her son Nino, a disabled person who walked but spoke with gestures. They went with a bucket to get soup at the orphanage. One day Nino was alone with his bucket, near my house two boys undressed him and ran away. He wasn't able to pull up his pants. He was without underwear. I timidly went down to dress him. It was the first time I saw a naked man. Woe if the uncles had known, it would have been a scandal.

In one of the many letters sent to my parents I had expressed the desire for a wrist watch. Knowing that Signora Agostina had come from Domodossola, I went to see her. As soon as he saw me he hugged me and gave me a package sent by my parents. I opened it and to my surprise I found a brown lamb fur with finger-sized curls, a felt hat and a box with a watch. I was shaking with joy as the lady adjusted it on my wrist. He gave me a glass of water to recover and ran home. The next day, when my uncles came to Novara, they said that if I wore that fur coat they'd think I was crazy: no one in the town owned anything like that. However, I wore it with pride. I pulled back my sleeve to let everyone notice the watch. I often gave it rope, so in a short time it broke. On my way to Castrangia, I met some elderly people who asked me the time. In order not to make a bad impression, I looked at the now irreparably broken clock and said that I had forgotten to wind it. - Thank you yourself -. They greeted me and continued on their way.

Compared to my friends I was small and thin, they were all

"developed". In a letter, my mother asked zizì if I was "developed" like my sister Rosa. But for Zizì to talk about these things was taboo. He didn't know that I knew everything about life. Rebellious as always, I told her "I'm not 'Miss' because I'm undernourished". And she: - What are you saying? We have always supported you. One evening I was sleeping in Castrangia and I felt bad. I was in a cold sweat. Thinking it was the end, I prayed, cried and went out in the dark to pee a few drops. And they: "If you get up again I'll hit you!". Maybe the Madonna del Tindari protected me. I went back to the straw bed and fell asleep. The next day at the laboratory in Novara, Signorina Assunta saw me paler than usual. When the waitress brought her coffee and milk with toasted slices as she does every morning, she offered me some too.

## Chapter eight - The flight of the swallows



Spending a lot of time in Novara, life seemed to me to have changed: perhaps because I went to visit grandfather Turi and I gladly chatted with him continuously for entire afternoons. He told me many stories of his life and how difficult his existence had once been. Furthermore, living in Novara I had the opportunity to witness the important events taking place in the town. Above all the great religious functions, the processions, the baptisms, the confirmations, but more than anything else the wedding ceremonies, moved me. Back then weddings were celebrated in the evening, I almost always went to browse with my friends in the church of San Nicola.

One evening I saw a bride in a white dress go out accompanied by her father. White as snow, she looked like a doll, she was so beautiful! It was Carmelina who married Filippo. I identified myself entirely and daydreamed: "who knows, one day it could be my turn too...".

In those days I had strange sensations, there was something new and strange in the air, I had premonitions. I was restless and waiting for an extraordinary event to happen. And indeed the event was not long in coming. Around noon the postman usually came by. One day in the month of June I hear his ranting voice: "Campo, there's mail". I took the letter, it came from ... Domodossola! Mother wrote to her sister.

I opened it abruptly until I almost ripped it off and read it, there was the news I'd been waiting for a lifetime: around 12 September my mother would come to Sicily to pick me up and take me north! By now I was a young lady, the future awaited me and I had to find a job. Knowing the reaction my aunt would have had, out of prudence I hid the letter in the bottom of a jar which contained a sea of junk: if zizì had read it poor me... Sometimes Uncle Micherillo came to the shop when he wasn't working in the hamlets in Novara. Sometimes he would come along with zizì and, alarmed, he would say: "It's been a while since your mum wrote, something must have happened to her...". I, on the other hand, was afraid that another letter would arrive with some hints. One day, in fact, one arrived, but fortunately without any allusion to the trip to Sicily. Summer slipped away slowly for me, I couldn't wait for that spasmodic wait to end. Work helped me stop thinking and pass the time that separated me from my mother's arrival. For the Feast of the Assumption on August 15, all the people wanted to show off their elegance and in the laboratory there was always a lot to do, more than usual: many ladies wanted to show off their new dress. August 13 was dedicated to female workers who could sew their own clothes.

I had asked zizì to buy the stuff to be on a par with friends. She agreed and I chose a cheap beige fabric with blue knot designs. The young lady in the workshop cut it for me and commissioned

an elderly worker to help me sew it. On the day of the party I had a new dress like everyone else.

There were also some acquaintances who had come from Fantina. One of them had seen my famous tight skirt. He brought a piece of fabric and asked zizi: "Your niece has to make me a dress, she's so good!". I took her measurements. I had in mind a model that Signorina Assunta had made for a client. I asked for some time to cut it and try it. "Okay, the fabric is a bit heavy, suitable for autumn. I will come around September 20th."

Meanwhile Carmelina, a girl from the workshop, invited all her friends to her wedding, celebrated one September evening in the church of the Matrice. With zizi's permission, I went to the ceremony. Among the guests there was also a lady from Domodossola who announced her imminent departure: "Concettina, your days are numbered in Novara. Your mum will come to pick you up soon".

After the rich refreshments I returned home happy. Days went by and the feast of Tindari on 8 September arrived, that year the very long route that wound along the fiumara didn't seem at all as hard and infinite as the first time, I felt like I was flying. Back in Castrangia I informed zizi that I would be staying for a few days with the invented excuse that the laboratory would remain closed until the 12th. That morning my heart was pounding. We picked some figs to take to a neighbor and headed to Novara. Halfway there I saw my mother coming down the mule track from a distance. I ran to her and hugged her with all the strength I had in my little arms. Zizi began to shout, "Why did you come suddenly? Do you think you can take Concettina away with you?" "Yes - replied the mother - we leave in three days". "You can't, he has to prepare a dress for a lady from Fantina." It was another excuse to hold me back. He screamed all the time. I impassive was

touching the sky with a finger. My only regret would have been that I would no longer be able to visit grandfather Turi.

On the evening of the 14th we had dinner. Zizi only opened his mouth to insult my mum: "How courageous you take her away from me, you have no heart, you make me suffer too much, I no longer consider you a sister." I saw Michelillo for the first time with tears. Under its rough and hard shell like wood evidently a few drops of humanity had remained imprisoned. I, on the other hand, had become as cold as marble and I wasn't moved at all.

I didn't sleep a wink at night, thousands of thoughts chased each other chaotically in my mind and I couldn't wait for morning to arrive to leave. Mother had ordered the taxi from a gentleman nicknamed "cauzi i wolf" (wolf pants). At dawn we got up, a final touch to the cardboard suitcase and a greeting to the uncles. My aunt upon departure came out of her room in tears, with her hair loose, and threw herself at my mother's feet, pleading: "Now I will kill myself and you will have death on your conscience for the rest of your life! Please, you I ask on my knees - she said - I am but a poor woman, alone and treated like a beast by a false husband, no one loves me. My sister, I ask you not to take her away from me, have mercy, you have no right to leave me alone, she grew up with us like a flower and now no gratitude!"

With his hair disheveled and his face dripping with mud, he pounded the ground cursing the entire universe. My mother had understood that her sister had become dangerous and was losing her mind, freaking out. However, she didn't move, she didn't let herself be moved to pity, she was deaf to her ravings, she looked into the distance and waited for the end of her drama. When my aunt realized that my mother was adamant she rushed to her room denying us a last goodbye. Suddenly we left, she returned cursing in the street, as we walked away we saw her shrink until

she became a small black ball that blended with the stones. Perhaps I had been cruel to her, as only children know how to be, but I remember that as I was walking away from her house protected by my mother's hand, when I saw that she was about to disappear from my sight all my resentment suddenly turned into affection and I felt a feeling of compassion for her (I later learned that Zizì mourned me in the streets for a few months as if I were dead).

In Piazza Bertolami the doors of the taxi opened. From the window I greeted everyone I saw until the end of the country. During the journey, with a pang in my heart, I observed the landscape and the town slowly moving away from my gaze, we remained silent for a long time until I saw the sea. By now I was far from Novara, definitely! Opposing thoughts fought in my mind and I couldn't control them, then I woke up when my mother stroked me and warned me that we had arrived. Then I intensely loved that country that I had detested for so long because of that sad life I was leading. At the Vigliatore station there was great confusion, many like us were leaving for the north with their cardboard suitcases and other bags.

A thin wind came from the sea and I felt the saltiness that flavored my lips. A good feeling that I felt for the first time. We waited for the train for half an hour. For me it was new air. People sang the popular song "Professor, tell me which came first, the chicken or the egg." Everyone was returning from holidays on the continent. Arrived in Messina I saw with amazement the carriages get on the ferry-boat. It was mid-September and thousands of swallows were circling in that very blue sky above the strait. With their flight they were embroidering my dream: to finally return to live with my family. I tried to see God in the center of that bright background and, even if I didn't see him, I thanked

him from the bottom of my little soul. After countless hours we got off in Rome to take the train back to Milan, after more hours of waiting, where there was another train change for Domodossola. It was a dream. On that train, my mother greeted several people she knew. Everyone asked where she was from and who the girl was with her. They didn't know he had another daughter.

I observed the landscapes: I saw in amazement Lake Maggiore and the islands, then the mountains. I asked how long before arrival, knowing that the town was in a valley surrounded by mountains. We arrived in Domodossola in the late morning. The sky was gray, the streets also seemed to be painted dark, people walked with a determined step looking at the ground, even their clothes were dark. Dad was waiting for us at the station with my little brother whom I had seen in Sicily two years earlier. Kisses and hugs. On our way home I tried to discover that place which would soon become my city. I counted the windows of the houses but they were so numerous that I lost track of my calculations. There were too many windows, and too many houses on top of each other. They were so high that my eyes were lost in the sky.

I felt dizzy. Thousands of questions welled up in my head, eagerly coming and going. During the journey I could not utter a single word. Then at home I had another surprise when I saw my sisters, who I remembered only from photographs. Another surprise was the kitchen with sink, faucet and gas stove (in Novara there was no water in the house and cooking was done with wood). In the evening, comare Grazia came to visit us with her daughter Caterina. Even the neighbors wanted to meet me. The next evening Dad took me to the cinema. One of the best evenings of my life that I will always remember, until the last day. Finally I was with my dad, before I loved him as one loves an absent father, now I admired him and finally for the first time I felt



protected as if I were his princess. In short, it seemed to me that I was walking above the clouds, I had landed in another point of the universe.

## Chapter Nine - The Gate of Heaven



Before leaving Sicily, my mother had managed to find me a job at the furrier's and after two days she accompanied me to work. We left home early in the morning: I was very excited about this news.

At the entrance I was greeted by Miss Tilde who gave me a big smile and took me by the hand, a pleasant and nice woman. Tilde said to me in Milanese "Hello bela tusa (girl), come, let me introduce you to the girls who work with me: Nella and Teresina. They have a lot of experience, they will teach you how to work. If there are problems - she added - don't be ashamed to ask". So in the blink of an eye I was back with my new job.

I already felt grown up and to mark this change in the life of the bela tusa for the first time came the menstruation. She didn't know much about that subject, but from the stories she had heard from her older friends in Novara, she had understood that this was the way to turn into a young lady. She understood that she didn't need that signal to be a woman: she already was for

everything she had learned, known and loved. It was no longer a caterpillar and had undergone the metamorphosis into a butterfly. It came from far away and in a few minutes it passed from one world to another. She found herself alone and was very proud of it.

Meanwhile, I was beginning to get used to the new job. Back then, fur collars were used to apply to coats. The skins were wet with a sponge and finally nailed to a wooden plank by pulling them from all sides. It reminded me of when in the laboratory in Sicily I crushed the leads to put at the bottom of the clothes. Even here there was a few hammers on the fingers. If there was a little sun they were left to dry in the garden on the road, so I had to keep watch over the precious Persian lamb, fox, mink and rat-musqué skins. While I was tending them I liked to watch the cars and people go by. I even inhaled the exhaust fumes of the cars and tried to imbue myself with that scent of the city, so new and intoxicating for the little girl who grew up in pure air. The city passed before my gaze and I even lost track of time. My father explained to me that there the day was divided into hours, while when I lived in Castrangia I only knew the rising and setting of the sun. Sometimes while I was tending the hides an elderly lady from the upper floor would come and keep me company. He spoke in strict Piedmontese and I didn't understand a thing: "Che bela fiola, da ndua ti vegnat (where are you from)? Cuma ti se ciamat (what's your name)?" I molt. "Ti mi capisat mia (don't you understand)?" When the skins were dry, Signorina Tilde cut the shape of the collars for the seamstresses who ordered them.

Little by little I learned to put the frisellina stuffing, the passafino around it and then the lining. Thanks to my abilities, I began to get my weekly pocket money and soon I was up to date with pension marks. I felt bigger. There was a radio in the laboratory: I

enjoyed listening to the songs. At the time, refrigerators weren't widespread but the young lady had an icebox that she filled with blocks of ice supplied by a gentleman who passed with a cart through the streets of the town. For me, drinking such fresh water was a novelty. An inexpensive wood stove heated the house. He didn't have a telephone, but when he had to call clients he sent me to his aunt, who owned a construction company with several workers. Among these, coincidentally, I saw for the first time ... But this is another story that, if I have the time and desire, I will tell you later.

At home I ate well, in the evening we went out to visit the city center with its stone roofs and shops with beautiful shop windows. On Saturdays I went with my mother to the market, which occupies a good part of the centre, when I left work around noon. We bought the fabric to make me a coat. It was squared. I inaugurated it by preening at Midnight Mass at Christmas. In short, a happy life.

Carnival came. We attended with a family close to the party at the Galletti theater. It was a dream to see masquerade balls amidst plays of phosphorescent lights.

The following Saturday when I got up there was something wrong. I was crying because my mother hadn't given me the San Pellegrino magnesia. A cousin of his arrived from Martigny. He had lunch with us. In the afternoon I felt strange, it seemed that my happiness was ending. Dad accompanied the cousin to the train, then we had dinner.

We didn't go out for a walk that evening. Dad said to mom: "I'm going to visit friends at the bar." Around 10 pm he returned home moaning and panting with a pale face, petrified by a strong pain in his chest. "Teresa, prepare me a camomile tea". While dad gasped on the bed, I ran with an aunt to call a doctor 50 meters

away. He came immediately, but in the meantime my father had stopped living. We later learned that the aorta had burst. There would have been nothing to do anyway, dad went through the gate of heaven and flew to heaven. It was February 17, 1951. All night long I stared at my father's helpless body. My head was spinning, a mixture of migraine and vertigo that nearly took me away from that room where all objects became hateful because they witnessed an unjust death. I never stopped thinking about my father and the cruel fate that had awaited me in Domodossola, the tears could no longer come out of my eyes because they had become dry from crying. That God I had imagined on my departure in the dazzling light on the Strait of Messina, where was he hiding? Why had he abandoned us? Why had he deluded me so much? Why was it that now that I had found my father he was taken from me forever? What was the point of this tragedy? Now that God here in Domodossola seemed different, distant, elusive, he seemed made of darkness, elusive and impalpable, bitter, a God I no longer knew whether to trust again or ignore him for the rest of my days. For nights and nights I remained silent, keeping vigil with my eyes strained in the dark, almost hoping that with the arrival of the day everything would go back to the way it was before. In those agonizing days, with my family on the edge of a precipice, I realized that heaven was no place for little girls.

One of those nights, in the early hours of the morning I collapsed and after a tormented sleep I sank into a sweet dream: I found myself on the lake, then my father appeared to me with his eyes and face immersed in a celestial light. Now her face no longer suffered and it was beautiful again. He smiled softly at me, took my hand, hugged me and started talking to me. "My child - he said - what I want to tell you now is my love, all the good I

want you. Circumstances have meant that we don't know each other. I really regret not having seen you grow up..."

Sometimes I think about that dream and about my last journey, I think about when the Lord will call me, I like to imagine that when I cross the door of heaven my dad is waiting for me, dressed like that night he took me to the cinema: with him we have many things to tell each other, we have to continue that conversation forever interrupted on that cold February night. It would be the best way, I think, to start my latest journey.

Mom was left in despair with four children and no pension because dad was a simple cobbler. All the cold and all the pain in the world had descended on our poor family of emigrants.

Far from our land, far from life, we were grains of sand blown by the desert wind.

My mother had lost herself and all her soul. She had become an empty shell. His body was contracted like a piece of wood, he kept on losing weight and his bewildered gaze, in a pale and expressionless face, remained fixed for whole minutes towards a distant point, towards Papa's grave. She had become like a ghost possessed by the impossibility of forgetting. I could sense the moment she would fall and sink into hopelessness with no way out. I tried to shake her, I talked to her trying to cheer her up. Incredibly, the roles had completely reversed: it was the daughter who consoled her mother, telling her stories to prepare her to live without her husband and help her forget. I, the eldest daughter, had not yet turned 15.

After dinner I went back to work at the furrier's to scrape together a few more lira. I was the one trying to keep the flame of hope alive. But in the end my mother, I don't know how, perhaps with the force of desperation, between one cry and another, she took the whole world on her shoulders and slowly went back to

being a seamstress, sewing some skirts and dressing gowns.

## Chapter ten - The beautiful tusa



In May of the same year my little brother caught measles and I got it too, not having contracted it as a child. While I was in bed I heard my mom open the door. Someone had rung the bell. Then I heard the voice of zizi and Micherillo. I was worried: before they had never taken me to Domodossola to see my parents and now they had turned up. They stayed for about a week, then left a little disappointed as they hoped that I would go back to Sicily with them. In November, a black-bordered letter arrived. Mom was alarmed, opening it her hand was shaking. I saw her cry: zizi announced the death of grandfather Turi. They had found him dead in the Bordonaro countryside on 8 November. He was 87 years old. The following year there was another even greater disappointment, when by chance the investigations led to the cause of death by suffocation with a handkerchief in the throat, found during the exhumation. The crime had been committed by a woman together with her brother, neighbors in the country, to



steal the pension of 11,000 lire. They later served 24 years in prison for her and 12 years for competition.

I continued to be sad. With little money, 5 people could not get by. Miss Tilde recommended a fake layoff so I could register with the employment office. I often went to check if there was any work, but hopes were low. In April 1953 I learned that they had hired some girls in a factory. They had no need, their fathers already had an occupation. So I went to the office to protest: I needed to work more than the others. In May I finally entered a factory where elastic bands, shoe strings, tapes, tubes for electric wires were produced. A hard job with weekly shifts 6-13 and 13-21. In the intervals I also went to the furrier to round up my salary and give my mother some relief.

August came. For the holidays, comare Grazia had to go to Sicily to visit her elderly mother. I also decided to leave with my daughter Caterina. We left by train for Milan and then for Rome, where we arrived at night. We had to wait a few hours for the train to Sicily.



At the station we found some fellow villagers, and among them a dwarf actor from Novara, Salvatore Furnari, and a soldier whose name I don't remember. While Signora Grazia was resting on a bench, Caterina and I were invited for a walk. They took us

to Piazza Esedra to eat mottarello. It seemed to begin to revive.

When the already crowded train arrived, Signora Grazia hurried to get on with two big bags. The train hadn't stopped completely and she fell flat on the tracks. Catherine, I and the whole crowd cried out to the Eternal Father as we pulled her out full of bruises but miraculously alive. She refused to be taken to the hospital. After an hour the train left. Before noon we arrived at the Terme Vigliatore station where we took the bus that led to Novara Sicily, guests of zizì and Micherillo.

They welcomed us as guests of honour. The night, all three of us in the big bed, Caterina and I didn't sleep a wink. Signora Grazia was full of pain. The same night there was a surprise: some young men serenaded us with guitar and violin, but uncle Micherillo, annoyed, made them run away.

Caterina's mother spent most of the time in bed. She only went out twice in ten days to visit her elderly mother. In the afternoon I went to visit my schoolmates and friends from the laboratory. One day I also saw a classmate who came to hug me. He was holding a bicycle by the hand and I asked him to take me for a ride. At the time in Novara a girl on a bicycle had never been seen. As soon as Zizì found out, she scolded me: "You've become an owl, I never imagined things like that."

Back in Domodossola, Signora Grazia was having difficulty recovering. After that fall, arthrosis pains took over. She only got brave when she went with her family to some party, where I too was invited.

I went back to work in the factory and furrier, but I needed new experiences. One day while visiting the parish of San Gervasio and Protasio, Don Giuseppe Benetti approached me to ask me a few questions. I confided all my sorrows to him. He encouraged me and told me: "Sunday afternoon come to the oratory. There

you will find the president of Catholic Action, Miss Germana, who will introduce you to the girls and give you lots of good advice". I immediately found myself at ease: with a little shyness I began to make friends. I was afraid of not knowing how to speak but with God's help I overcame the first difficulties. I enjoyed reading the association's newspaper admiring the founder Armida Barelli: thanks to her my life had improved. When the shift at the factory allowed it, I went to morning mass at 7, where I met Don Benetti, who I considered my spiritual director. On Sunday I had volunteered to spend an hour at the good press desk in front of the church. Later they invited me to join the ACLI board. With all those commitments, I felt important and accomplished.

The factory mates judged me bigoted, but I didn't feel uncomfortable, on the contrary I prayed for them and called them back when, before starting the shift, they spoke vulgarly in the locker room.

## Chapter Eleven - Porcelain Face



One Sunday in the summer the president of Azione Cattolica Germana organized a trip to the mountains. With the little money I had left I was able to pay the travel fee. We arrived by bus to Goglio, then by cable car to Alpe Devero and then on foot to Crampiolo. I contemplated the beauty of the mountains covered in flowers: rhododendrons, buttercups, wild orchids. Blueberries to feast on. Cabins with stone roofs and wooden windows with bright red and pink geraniums hanging from the windowsills. I asked Germana where the road ended. "When we are tired we will stop for a packed lunch". Around 1 pm we stopped to drink the clear water that descends from a rock towards the valley. After eating, praying and singing, we walked back. I was trembling with joy: I had never spent such a beautiful day. At home I told my mother everything and saw her smile.

Every now and then I received mail from a friend in Novara Sicily: he asked me to find him a job in Domodossola so we could meet. I was very confused but happy that someone was in love with me. There was also a boy from Domodossola, but I didn't like him: in the morning he drank a shot of grappa and his cheeks were always red.

The morning meditations showed me the way to the convent,

but at the same time I liked children and the idea of starting a family. I entrusted myself to God's will. I spent Sunday afternoons at the oratory planning the weekly Catechism assignments with my friends. On some Sundays we went to the oratories in neighboring towns. The bus ride disturbed me, but courage overcame a few small pains.

On May 1, 1954, the ACLI and the oratory organized a trip: a pilgrimage to the Sanctuary of the Madonna di Oropa in the morning and a rally by the honorable Pastor in Biella in the afternoon. I was one of the first to sign up with a friend of mine and her boyfriend Pierino. 2 buses full of young people left. Among them was a shy blond boy I'd seen somewhere before. It was really him: the worker of the construction company where I used to telephone the customers of the furrier. Pierino introduced him to me: he was his cousin. During the day he never left me with his eyes. When I got home, I told my mom. The following evening I saw him under the balcony of the room located on the first floor. "Mom, mom, come and see: there's the boy I met in Biella". And she with a half smile: "It's evident that she's courting you." The following evening, going out with a neighbor, I found him in front of me. Shyly he asked if he could come with us. A little hesitant, I accepted. We broke the ice by chatting about this and that. After the afternoon shift at the factory he would take me home. One evening I took him up to introduce him to his mother, who received him very well. In his spare time he attended the oratory. Back then boys and girls were separated, only at the end of the meeting could they meet. We also attended ACLI meetings.

Although my mother came from Sicily, where two boys who loved each other couldn't go out alone, she trusted us and we began a serene journey. Giuse told me that he had met my dad:

to raise some money, being 4 children and only the dad who worked, as a kid he did some errands for the financiers of the barracks a few steps from his house. Sometimes she took their shoes to my dad to be repaired. I listened with pleasure.

He told me something else: when I was passing through Rome on 16 September 1950 to reach Domodossola we met virtually. Giuse, as I still call him, had arrived by bicycle for the holy year. An adventurous journey: he had left Domodossola together with a priest from the valley who pedaled quickly with mountain boots. It was almost impossible to follow him. He only stopped when he saw some vegetable garden to get some salad. Halfway through Giuse was left alone. Along the way he found a peddler with an old bicycle full of junk to sell. They kept company up to Rome.

August came. The factory was closing for holidays and I decided to go and see my sister Rosa who was in the hills on Lake Mergozzo for a convalescence. I asked the nuns who ran the house to stop me for a few days. I had just mentioned this idea to Giuse. There were other girls in the house on vacation. Among them the beautician niece of a nun. On the morning of the 15th, feast of the Assumption, he called us to his room after Mass to practice. He filled our faces with various creams, mascaras and lipsticks: we looked like wax statues. At lunch, the nun aunt called her niece: it was not the case that she treated us like this.

In the afternoon, looking at the lake from the window, I saw Giuse appear. I didn't want to be seen with that porcelain face. Seeing me at the door, he almost didn't recognize me. I apologized explaining that it had been an experiment and the other girls had been transformed as well. In the afternoon we strolled in the garden of the house. Towards evening he said goodbye to me: "See you soon, in Domodossola, but with a clean and fresh face as before".

## Chapter Twelve - Violets



When the two weeks of vacation were over, I resumed work in the factory on the 1 to 9 pm shift. As I was threading the bobbins into the spindles of the machines, I thought of Giuse, but at the same time I didn't really want to see him. At 21 the siren sounded and my heart started pounding. Having stamped the briefcase, as I came out of the gate I saw a bicycle in the semi-darkness. It was really him: he came towards me, shyly looked me in the face and said: "I like you so simple". He made me sit on the barrel of the bicycle and drove me home. We exchanged a simple good-night greeting. This happened almost every day. On Sunday afternoon we did some bike rides in the nearby villages. One day he took me to his house to introduce me to his father and mother, two sisters and a brother. Little by little she also introduced me to her uncles and cousins as a friend.

When my mum saw us from the balcony she made us go up to the house. While she doted on that boy, I was very undecided. On December 8, the day of the Immaculate Conception, my name day, the bell rang. It was the florist, who handed me a bunch of red carnations. "Mom, Giuse sent me greetings!". What a disappointment opening the card: it wasn't him, but a

14-year-old boy met by chance. It said "I love you" with a signature. Maybe he thought I was his age.

On Christmas Eve Giuse showed up with a large colored vase full of chocolates and a greeting card. I thanked him and we went to midnight mass together. On returning home he said to me: "Tomorrow I have to go with the family to lunch with relatives. See you again in Santo Stefano". On the morning of the 26th I told my mother "I won't go out with that boy anymore, I'll give him back the vase, I don't want commitments". And she with a stern look: "You're crazy, you could have done it if I hadn't already eaten the chocolates".

In the following days Giuse came as usual to pick me up at work. In the stretch of road on foot or on the barrel of the bicycle I hardly spoke to him. On New Year's Day 1955, I went to mass. He was there too and finally drove me home. At the door he said to me: "May we know what you have in mind to make me suffer like this?", and a tear escaped him. That drop overflowed the vase and I gave him a smile. He gave me a kiss and said: "This afternoon I'll pick you up to go to vespers at Mount Calvary. After vespers a film will be screened at the ACLI club". I accepted and we said goodbye. I reported it at home and my mother said happily: "You would never find a good boy like that again".

At 2.00 pm we left for Calvary along the mule track with the chapels of the Via Crucis. Once at the Shrine we sang vespers and after the blessing we went to the club. I don't remember the title of the film, but it was very boring, so I proposed we go back to the city to the Catena cinema, where we were able to enjoy a better film, called "Violette".

In April, traveling the Vigezzo valley and the Centovalli on the little train, we went with his parents to the festival of flower floats in Locarno. We met Giuse's godfather, who introduced me as a



"girlfriend". He put his hands in his pockets and took 10 Swiss francs from his wallet, gave them to Giuse and said "Good, when are you getting married?". We looked at each other, we had never talked about it.

In the following days we began to cultivate the idea of marriage. We also talked about it at home. Mommy rejoiced but at the same time there were few financial possibilities. Little by little we bought some sheets and some linen. We didn't have any special needs. We went looking for a small and modest apartment. We found him in the ancient Motta district and therefore fixed the day of the wedding: Monday 19th September. I went with my mother to the Panzarasa fabric shop to buy the lace for the wedding dress and took it to Signora Tilde, the furrier, who had always promised me she would make it with love.

At the town hall for marriage banns my mother had to sign because I was still a minor. Even Giuse's parents were happy. In the parish, Monsignor Pellanda told us beautiful words of encouragement: "Always keep yourselves modest with so much faith to face the joys and sorrows that life has in store for us. I will let you find the red runner along the nave".

We had to prepare the list of relatives and friends to deliver the wedding favors as usual. Very few guests. Giuse's mother said "Two per family". By and by we reached 35 people. Witnesses chosen: uncle Carmelo di Giuse and for me Pierino, the architect of our meeting. A week before the wedding, the men's oratory headed by Don Giuseppe Briacca prepared a party for us. Master Furiga painted a picture of greetings on the blackboard and created a parchment with the list of friends. There was also a table covered with pastries and sodas. There had never been a party like that in the oratory. The collegiate church of Saints Gervasio and Protasio was being renovated and the pavement

was full of rubble and stones, but some willing women did their utmost to clean it up in honor of Giuseppe and Concetta.

On September 16 Zizi and Micherillo arrived, moved because Concettina was getting married and he had to accompany her to the altar in the place of her father who was no longer there.

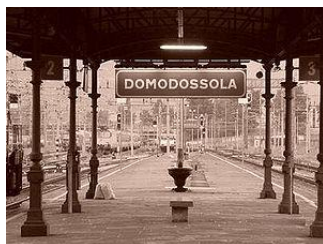
Meanwhile some little gifts arrived: a coffee pot, a coffee grinder, small liqueur glasses, sets of saucers and cutlery from the relatives and friends who had received the favour, a set of kitchen utensils from Pierino and his uncles. Women's Catholic Action gave us a bedside picture with the Holy Family, the assistant Don Benetti a wonderful green vase for flowers with silver decorations.

The night before was long. I thought of mummy who was left with three children who were still young and with few resources. "You have little faith, didn't the oratory school teach you that there is always Providence in life?" I said to myself. On Monday the 19th I got up at seven. Signora Tilde arrived in the lace dress. She dressed me and adjusted the veil I had bought in Milan. At 9 the taxi arrived to take me to church. I was confused, I found a sea of people watching me. Giuse was already at the altar waiting for me with a bouquet of orange blossoms, accompanied by her sister Rosa because mother Olimpia would have been too excited about her first child getting married. I joined him accompanied by uncle Micherillo on the red carpet.

Mass began. Monsignor Pellanda was also excited. I remember an encouraging homily, the blessing of the rings, the promise of lifelong fidelity and, at the end of the ceremony, the signatures. As I left, Pierino's mother, who at that moment also became my aunt, placed the badge of the women of Azione Cattolica on my chest.



## Chapter thirteen - New life



After the celebration in the church, refreshments followed at the Grandazzi bar in via Castellazzo. Between one kiss and another we had an aperitif for the guests with some pizzas and pastries. A greeting and a special kiss to the in-laws Olimpia and Armando who had gone with mummy to get the suitcase, then ran to the station to catch the 12.15 train for their honeymoon.

Mommy was crying bitterly. We entered the compartment. The station master announced the departure with his whistle while Giuse and I leaned out of the window for a last farewell. The adventure of our life began.

Once in Florence we walked towards the hotel indicated by Signora Tilde, the furrier. At the grand entrance we were greeted by some music, then the butler ushered us to the room on the third floor. For us everything was new, even sleeping in a double bed.

The first day we visited the city, the second we went to Piazzale Michelangelo where you could admire all of Florence. We took some photographs: Giuse's camera with a roll of film could take eight black and white photos.

On the third day departure for Rome. The hotel was more modest because the money set aside with sacrifices had to be

enough. We stopped for a couple of days to visit the four basilicas that Giuse had seen during the holy year and the Trevi fountain. We also returned to the Esedra fountain, the one on the famous night in 1953 when Signora Grazia had fallen under the train.

The time came to leave for Sicily. After a long journey the train arrived in Calabria and finally from Villa San Giovanni we could see Sicily. Giuse savored those moments: the train being loaded onto the ferry-boat, the Madonnina at the top at the entrance to the port of Messina.

At the station, uncle Carmelo, mother's brother, was waiting for us with his wife Gaetana and daughters Rosetta and Antonietta.

They welcomed us like two princes. We stopped for two days visiting Messina: the cathedral clock that I had seen as a child, the Madonna di Montalto and other very beautiful squares.

There was only one flaw in that house: at dinner time, uncles and cousins dressed up and instead of sitting down at the table they said: "Let's go for a walk along the sea". Giuse and I, resigned, went out peckish. Around 11 pm we went home and my aunt started cooking. One night he put the snails with their shells in the sauce, but what matters is affection, not habits.

On the third day they accompanied us to the train with a few tears. Uncle Micherillo was at the Terme Vigliatore station with the taxi driver to reach Novara. Zizì, zia Maricchia and zia Peppina were waiting for us in the village. It really seemed that the princes of Domodossola were arriving.

The next day we went to Badiavecchia to visit our paternal grandmother Concetta and father's uncles, sisters and brothers. In the little square with my grandmother's tobacco shop, many inhabitants of the hamlet who knew me as a child had gathered and were calling out loud to other people: "Concettina has arrived

with her husband!"

Kisses, hugs, flushed faces. It seemed like a dream to me. It had been exactly five years since I had left the country.

Two days later we had the taxi driver "Cauzi i Lupu" take us to Taormina. At noon he took us to the restaurant, where we were served with white gloves. Giuse and I looked at each other to say: "Will the money be enough for us?". Having visited Taormina and then Castelmola under a downpour, towards evening we returned to Novara, tired but satisfied.

The next day it was already time to go back to Domodossola. The commitments of the new life awaited us.



## Chapter fourteen - Our first nests

Although I had already embarked on the journey to Domodossola in '50 and '53, it was as if I had left for the first time: I was heading towards a new life for two.

After boarding the train on the ferry-boat, we went up to the terrace to see the Madonnina of the port and Sicily slowly drifting away.

With a tear we returned to the carriage, seated on the wooden benches. There were no bunks then.

When night came we began to doze off with our necks hanging down. Sometimes we got up to look out the window. At important stations the station master would loudly announce the name of the city. In Naples, on the sidewalks there were the "guaglioni" who sold pizzas. Slyly they first asked the travelers to give them the money, then the train left again and they were left with money and pizza.

Slowly we were approaching Milan. On the train to Domodossola, I experienced the emotion I had experienced for the first time 5 years earlier: Lake Maggiore, the Ossola mountains, the stone roofs. This time together with my husband Giuse. Around noon we reached our destination.

Giuse Armando's mum and dad were waiting for us. It was a party: if they could they would have made the bells ring.

A quick lunch with mum Olimpia and then rest in our new nest in the Motta district. The following day I resumed my work in the factory and Giuse returned to the construction site.

My thoughts went to mummy for my lack of support, but my spiritual director Don Benetti encouraged me to pray, assuring me that many people loved her. Sometimes Giuse and I went to lunch at her house, and she enjoyed it. Meanwhile one of my

sisters had found a job contributing with a new support to the family.

A short time later we announced to mum, mum Olimpia and dad Armando that they would become grandparents in July.

I was beginning to feel pregnancy discomfort but the duty of work called. Then the workers were not protected as now. Giuse managed to find a better job than at the outdoor construction site: a small factory of wooden items such as plugs for barrels, tools for unraveling wool skeins and even "paungi" (wooden spinning tops). In the fifth month we began the tour of the shops in search of the pram for the future newborn. The width was always greater than the entrance door and we had to decide to move house.

Back then there weren't any agencies, we went to ask here and there. Providence let us find an apartment on the second floor of a house in via Scapaccino, right next to the furrier's workshop.

Within a short time we organized the move. We were no longer in the city center, but not far away either, closer to my workplace.

The monthly rent was 8,000 lire, a lot for our meager wages, but the apartment was welcoming and bright. In the courtyard we could also have a couple of square meters of land where to grow aromatic herbs and flowers, my passion.

Received the keys we cleaned up the rooms and dressed up the windows with beautiful curtains with valances and lace curtains in the kitchen. After the move, life went on normally. My tummy became more and more evident. One day a colleague asked me when I would be home for maternity leave and advised me to go to the gynecologist. So I made the appointment privately. The doctor almost scolded me for waiting too long: "You can't work after the sixth month and you're already in the seventh month: you took a risk". The next day I delivered the document to the office and even the clerk said I was naive.



Meanwhile I was preparing the layette by knitting sweaters, shirts, shoes and diapers made from old sheets that my mommy gave me.

We also went to buy the pram, which I had prepared with sheets embroidered by me in neutral colors, not knowing if it was a boy or a girl. Finally, on the evening of July 2, the waters broke and with the suitcase already packed we set off on foot to the hospital. The gynecologist who had examined me told Giuse that he could go home. Labor had just begun and it took about 20 hours. The next day she went back to maternity while I was still waiting in the delivery room.

At one point a boy was born and the nurse went to tell the baby's father, who almost fell ill with emotion. After an hour he was able to hug our first child, called Armando after his grandfather. After a few hours, grandparents, uncles and cousins were also informed. It looked like it was the first baby in the whole world.



## Chapter fifteen - We thank God...

A few hours after the birth, the nurses in the maternity ward brought this creature of flesh and blood to my bed. They attached it to my breast. Other than the rag doll that Zizi had made for me as a child.

The hospital stay was then one week. Before returning home, people went to the hospital church for "purification", a blessing from the priest.

On the ward, everything was ready to go home, but I was starting to feel dizzy. The midwife tested my temperature: 39. My doll and I had to stop for another two days. Finally Thursday 12 almost healed we went home. On Sunday the 15th Armando was taken in the new pram to the baptismal font with his father Giuseppe, his friend Mariuccia godmother and godfather Basilio, a friend of the oratory. I didn't have the joy of attending the event because the elders superstitiously advised to stay at home. I contented myself with preparing a little refreshment.

Life as a threesome was different but I was doing pretty well. I had a lot of milk, the baby was growing and I took him to the childhood center every week for a checkup.

At the end of the two months, unfortunately I resumed work in the factory. There were no kindergartens then. The grandmothers had agreed to take care of him for a week each.

When I worked the six o'clock shift before going to work, Giuse wrapped it up and took it to its destination. Unconsciously this child suffered and I cried with him.

Unfortunately I could not quit my job. Slowly, with faith, we continued the three way journey: the first meals, the first steps were wonderful things. On the first day of kindergarten Giuse finally found a better paying job. For a couple of years he was a

janitor in elementary school, then he was called to the Town Hall to occupy the post of conciliatory messenger.

Thus a window was created to leave my job in the factory and devote myself to the child while waiting to give him a little brother. On 17 August 1962 we were cheered by the birth of our second child. Luciano was light-skinned with blond hair, the opposite of Armando. A fairy tale. On Sunday 26 he was baptized with his father Giuse, his cousin Mariuccia and godfather Giuse's brother Antonio. Again I had to stay at home. After the maternity leave, I left my job to devote myself to two beautiful children.

On October 1, 1962, Armando with a blue apron and a satchel on his shoulder began first grade. We entrusted it with a few tears to teacher Leopardi.

In the same period the Mayor of Domodossola summoned Giuse proposing him accommodation on the second floor of the Town Hall, which remained vacant when the municipal messenger retired. In a few days we organized the move. In the center we had all the comforts. In the evening, closed the great door, we were the rulers of the city. We could comfortably watch the demonstrations from the balcony of the Mayor's office. From our windows we could see part of the market with a centuries-old tradition.

Meanwhile Luciano was taking his first steps: he had become the mascot of the City employees.

To supplement Giuse's wages, I wanted to invent a job. I started dressing windows, beds and pillows for friends. Word spread and so I became the "lady of the tents". Giuse in his free time learned to prepare the assembly of the curtain rods and thank God we could enjoy a more comfortable life.

On October 1, 1968, Luciano also began school with teacher Luisa Cerri.

Time went by fast. In the summer we went on holiday around Italy with the camping tent. Sometimes as far as Sicily to my hometown.

In July 1973 we were camping in Val d'Aosta and I began to have the first symptoms of pregnancy. On 16 February 1974, little sister Daniela arrived for Armando who was almost eighteen and Luciano who was twelve. It was carnival time and the people who looked at the pink ribbon on the Town Hall door thought it was a joke. The parish priest advised us to celebrate Baptism on Easter night, godmother our friend Gianna and godfather by acquired uncle Benito.

Forget the superstitions, this time I too participated in the event on the night of April 13th. The next day at the oratory there were one hundred guests for refreshments.

Daniela has also grown up and we are now old. Our three children have given us 7 grandchildren: Stefano, Virginia, Greta, Lorenzo, Rebecca, Letizia and Matteo.

The story is ending. On 19 September 2015 Giuse and I celebrated 60 years together.

We thank God, Our Lady and all those who loved us.



*Mazza Concetta Maglio, born in Novara di Sicilia on 18 April 1936.*

## Index

1. The paternal home	7
2. Out of this world	14
3. Play in the sand	25
4. Oil, cobwebs and the evil eye	35
5. The owls	41
6. Vossia forgive me (Starlight)	47
7. Emily	54
8. The flight of the swallows	59
9. The door to heaven	66
10. The beautiful tusa	72
11. Porcelain face	76
12. Violets	79
13. New life	84
14. Our first nests	87
15. Thank God...	90

