

A
Tyranny
of
God

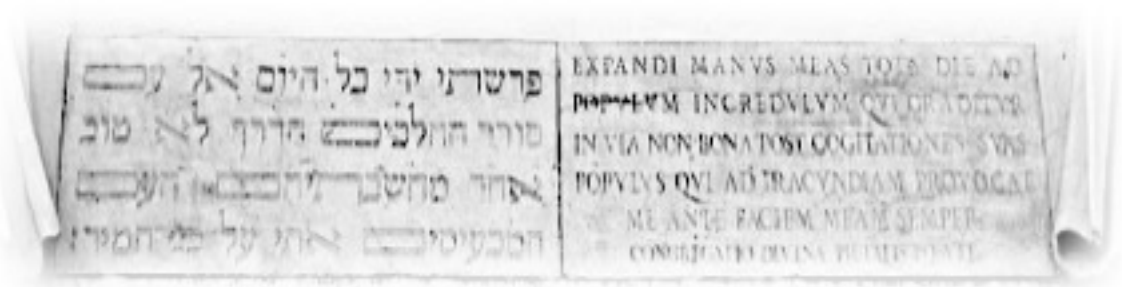
Francesco Rizzuto

A TYRANNY OF GOD

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“I have spread out my hands all the day to a rebellious people, which walks in a way that is not good, after their own thoughts; a people that provokes me to my face continually.”

Isaiah 65:2-3

Inscription in Latin and Hebrew, chiselled into the façade of the Church of San Gregorio Della Divina Pietà, Rome, Italy.

Chapter One

October 16, 1943

His father had warned him about Signorina Malatesta. The Jewish-Italian nightingale of the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma could shatter a crystal goblet using only her vocal chords. And she had other skills too.

The tinkle of shattering glass reminded the little boy of La Malatesta although he'd never seen the songbird nor heard her warble. This time it wasn't Verdi or Puccini or Donizetti. It was pure Wagner. *Götterdämmerung*. A squad of German SS-Ordnungspolizei was busy trashing the Bordello Beatrice in Via Lungotevere dei Cenci while eight-year-old Adamo secreted himself inside an ornate walnut wardrobe with carved lion's paw feet and rose trimming and frolicking *putti* at the corners and a huge bevelled mirror door that had just now taken a lethal blow from the iron shoulder plate of a Mauser rifle.

With a sudden shove, the wounded cabinet tottered in uncertain dignity then thundered to the floor, coming to rest with the remnants of its door pressed tightly against the tiles. The soldier treated its slatted back panel to a final pounding with his gunstock, but the noble old wood held firm. Guttural voices barked angry orders in German; women and girls screamed and cursed and wept in Italian. From inside the darkened box, Adamo heard the crisp clatter of iron-heeled jackboots rushing away down the grey marble staircase.

"*Raus! Schnell, schnell, jeder raus!* Hurry, hurry, outside everyone!" the Untersturmführer shouts while slashing randomly to left and right with a stiff leather switch that he'd requisitioned from one of the women's bedchambers. His orders are to clear the establishment, separate client from whore using a pry bar if necessary, then herd the riff-raff toward a marshaling yard set up at the nearby Theater of Marcellus. If any German military personnel or card-carrying Fascists or Axis-friendly diplomats or priests happened to turn up amongst the detainees, they are to be released unharmed.

SS-Obersturmbannführer Herbert Kappler is purging the Holy City. The raid is orchestrated by a stubby, lackluster subordinate with a fearsome reputation, SS-Captain Erik Priebke. Before the German forces abandon Rome to the advancing Allied armies, Kappler and Priebke will have resolved the 'Jewish Question' here once and for all. First, they will start with the whores, then work their way up the social ladder. By December, all will be reduced to ashes.

Chapter Two

January 1957 - Afternoon

Father Adamo Di Domenico rests his slender frame on a red velvet cushion inside the center compartment of a carved baroque confessional in the chapel of San Gregorio Della Divina Pietà. A soft black cashmere scarf is tucked snugly under his chin for the cold and today he wears his pajamas inside his coal black cassock for extra insulation against the dampness. He waits here every Saturday afternoon for a handful of parishioners who come to confess all their small and large sins, receive absolution, then repeat the same offenses, usually the very same day. He feels like a frustrated laundrywoman. No matter how vigorously he scrubs their soiled consciences, they simply refuse to stay clean.

Worst of all, he hates the claustrophobia, sitting hour after hour inside the dim wooden box, like an upended coffin he thinks to himself, or the time as a frightened little boy in the ghetto when he found himself sealed inside a toppled *armadio*, no more than a stone's throw from where he sits today. After a few hours, he managed to struggle free by pounding with his stockinged feet then sliding sideways through a crack that opened in the bottom of the wardrobe, but only to discover that his entire world had quite suddenly and irreversibly collapsed.

But then what's a novice friar to do? His job is to listen patiently to their litany of sins then, with a few Pater Nosters or Ave Marias meted out in penance, to measure out God's forgiveness and reassure the penitent of His unceasing love, salve their guilty consciences, reaffirm their spiritual credit ratings, and send them back to their lives of petty rivalries and meaningless quarrelling. If the Devil himself were to kneel before him and beg forgiveness for his horns and pointed tail, say, or Adolph Hitler the murder of tens of millions of innocents, he would have been duty bound to forgive them. No act was so monstrous it could not be expiated with a few prayers or a discreet contribution in cash money.

That's how it worked, the young priest reminded himself. The Church instilled a guilt complex in the child for the serious mistake of having been born, then later for having lived. He knew the formula by heart. Next it offered a means of respite from the guilt. This too he knew by heart. It was pure marketing: create a need that wasn't there before then fill it with a product. That was his job now: product fulfillment. Sometimes, though, a person just came to talk.

When he feels the dull thud of the next anonymous penitent dropping onto the stiff, wooden kneeler to his left, he slides open the partition to reveal the dim outlines of a man, head bowed, cap in hand, making the sign of the cross on the opposite side of the screen.

"Buona sera Don Adamo, good evening Father Adamo," is how the fellow started.

"In nomine Patris et Fillii et Spiritus Sancti. Salve, fratello," the priest replied. "How can I help you, my brethren? Have you come to make your confession?"

"No father, no confession. I came bearing evidence."

"Evidence? What kind of evidence? Has another Christian erred and you're pointing a crooked finger at him? God does not like tattlers, you know!"

He recalls how, only a few years ago, a simple denunciation to the Fascist police or the Gestapo could cause a man or woman to disappear forever. A jealous wife might easily rid herself of her husband's mistress by denouncing her rival as a Jewess in hiding or hinting that she was a spy for the Allies. It was easy then to settle old scores and people took every opportunity to do so.

"No, Father. That's not it. I have proof that Beatrice was innocent."

"Beatrice who?"

"La Cenci, Father. La Cenci!"

"But that Beatrice has been dead for four hundred years. The papal executioner chopped off her head!"

"Well, that's just it Father. He didn't, you see."

"He did Piero, he did. Trust me. I was there. I witnessed the whole messy business. I was just a little boy growing up in Trastevere and our parents took us to see the executions in the Piazza Sant'Angelo. We packed a picnic lunch and there were musicians and jugglers and a puppet show. That was a long time ago. Go home now and rest yourself. La Cenci won't be coming to you anymore, at least not tonight. Trust me. I'm your priest."

"But Father, I want her to come. We're having an affair, you see. But don't tell her father the Count; please, I beg you. He's a madman. He'll murder us both!"

"All right, Piero. I won't. What is said in confession stays in confession. So, you've come to admit your adultery with the ghost of – I'm sorry – with the living Beatrice Cenci. *Ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis in nomine Patris, et Filii et Spiritus Sancti.* I forgive you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Now go in peace. *E salutami a la tua cara moglie.* And say hello to your dear wife for me."

"Grazie, Don Adamo. Mille grazie."

Chapter Three

October 16, 1943 - Evening

The angry afternoon sky has darkened to moonless night and a terse rain is falling.

Adamo scurries like a frantic sewer rat through the darkened and narrow passageways of the empty ghetto, but to where he has neither idea nor plan. He lurches against the pelting rain and pauses only to swipe his dripping nose across a soggy shirtsleeve. The staccato bursts of a runaway machine gun pound inside his chest, an invisible rapier pierces his side and acid seeps into his lungs. He is searching for his sister.

When Atalia was forced to look after her little brother, she packed him along to the brothel dragging their cardboard suitcases behind them over the cobblestones. He could run errands for the girls and women there and do odd jobs and that way earn a crust of stale bread and maybe a little wine to soften it, she pleaded to the madam.

“É vero? Altro che può? Noi siamo putane, cara mia. Tutti devono guadagnarsi la sua propria crosta! Oh, really? And what else can he do? Huh? This is a whorehouse, sweetheart. Everyone of us here earns her crust of bread!”

In the end, the sly old woman relented. With her dark, Middle Eastern looks and her youth, Atalia could turn out to be a good earner. And if she wanted the girl, then she had to take the kid brother along in the mix. She decided to outfit the boy as a Renaissance house dwarf, teaching him to bow deeply and juggle a trio of polished brass spheres like the three testicles of Lorenzo DiMedici, to boldly strut about her salon demonstrating *la mano fico* for the vulgar amusement of her guests. She dubbed him *Gufu*, the owl.

Atalia herself wasn't a particularly bright girl. Her dream was to become a movie queen at Rome's new Cinecittà, Mussolini's answer to Hollywood. She longed to see her semi-naked image displayed in the pulp press and spread across the back page of *Il Messaggero*. Didn't Il Duce himself proclaim from the director's chair, gripping his bullhorn like an ancient blunderbuss, *“La cinematografia è l'arma più forte,”* that is, movie making is the most powerful weapon? Hitler may have invented the Blitzkrieg, but the showy Italian leader planned to conquer his enemies with reel upon reel of sultry Latin temptresses starkly clad and delineated, frame-after-frame, in 35mm black and white, the peculiar way that Fascism saw the world.

She was dark complexioned, sloe-eyed, big breasted and, as Adamo was soon able to observe, a natural born whore; all the basic qualities needed to succeed at Hollywood on the Tiber. Their absentee father had not sent money or even any news of himself in America, and the ever more restrictive measures being taken against Jews in the country, along with their mother's recent murder, had considerably reduced the siblings' odds for survival. Yet despite the boy's own insecurity and doubts, especially while trussed up like a truncated court fool and the object of general ridicule, his eighteen-year-old sister nonetheless thought of herself as a budding entertainer only needing to be discovered, after which time all would be made right. After all, she pointed out, they were really more Italian than anything else.

Life was nonetheless a good deal better at the bordello. Newly hopeful Atalia had only to laze about eating chocolate bonbons while perusing her dog-eared collection of movie magazines between visitors, the perfect start for a wannabe starlet. She even had her own room with a high four-poster bed and a chambermaid to renew the soiled linens. On the wall,

in an elaborately carved, gold leaf embellished frame above the mattress, hung a large Mannerist oil painting of *Virgen Lactens*, milk from the Madonna's naked breasts spurting down in a warm shower over the tormented souls in Purgatory. Little Adamo, who was wiry and short for his age, slept on cushions inside the huge mirrored wardrobe in her room, a place where he often secreted himself while his sister serviced clients, listening in on the sound track without actually seeing the picture.

The whorehouse in Via Lungotevere dei Cenci was generally quiet until patrons began trickling in between two and four o'clock each afternoon, the time when shops and government offices shut down and Italian families celebrate their main meal together; the traditional hour when people accomplish their furtive couplings before returning to work or retiring to a favorite bar for an espresso or *digestivo* with their cronies. There was a regulated tranquility and dedication to purpose inside the Bordello Beatrice with its smartly costumed chambermaids and servers scurrying about their designated tasks in preparation for the evening soirée.

Languid young goddesses graced the reception hall, postured like flawless pink alabaster statues begging adoration, newly opened blossoms in the Campo dei Fiori, delicacies the flavor of *tartuffo* and the seductive aroma of *zagara*. The gentle and reassuring ambience admitted no hint of the turmoil brewing in the city outside, a welcoming oasis of purloined pleasures amidst the impending storm.

Clients openly praised the quality of merchandise and range of services on offer inside the establishment, at the same time secretly fearing its venerable madam, the Duchessa Chiara Montechiaro Della Grazia, an aged daughter of the city's so-called Black Nobility whose thick leather-bound diary read like the Devil's own breviary. Her florid, hand-lettered roster of high profile clients and their respective sexual proclivities promised a steady trickle of large-denomination Lira notes to keep this formidable old dame in comfortable retirement one day.

And what could be wrong with such an arrangement, anyway?

After all, Italy was the whore of the Mediterranean, the Duchess informed a gaggle of elegantly uniformed German officers over flutes of Spumante in her richly appointed drawing room each evening. The country lay flat on her back with her legs spread wide apart, teats bared to God's blue heaven, ready to embrace the barbarian and bear his bastard offspring. Why, there were more blue-eyed blonds and carrot tops in Roma or Napoli or Palermo, she pointed out, than Paris or Copenhagen or even Berlin; and now the country's brothels – and the Bordello Beatrice was no exception – were packed with *Tedeschi*, the Aryan supermen whose contribution Il Duce was convinced by Adolph Hitler would improve the Italian gene pool. It was written there in the Pact of Steel, she insisted, while her besotted guests toasted her continued good health. Wasn't it her patriotic duty to ensure that Il Duce's wishes were carried out to the letter?

In 1938, he and the diminutive Italian king had welcomed the German leader with an epic display of Fascist pageantry. They met him at the train then escorted Der Führer's motorcade straight to the Quirinal Palace, bypassing the Bordello Beatrice, which in any case was empty of clients that day since all of Rome packed the streets to cheer the spectacle of two liveried psychopaths and a failed monarch. Nonetheless, Donna Chiara had redecorated her salon at considerable expense for the occasion and put out a lavish buffet for three hundred guests. Along the balconies overlooking the boulevard, the clever madam boldly positioned her merchandise draped in sashes of green, white and red silk bunting with a

gilded papier-mâché serpent pinned to each coifed forehead, like Fascist maenads and the closest thing to the fifteen marble apostles preaching to the clouds that grace the façade of the Cathedral of Saint John Lateran.

She then held her breath, an ailing heart palpitating inside a still-ample bosom, trembling with anticipation as the open limousines and motorcycle escort, horns and sirens blaring and multi-hued banners flying in the slipstream, sped on past her door. Afterwards, La Duchessa Montechiaro was depressed and retired to her bedchamber, refusing to see visitors. The Bordello Beatrice in Via Lungotevere dei Cenci remained closed and shuttered for an entire week, as if in mourning.

That was before the raid. Now everything had changed.

When the panting boy reaches the end of a narrow alley that opens into the Via del Portico d'Ottavia, he runs smack into a trio of men in black ankle-length cassocks with heavy woolen capes draped over their shoulders and black satin hats. They move in unison with the rainwater cascading from the rims of their mushroom-like *ombrelloni* that claw at the walls of this ancient passageway, a covey of bats issuing from a dank cave. They are the Dominicans of San Gregorio. Adamo's father had warned him about the Dominicans too. One of the men grabs Adamo by the nape of his neck and hauls him up short.

"*Marrona!* Another Jew runt. *Porca miseria!* The exterminators didn't trap all the vermin this time. Looks like they'll need to make another sweep tomorrow."

"Release him, Don Emilio," his companion chimed in. "The child is Romano; can't you see that? He's just another famished street urchin like so many these days. Look, there. Our fine upstanding parishioners are already ransacking the dwellings of their Hebrew friends and neighbors. Let the boy go. Times are bad enough. Don't make more trouble."

The third priest looks on. Roly-poly Don Pompeo is waiting on the sidelines to see who will emerge victorious from this argument, Don Emilio or Don Peppino. He'll wait and see, then take the side of the winner. Right now, he's raised the front of his soiled cassock to his voluminous waist, exposing himself while pissing against the ochre-stained limestone wall of a building. People in this *quartiere* have painted crosses in all the alcoves and placed crucifixes over the entrances to their dwellings, although very few Christians live in the *Claustro degli Ebrei*, the Jewish Ghetto, to encourage individuals to move on and urinate elsewhere in the block, away from their homes and places of business. Don Pompeo retrieves a white silk handkerchief from inside his sleeve and dabs at the tip of his dribbling member.

"Come along, my child," Don Peppino tells the boy, almost kindly, and in this way outmaneuvers his adversary. "Come to the rectory and share our bread. One can see that you're hungry. Leave it to others to gnaw the bones of our unfortunate brethren."

Adamo thinks he knows the man. His voice sounds familiar. He could identify all his sister's clients by their voices. He wants to ask if he knows where Atalia can be found right now, where the policemen and soldiers took her. He wants to go there. But Don Emilio is snarling at him, all the while massaging his dense five o'clock shadow with the long bony fingers and soiled palm of his free hand, as if thinking or plotting. He eyes Adamo in a way that makes him feel uncomfortable, even creepy. The boy tries hard to squirm free, to scurry away in the opposite direction this time, but the priest is holding him fast by the collar, thrashing. The man smells sour, like a bedchamber badly in need of airing but whose door and window are sealed tightly shut, or a tomb.

“Yes. Do come to the rectory for some bread, as my esteemed colleague Don Peppino here suggests. Then we shall judge what use a little boy can be to a friar.”

Chapter Four

November 1943

Don Peppino is coaching the boy in Latin, mathematics and Church history.

Despite the child never having attended school, he nonetheless could read Italian reasonably well and do simple sums. The priest knew nothing of the foundling's background, only that he'd plucked him from a narrow alley of the *Claustro dei Ebrei* on the night of the roundup. Adamo, in his turn, reveals nothing. He is an observer. He speaks only when spoken to. As he once did from inside a carved walnut wardrobe in the whorehouse, he listens and learns.

The old priest tells Adamo that the great Cathedral of Saint Peter and the Basilica of Saint John Lateran, which is the Pope's own church, are the palaces of God. They have always existed on Earth and will remain so until the end of time. Nobody built them. The Allies' powerful bombs cannot harm them. It was the same with all the other magnificent cathedrals of Europe. When God created the universe, He made these wonderful palaces for Himself to sojourn whenever He decided to visit there or needed to intervene in human affairs for one reason or another, which has been often, given the sorry history of the world.

The boy recoils at the impact of something unwholesome carried on the old man's breath.

"Then cathedrals are like dinosaurs, aren't they, Father? They're so big and powerful, nothing can harm them."

"No! Dinosaurs and cathedrals are not alike! The dinosaurs were evil beings like the hideous dragon that our noble San Giorgio slew with his lance, that is, before the pagan emperor ordered that he be tortured three times on the wheel of swords then decapitated. But that's another story. Cathedrals are sacred places where God resides, as are all churches where the consecrated Host is present at the altar. They are protected for all eternity by His Divine Will and therefore can never become extinct like the dinosaurs who were the issue of Lucifer."

"But Father, if God is all-knowing and all-powerful and all-loving, as you say, then why did He create dinosaurs and dragons in the first place? And can't He just remove them from the world? Why can't He remove the Germans too, and stop the bombs from falling?"

Don Peppino is unprepared for an eight-year-old's unexpected rebuttal.

"Well, now. An all-knowing and all-powerful and all-loving God wouldn't want to remove evil from the world if a greater good were achievable through its existence, now would He? You could say that the existence of evil allows good to be possible. For example, if there were no suffering, then there could be no sympathy and no caring either, no charity. Without wrong-doing, there could be no mercy. All our virtues would have no meaning at all.

"The world needs evil because it needs suffering and pain. Only through suffering do we arrive at a deeper understanding and fuller experience of love and goodness. There is no evil so great that we cannot imagine any goodness coming from it, no sin so grave that it doesn't merit compassion and mercy."

Adamo's history lessons also tell him that it was the Rothschilds who salvaged the Pope's kingdom in the year 1850 with a large loan that enabled Pius IX to finance a mercenary army and recapture the Holy City from the godless republican horde, that is, after excommunicating the whole lot and sending their souls straight to Lucifer, father of the dinosaurs. In those glorious days, the *Stati Della Chiesa*, the Papal States as they were then called, encompassed the entire central Italian peninsula from the Ionian to the Adriatic Sea, from Lombardy in the north to the fortress of Gaeta on the border with Napoli, which was a vassal state of Catholic Spain, as well as the Avignon region of France. It was the Pope who crowned all the mighty kings and emperors of Europe starting with Carlo Magno.

Still, he is left confused.

"If the Jewish Rothschilds rescued the Pope from his enemies," the boy asks, "Then why did His Holiness allow the German soldiers to arrest all the Jews? And what's become of my sister, Atalia? Do you know where they took her, Father?"

"No, child. I don't know. These are troubled times we live in. God teaches through trial and error, although sometimes it seems to make no sense. He causes us to walk in darkness so that we may arrive at the light, but only He can understand the how and the why of it. *"La verità, caro mio ragazzo, che Dio no si preoccupa molto di ciò che accade sulla terra...."* Truth is, my dear boy, God doesn't really concern Himself much with what happens here on earth. He's too busy with the business of running Heaven. His mother can help us though, if we only ask and make sacrifices in her honor. We must pray to Our Lady of the Sorrows and implore her to see us through these trials and tribulations and comfort us with her love."

The rest of the boy's time is spent assisting Signora Baldasso in the kitchen of the rectory where a stiff pallet has been prepared for him to sleep in a small alcove behind the coal-fired cook stove that the friars insist must be extinguished after Vespers to save fuel. Food and fuel shortages are severe in the Eternal City now that the British and American armies have taken Sicily, the breadbasket of the country, and are doggedly fighting their way northward up the Italian peninsula with the Germans and Italians in retreat.

Meanwhile, Adamo has discovered a loose iron bar in the grated window above his pallet that rests on the cold stone floor. If he removes the bar, the opening offers just space enough for a small boy to slip through, that is, if he strips naked and hasn't filled his tummy with the remains of the sumptuous meals the friars indulge in every night, leaving whatever scrapings remain in the bottom of the pots to him, the cook's boy, and the rectory's eight large dogs. The friars' larder is crammed with legs of salty prosciutto from Parma and wheels of Pecorino Romano cheese, as well as thousands of hard cured sausages, salami and soppresata dangling from the heavy chestnut beams of the cellar. There are casks of wine of every vintage dating back as far as the Roman Republic of 1849 when Garibaldi conquered the city and banished the Pope to exile in Naples. They collect their daily bread and pastry ration *gratis* from the local bakeries in a kind of gentle taxation. Pasta prices have tripled and bread prices quadrupled since 1938 when Mussolini's racial laws paved the way for the Pact of Steel with Germany. The city outside the rectory may be starving, but life inside is still good.

Adamo is focusing on how to squeeze his skinny frame through the enlarged opening in the grill so he can slip down the unlit streets to the marshaling yard where the coal tenders of trains, the ones Il Duce made to run on time, spilled their precious fuel between the shiny steel rails. Partisans have sabotaged the electrical power generating stations despite heavy repressive measures taken by the occupying Germans. There are few electric lamps burning

in the city streets now, while shards of warm yellow candlelight escape from cracks in the shuttered and shaded windows of homes. He will gather whatever lumps of coal he can find in the darkness before the Ferrovie dello Stato guards or the Fascist military policemen discover the intrusion and chase him with their wooden cudgels or let loose the ferocious German Shepherd dogs.

There are always boys and men and even some women scouring these railyards for wood and coal to warm their families or the occasional bit of scrap iron or brass to sell for a few Lira. He takes special care not to soil or rip the thick woolen coat that the housekeeper has sewn for him out of scraps. When he arrives home with his pockets filled with chunks of pilfered anthracite, he'll rekindle the cook stove and stay warm until she arouses him at five to attend Matins.

Signora Baldasso has cautioned Adamo to steer clear of the crumbling Cenci palace at nighttime. Screams were often heard from inside the dark upper chambers, she tells him, and people sometimes report beams of light bobbing about behind the cracked and blackened windowpanes as the murdered family walks its silent corridors. She herself once caught a glimpse of the headless Beatrice stock-still in her blood-soaked negligée on a balcony under a full moon. This bit of advice she whispered to Adamo *sotto voce* the first time she discovered how it was he managed to keep the cook stove burning warmly all night, although Don Emilio was careful to remove the coal shuttle to the cellar whose heavy timbered and iron-bound door he bolted and secured with a large brass padlock each evening before extinguishing all the candles and kerosene lamps in the building.

Signora Baldasso wore white cotton gloves on her hands and wrapped her feet in strips of soiled linen cloth inside her flimsy leather sandals, even in the humid heat of the Roman summer. The woman was odd, the boy figured, like the rest of them. Still, he accepted her advice and gave the old Cenci palace a wide berth as he hurried to and from the railyards.

One time, she had even allowed him to visit her tiny room at the base of the bell tower where they knelt together at the foot of her rusting iron bedstead with its hard, straw-filled mattress in the flickering candlelight to pray. On the pillow was perched a crudely carved wooden figurine of the child Jesus dressed in infant's clothing.

"Pray for your mother and father," she told him. "And then we will sing an Ave Maria together."

"My mother is dead," he replied succinctly. "And we haven't seen our father for years, not since he went to America. I want my sister. I'm going to pray for her."

Carlotta Baldasso rose from her calloused knees and hugged the skinny child tightly against the thick skirts and colorful patchwork apron covering her midsection, then dabbed at the corners of her large sad-puppy eyes with a crumpled flower-print handkerchief. The woman had no babies of her own and no husband to make one for her, despite calling herself *signora*, a title generally reserved for married women. Like everyone in the Rione Sant'Angelo, she already knew the tragic fate of her Jewish neighbors.

She was of medium stature, muddy complexioned, with badly hacked and disheveled black hair that wreathed her oval face and thick-lipped features like an angry nest of vipers. Young Adamo's first impression was one of revulsion. She was spare like the boy who, after only a few weeks of regular meals at the rectory, had entered a growth spurt. She'd worked here in the friars' kitchen practically all her life; well, to the extent of her memory, that is.

She stayed close to San Gregorio and kept a low profile since people outside shunned her, for whatever reason, likely some long-forgotten transgression of their rough social code.

Her oldest memory and the subject of lingering nightmares was that of an angry mob shouting “*Diavola! Uccidere! Morte alla stregonina!....Kill her, kill her, kill the little witch....*” It was a much younger Don Peppino this time who rescued the wounded girl as the jeering crowd stooped to gather more loose paving stones and carried her to the rectory in his arms.

“What are you going to pray for?” the boy asked.

“*Nulla, gioia. Assolutamente nulla....Nothing, my dear. Absolutely nothing.*”

Carlotta Baldasso was not a woman given to celebration but tonight she has allowed herself a fleeting smile.

Chapter Five

September 1939

Jacob Mortillaro held the crisp paper envelope between his forefinger and thumb, turning it front to back then back to front again, as if deciding whether to slice it open with the pearl-mounted pen knife that dangled from the bright golden links of his watch chain, put it back in the post after scribbling 'return to sender' across the front, or toss it into the coal stove. Of course, he would open it. He'd been waiting months for news of Lucrezia.

New York

25 July 1939

My Dearest Jacopo,

Sincerest apologies to you and your family for the delay in writing after arriving in this marvelous city. The voyage from Napoli was uneventful, given the risks and uncertainty of trans-Atlantic crossings these days; nonetheless, all was gaiety aboard ship and we reached New York without incident. Our dear agent Torturicci was waiting at the pier and accompanied us to the lodgings he had arranged near Central Park and facilitated our introduction to various persons of influence in the musical theatre and grand opera circles here. The only one missing is you, first and best loved tenore di grazia of the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma. How we do wish you could join us.

Torturicci informs me that there is a part opening for someone of your caliber in next year's production of Aida at the Met. I have played the gramophone disks you cut for him and he is impressed with your vocal range, coloratura, and incredible sustain, as well as your fine résumé of performances in Italy and the Opéra National de Paris.

If you can, I must have your response very soon. The production company is already holding auditions for the part of Radamès and we can only stall long enough for you to book passage on the next available ship.

Please convey our warmest regards to your dear wife and two precious children. Tanti affettuosi abbracci e baci a tutti.

La Malatesta sends her love....

In bocca al lupo,

Manfredi

Jacob refolded the single, gossamer-thin sheet, returning it to the envelope with its red, white and blue trimmed border and the Statue of Liberty engraved on the cancelled postage stamp that he secreted inside a sheaf of music under a tall pile of leather bound librettos and books. He thought he could detect Lucrezia's faint perfume emanating from between the

florid lines of her husband's handwriting. When he thought of Manfredi's offer of the male lead in Aida, it was the smooth, moist passage between the diva's thighs that more immediately came to mind.

Working at the Metropolitan Opera would place him close to her again, this time away from the prying eyes of Anna, his wife. It would be a difficult sell but, in the end, she would accept his decision to go. He would frame the proposal as an opportunity to move the family far away from what was shaping up as another exercise in collective madness and the latest chapter in a long history of oppression and abuse of European Jewry.

Anna took the proposal with resolve. They barely survived on his small salary from the Teatro dell'Opera and whatever extra Lira he managed to earn entertaining at weddings and bar mitzvahs, she pointed out. Their fourteen-year-old daughter Atalia was next to useless. Mussolini had expelled all the Jewish children from the schools after enacting the racial laws only the year before. Now the girl lay about the apartment all day in a deep funk, absentmindedly thumbing her shabby collection of movie magazines and frequenting a nearby cinema after dark, her behavior the subject of many a heated family argument. Little Adamo, practically at his mother's breast, was too young to contribute anything to the family larder. Finally, they didn't have sufficient savings to purchase even one third-class steamship ticket to New York, never mind four.

Other than that, Anna informed her determined husband, he was free to go.

Chapter Six

The white smoke that appeared at 17:30 hours on March 2, 1939 had suddenly turned to black. Monsignor Vincenzo Santoro grabbed the telephone and dialed Vatican Radio to reassure Rome, and the entire world, that the smoke was indeed white. Eugenio Pacelli had been elected as the new Supreme Pontiff.

A career diplomat and favorite of Adolph Hitler, the former Papal Nuncio in Berlin and later Vatican Secretary of State, had negotiated the Reichskonkordat of 1933 in which the Church gave moral legitimacy to the Nazi regime at the same time it disenfranchised the German bishops to create a more monolithic ecclesiastical structure with the Pope as supreme dictator. Pacelli now moved himself into the papal quarters along with two caged songbirds and Sister Pasqualina, a Bavarian nun, his so-called housekeeper. Rumors would circulate about the pair but they were short-lived since by then the world had more distressing matters on its mind. Italy was poised for an invasion of Albania. German troops were amassing on the border with Czechoslovakia. In America, students at Harvard University were swallowing live goldfish. Then the letter arrived.

In the first week of October, Jacob Mortillaro booked passage on the French steamship *St. Nazaire* sailing from Genoa to New York via Marseille and Gibraltar using the money that his friend Manfredi had wired him. He caught the morning train at Termini Station in time to put himself on the Genoa waterfront by nightfall. The man would not be seen or heard in Italy, ever again. Nothing further was known of Jacob until the white smoke appeared three times more and his heirs were far from the spot where the Teatro Dell'Opera di Roma's *tenore di grazia* had treated the country of his birth and cradle of his singing career to one final encore.

As her husband changed trains at Florence, then Viareggio and La Spezia faded into the distance, Anna Mortillaro gathered whatever family heirlooms she could find and delivered these to the nearest pawnbroker. Over the next months, she would make more visits to this small, bearded man with unruly white hair and tiny oval shaped spectacles hunkered down inside a cubical along the Tevere, a man who'd grown rich in times of adversity, benefitting from the bad life choices made by other residents of the *quartiere*. Although Shakespeare had lamentably depicted pawnbrokers as being of the Hebrew persuasion, at least during Elizabethan times, this was not at all true in the Rome of 1939. The man's name wasn't Shylock. Until recently, many Jews had been enthusiastic members of the Fascist Party.

Anna emptied her delicately embroidered cotton handkerchief into a tarnished metal tray laid on the rough wood counter in front of her and came away with almost two months' rent in exchange for her wedding ring, two pearl earrings that had once belonged to her mother, a thin gold necklace with a Star of David pendant, and a slender, white gold lady's diamond ring that she'd discovered one day in the pocket of her husband's overcoat and secreted away without another word. Curiously, Jacob had never mentioned it.

Taking her numbered receipt, she was reminded of the coat check counter at the Teatro dell'Opera and for no apparent reason began to cry. The little man told Anna that she could return there anytime with the repayment and there would not be any interest charged. But don't take too long, he warned with an uncertain smile.

On the way back to her apartment, she stopped at a news kiosk and purchased that evening's *Il Messaggero*, as well as a copy of *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican's own news organ. Later she would peruse the help wanted sections in search of whatever she might chance to find there. Italian industry needed workers for the assembly lines, she reasoned, especially now when so many young men were being called up for military service and women were taking their places in the factories. Maybe her husband's leaving would not be so difficult after all.

They'd lately not been getting on so well and Anna felt herself approaching that stage of life when physical sex, never mind romantic love, seemed less appealing than sitting down to a good meal and afterwards enjoying a hot soothing bath. She'd long ago sensed that a woman could never experience true love – however the word 'true' might be defined – in a man's embrace and her husband's departure seemed to prove the point. Only with her children had she felt unqualified affection without any small print in the contract or other extraneous conditions attached. With Jacob, it was always a medium of exchange: he gave her the two children she'd planned for and put bread on the table, she gave him whatever else the man couldn't provide for himself. There wasn't a great meeting of minds here, nor any merging of souls. His career in grand opera had not produced the material comforts she'd expected and the man was often absent from the home for periods of time, sometimes without plausible explanation. All in all, their marriage was a disappointment. Quite suddenly now and without further ceremony, he was gone.

Despite this jumble of worrisome thoughts and defying all logic, Anna felt herself become unexpectedly lighter as if, in defiance of the odds, she was suddenly free to start over.

Chapter Seven

At the end of a narrow street where she found a run down little piazza with a badly fractured fountain, Anna placed her copy of L'Osservatore Romano on the mossy marble rim before resting her bottom against the cool stone. A sprinkling of rain had moistened the cover pages of the newspapers that she had held above her head during the walk from the river toward the ghetto and now the limp, inky sheets came apart in clumps of papier-mâché in her fingers. Among the center sheets she discovered the adverts still crisp and dry.

She traced her finger down first the left then the right-hand column of Il Messaggero's help wanted section then tossed the paper aside and retrieved L'Osservatore Romano. Since she hadn't any trade or profession, such as nurse or hairdresser or pastry chef, and therefore brought no special skills to the job market, her initial search did not look at all promising. The factory jobs were all in Milano or Torino, not Roma, that was, as the Romans themselves joked, a city of "*torri, campane, preti e putane*... towers, bells, priests and whores."

Among the unskilled and semi-skilled labor pool, advertisers sought caregivers to attend their aged parents or provide company for an invalid but this was mainly nighttime work and Anna had her two children to look after. At fourteen, Atalia was as much a problem as was four-year-old Adamo. After the racial laws of 1938, all Jewish students were barred from the public schools – which were also Catholic schools since the Lateran Treaty of 1929 gave control of education in Italy to the Church – and her daughter had been forcibly expelled from classes. Since then, the defiant girl came and went as she pleased, even after darkness fell over the city, ignoring her mother's words of caution that sometimes led to angry altercations. Anna didn't consider Atalia trustworthy and she could never rely on the girl to look after her little brother in her absence, especially at night when the girl was out roaming the streets, to feed him and keep him safe. She thought about taking in laundry or looking after other people's children but where to start? The Roman nobility and bourgeoisie had live-in nannies and housekeepers. The rest couldn't afford help.

When no valuables were left to pawn, the landlord came to collect the rent money himself rather than sending his daughter, as had earlier been the custom. The man was blunt in his proposal. The woman needed something, namely this flat of his that her family had occupied during the last six years. She could pay for the accommodations in Lira notes or they could negotiate another means of exchange.

When a husband goes to America, the shameless fellow informed Anna, he finds another woman to fill his need. There was no shortage of females, especially in New York. They waited in droves for the handsome Italian men when they disembarked at the wharves in Manhattan, taking their pick and leading them straight home to bed. He knew about these things. He'd been to America himself, worked hard and come back with money to purchase these flats that he rented to people in the ghetto. Now he was enjoying the fruits of his labor. But how many other fine husbands like him had she seen returning from America to their families or sending the passage money as they promised? They rarely ever did.

As he mouths all these truths and half-truths, his voice becomes softer and he places his coarse, unshaven face closer to her cheek, whispering. As if they had a mind and will of their own, his fingers begin to remove the top button of her blouse, then the next button and the next until he can just slip his hand inside to cup one of her small breasts. Anna feels her nipples harden. She knows that a pact has been drawn up and sealed without her having to utter a single word.

Chapter Eight

When he reached the Genoa waterfront with the looming St. Nazaire tethered at dockside, a smartly uniformed customs officer examined Jacob's passport and boarding papers then demanded to see his exit visa.

"All Jews leaving Italy require an exit visa," he declared.

"Since when is a visa necessary?" Jacob replied, puzzled. "I travel regularly to France and was never asked for such a thing. Is this a new law?"

"Not a law. It's our policy. You can purchase the visa from me now or stay behind. Your choice. The ship sails at 22:00 hours."

"And how much is the fee for this exit visa?"

"That depends on what you offer me," the officer shot back, annoyed by the impertinence of this person whom legislation had now deemed a lesser species. He turned instead to the heavysset, mink clad matron in an absurdly large feathered hat, cradling a miniature white poodle dog, next in line behind Jacob. He quickly stamped her papers, patted the panting mutt on its furry head, then handed everything back to the smirking woman who strutted boldly up the gangplank into the ship.

"If you're not boarding the ship then step aside," the pompous man in his richly tailored costume ordered. He sported a chrome-tanned leather Sam Brown belt over his considerable paunch in the same way that an overly endowed matron employs a corset, with holstered pistol and brightly colored campaign ribbons dangling from the left breast pocket. Jacob wondered whether art mimics life or was it the other way around? He felt himself at the opera house, under the spotlight again, the love-struck Radamès, captain of the Egyptian guards bursting into song....

*“Celeste Aida, forma divina.
Mistico serto di luce e fior,
Del mio pensiero tu sei regina,
Tu di mia vita sei lo splendor.
Il tuo bel cielo vorrei redarti,
Le dolci brezze del patrio suol;
Un regal serto sul crin posarti,
Ergerti un trono vicino al sol, vicino al sol, vicino
al s-o-o-o-l!”*

The long file of passengers with their suitcases and steamer trucks waiting to board, the scruffily clad porters, assorted ship’s officers and sailors, hangers-on and wharf rats, all break into hearty applause. The customs goons are clapping their gloved hands. Several shout, “*Bravissimo!*” and “*Da capo!*” Everyone is smiling.

The bemedalled officer reaches for Jacob’s documents then quickly stamps them and hands the lot back.

“Complimenti, Maestro, e buon viaggio.”

Chapter Nine

May 1940

The landlord finished his business and reached to the floor to recover his trousers before leaving while Anna lay naked and sweaty on the crumpled bed, the one that she and Jacob had shared and where she had birthed both her children. She calmly surveyed this unexpected stranger who had so artlessly entered her life, neither lover nor client, and for whom, despite the circumstances and defying all logic, she was beginning to experience some tender feelings.

The man was rough and uncultured in practically every way, so unlike the meticulously groomed Jacob with his penchant for learning, extensive knowledge of the Talmud, and his musical abilities. Nevertheless, he was better endowed and more sexually accomplished than her absentee husband and Anna, who despite her timid self was a secret risk taker, had lately decided she would open herself a little to him, that is, she had allowed him to bring her to orgasm which was a feat that Jacob, after so many years, never quite managed.

After five months without any word, she had come to regard Jacob Mortillaro as her ex-husband and each passing day confirmed the validity of the landlord's remarks. A man quickly finds another woman to fulfill his need. When a husband goes to America, he rarely comes back. This is what he had said the day he came to collect and she had no money to pay the rent. The words were pure *spezzatura* and like a splattering of wine stains they simply refused to wash away.

She had submitted to his proposal under duress, in a spirit of acceptance, and without much resistance. The angry, wrathful HaShem was sometimes prone to overlooking acceptance of evil, she thought, if it were done without compromise and out of necessity. Like the virgin daughters of Lot, for instance, who eagerly coupled with their besotted father to prevent the extinction of the whole human race, while Sodom burned in the background. Acceptance was one thing, but the Almighty didn't like compromises. His was a Fascist universe starkly delineated in black and white. There were only the victor and the vanquished, which made perfect sense. In a compromise between food and poison, she reasoned, death was the only sure outcome. Therefore, Anna had accepted the inevitable and allowed herself to be vanquished.

Of course, acceptance of a necessary evil could never constitute a good, but then the complexion of things seemed to be changing, at least on her side of the affair. She was acquiring a physical need for this man, like Mussolini had developed an affinity for Hitler despite his keeping a Jewish mistress. Given that she was beginning to receive more satisfaction from their encounters than just rent relief, if she were forced to choose now between the man's rough embrace and a hot soothing bath, she'd gladly forgo the bath.

He flipped the thick suspender straps one after another over his shoulders, straightened his waistband and patted down the crumpled trouser fronts then, before opening the door to leave, reached into a front pocket to extract a few Lira notes and placed them on her dressing table. Anna said nothing, not even thanks. She didn't need to wash his soiled undergarments or prepare his pasta for him or endure his complaints about her relatives or listen to a never-ending litany of annoyances or share a life that had long since degenerated into a routine of hostility and petty bickering. She wasn't his wife.

“A deacon of Saint John Lateran owes me some money,” he said to Anna, stalling in the doorway with his crumpled felt hat in hand. “Gambling debts. I can ask a favor, like a job for you cleaning toilets in the rectory or something. Even Jews can do that kind of work. It doesn’t take any skill. Do you want me to talk with him about it?”

“Yes. Please do that for me if you can. You know how difficult it is for us and I want more security; that is, besides what happens in this room.” She was careful not to offend this man. He was her lifeline, after all. “I have two children to feed and I need a steady job.”

“Yeah, sure. *Però, mi raccomando...* don’t go turning no tricks with them priests, I’m warning you. *Sono cattivi, tutti quanti.* They’re a bad lot, all of them.”

What began with tenderness had finished in a threat. To him she was just another whore. Anna pulled the soiled linen sheet tightly over her head and pretended she was dead.

* * *

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