

The Besieged Courtyard

by Giovanna Zangrandi

It was more an open space than a courtyard, something between a garden and a threshing floor; it was the point of access to the vegetable patch, the henhouse, and the vast terraced field which lay high above the river. It was my childhood kingdom [*regno*], with ancient roots in a heroic period when horses and wagons stopped there to rest, which echoed still with the distant thunder of “real” soldiers whose assaults made the air and the ground tremble, a period that now seems very remote, the “stuff of stories.”

Of course, it also lived through a more realistic period, hosting an ark of animals to whom I felt alternatively like a queen, a relative, and a friend: the great horse, Giuditta, her children and grandchildren; the sow, Sandra; piglets and rabbits, chickens, guinea pigs, and turtle doves; the raven, Tonino; Anastasia, the turtle, and the river banks, alive if not speaking.

When my father grew ill, the farm slowly emptied: the horses were sold with the walnut trees that had enclosed their pasture (I was at school and hadn't heard the cracking of the centuries-old trunks. When I returned, they were already being taken away on long carts. It seemed like a funeral, yet I was the only one who mourned them). The large meadow leading down to the river was leased, ploughed, and sown with sorghum and millet. And the courtyard we were left with was sad and empty, the flower bushes withered, the apples in the vegetable patch wrinkled and puckered; these days, I walked calmly and seriously: I would take a basket of feed to the ten laying hens which still lived in the henhouse, carrying back their eggs, feeling like a “big girl” who had to help around the house. There no longer remained any desire to play in the courtyard, which was now covered in frozen puddles of rain and half-melted snow and crowded with abandoned rubbish.

It was towards the beginning of spring when my father decided to have a small residence built in the southern part of the stable to accommodate a family of farmhands, Berto and Clelia and their daughter; the man was a devil, young and tall, a “foreigner,” half Brescian; he came to our town during his military service, and the sin of love rooted him here, pairing him to a stout girl named Clelia di Ceo. Now she was a round, dull, married woman with a beautiful baby

girl, six or seven months old, white and rosy like her name, Biancarosa.

The temperature varied in March, when gusts of wind blew down from the snow-covered ridges of the Great Alps; on colder days, trains of clouds rose from the edges of the rain gutters and the tangles of bare branches. The mason, Mario, had come to work with Berto on the stable; they were slow and precise, amiable, sometimes even breaking into laughter, especially Berto; they quickly became friends; at lunchtime, my mother would give me a bottle of wine to bring them.

In the evenings, Berto came to visit my father to confer about his progress. He would enter the dining room, stooping down under the door, carrying a wave of his smell, a swirl of hay and sweat, not musty but fragrant, the scent of the valley. I would bring him a glass of wine, which he drank gently. Sometimes he tried to engage my father in political dialogues. I didn't understand everything, but I noticed that my father sometimes chose his words carefully; he was neither relaxed and casual nor dialectical and combative, such as he was with certain people like the secretary or representative or someone else with the red tie [of the Communist Party] or the black bow of the anarchists; though Berto had barely graduated from the third grade, he had things to say about Marx, Pareto, and the other great authors on my father's bookshelf. "Those people there," he would ultimately declare, "must make a revolution and kill those bold, bomb-throwing swine who tyrannized us at the foot of Caporetto!¹ A workers' republic must be declared, and the masters must be killed," Berto would shout, adding later, "Not all of them, needless to say, I'm referring only to the swine."

My father would shake his head pensively, tired as he often was, pouring Berto another glass; as the discussion languished and drifted off, Berto would rise, giving us each his huge, callused hand without a squeeze, as if he were afraid he might crush us or bind himself to a pact.

As had happened in the past, my father's friends would sporadically come over after dinner that autumn, joining us in our snug dining room. The dining room was the heart of our house: its mainstay was the walnut table which stood in the center of the room, surrounded by a cabinet of fine porcelain, my father's bookshelf, the cupboard of cutlery, a rather ragged sofa, and his armchair, which sat beside the large tiled stove; it could be a dining room, a study, a work room, a playroom, or a meeting place. At the end of the loggia was, or more accurately had been, the good living room [*il salotto buono*];² now our armchairs were amassed in the corner, covered with cloth, repugnant gray ghosts; it had become extraneous, completely invaded by crates of apples and other foodstuffs, sacks

1 See footnote 9, reference to *arditi*.

2 *Il salotto buono* is a room for receiving respectable people, typically found in a middle-class home.

of wheat or birdseed, almost as if it opened into another house entirely; I was afraid to go there by myself at night.

In the dining room, there was even a place for my toys in the corner between the cupboard and the wall. If my father's friends visited, I would leave my corner to greet them (not hostile, snarling, or rude, as I had been with the well-dressed women who had once come to visit the good living room), before running off to fetch a bottle of old wine. I knew exactly which shelf to reach for in the cellar, being careful not to stir the dust, bringing the bottle to my father with a corkscrew. He would uncork the bottle ceremoniously, and they would sip the wine gently, nourishing their discussions, which were often rather difficult or even impossible for me to understand.

On certain evenings, however, I devoted myself to observing them, listening, knowing that their words were important. Once, after they had left, I asked my mother, "Mama, are Papa's friends and the things they say important?"

She laughed without making a sound and ruffled my hair. Speaking assuredly and without hesitation, "They say important things, very important things, but those things don't help any longer. You'll understand when you're older."

On such evenings, I watched them from my corner, surrounded by small stools and dolls that no longer attracted me, nonsense for small children, blech! The most assiduous and dear to my father was the party secretary, a forty-year-old man, tall and gray, with two severe eyes and a confident, measured voice. They would exchange books on the history of religion, all the while speaking the names of gods whom I knew only vaguely: Indian and Chinese and, I don't know, Buddha, Confucius, Muhammad. I also learned that none of them were any good: my father and his friend repudiated and demolished them all, while the pale, morose interim veterinarian listened on until finally he began to recite verses himself, saying that a sect of Bacchus and Venus must be founded; with that they finished their glasses of wine.

Other evenings, Porfirio, the watchmaker, would come over, red and thin, with a big black anarchist bow, accompanied at times by Omodeo, the carpenter, a little old man who tried each time to tell the story of how he had met an important Russian in Switzerland, a short name that I had also read in the big headlines of the newspapers, Lenin.

Porfirio was the funniest, waving about his nervous little hands as he preached, speaking of the revolutions that must be made, of barricades and gunshots, until the others turned against him, citing the events in Russia and France. I watched my father admiringly, he was so confident, so good at geography. If only he would recover...

I had never liked Omodeo, but I began to hate him from the moment I heard him say, "We should bring down the king and all his henchmen: we deserve an