

Sacred Hearts

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Published by Virago Press

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SACRED HEARTS

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PART ONE

The Convent of Santa Caterina, Ferrara, 1570

ONE

Before the screaming starts, the night silence of the convent is alive with its own particular sounds.

In a downstairs cell, Suora Ysbeta's lap dog, swaddled like a baby in satin cloth, is hunting in its dreams, muzzled grunts and growls marking the pleasure of each rabbit cornered. Ysbeta herself is also busy with the chase, her silver tray doubling as a mirror, her right hand poised as she closes a pair of bone tweezers over a stubborn white hair on her chin. She pulls sharply, the sting and the satisfaction of the release in the same short 'aahaa' of breath.

Across the courtyard two young women, plump and soft-cheeked as children, lie together on a single pallet, entwined like kindling twigs, their faces so close that they seem almost to be exchanging breaths, the one inhaling as the other lets go. In. Out. In. Out. There is a slight sweetness to the air. Angelica perhaps. Or sweet mint, as if they have both eaten the same sugared cake or drunk from the same spiced wine cup. Whatever it is they have imbibed it has left them both sleeping soundly, their contentment a low hum of pleasure in the room.

Suora Benedicta, meanwhile, can barely contain herself, there is so much music inside her head. Tonight it is a setting of the

Gradual for the feast of the Epiphany, the different voices like coloured tapestry threads weaving in and over each other. Sometimes they move so fast that she can barely chalk them down, this forest of white notes on her slate blackboard. There are nights when she doesn't seem to sleep at all, or when the voices are so insistent she is sure she must be singing out loud with them. Still, no-one admonishes her next day, nor wakes her if she slips into a sudden nap in the refectory. Her compositions bring honour and benefactors to the convent and so her eccentricities are overlooked.

In contrast, young Suora Perseveranza is in thrall to the music of suffering. A single tallow candle spits shadows across her cell. Her shift is so thin that she can feel the winter damp as she leans back against the stone wall. She pulls the cloth up over her calves and thighs, then more carefully across her stomach, letting out a series of fluttering moans as the material sticks and catches on the open wounds underneath. She stops, breathing fast once or twice to still herself, then tugs harder where she meets resistance, until the half-formed skin tears and lifts off with the cloth. The candlelight reveals a leather belt nipped around her waist, a series of short nails on the inside, a few so deeply embedded into the flesh beneath that all that can be seen are the crusted, swollen wounds where the leather and the skin have fused together. Slowly, deliberately, she presses on one of the studs. Her hand jumps back involuntarily, a cry bursting out of her, but there is an exhilaration to the sound, a challenge to herself as her fingers go back again.

She keeps her gaze fixed on the wall ahead, where the guttering light picks out a carved wooden crucifix; Christ, young, alive, his muscles running through the grain as his body strains forward against the nails, his face etched with sorrow. She stares at him, her own body trembling, tears wet on her cheeks, her

eyes bright. Wood, iron, leather, flesh. Her world is contained in this moment. She is within His suffering. He is within hers. She is not alone. Pain has become pleasure. She presses the stud again and her breath comes out in a long satisfying growl, almost an animal sound, consumed and consuming.

In the next-door cell, Suora Umiliana's fingers pause briefly over her chattering rosary beads. The sound of the young sister's devotion is like the taste of honey in her mouth. When she was younger she too had sought out God through open wounds but now as novice mistress it is her duty to put others' spiritual well-being before her own. She bows her head and returns to her beads.

In her cell above the infirmary, Suora Zuana, Santa Caterina's dispensary mistress, is busy with her own kind of prayer. She sits bent over Brunfels' great book of herbs, her forehead creased in concentration. Next to her is a recently finished sketch of a geranium plant, the leaves of which have proved effective at staunching cuts and flesh wounds – one of the younger nuns has started passing clots of blood and she is searching for a compound to stop a wound she cannot see.

Perseveranza's moans echo along the upper cloister corridor. Last summer, when the heat brought the beginnings of infection to the wounds and those who sat next to the young nun in chapel complained about the smell, the abbess had sent her to the dispensary for treatment. Zuana had washed and dressed the angry lesions as best she could and given her ointment to reduce the swelling. There is nothing else she can do. While it is possible that Perseveranza might eventually poison herself with some deeper infection, she is healthy enough otherwise and from what Zuana knows of the way the body works she doesn't think this will happen. The world is full of stories of men and women who

live with such mutilations for years; and while Perseveranza might talk fondly enough of death, it's clear that she gains too much joy from her suffering to want to end it prematurely.

Zuana herself doesn't share this passion for self-mortification. Before she came to the convent she had lived for many years as the only child of a professor of medicine. His very reason for being alive had been to explore the power of nature to heal the body and she cannot remember a moment in her life when she didn't share his fervour. She would have made a fine doctor or teacher like him, had such a thing been possible. As it is, she is fortunate that after his death his name and his estate were good enough to buy her a cell in the convent of Santa Caterina, where so many noble women of Ferrara find space to pursue their own ways to live inside God's protection.

Still, any convent, however well adjusted, trembles a little when it takes in one who really does not want to be there.

Zuana looks up from her table. The sobbing coming from the recently arrived novice's cell has now become too loud to be ignored. What had started as ordinary tears has grown into angry howls. As dispensary mistress it is Zuana's job, should things become difficult, to settle any newcomer by means of a sleeping potion. She turns over the hourglass. The draught is already mixed and ready in the dispensary. The only question is how long she should wait.

It is a delicate business, judging the depth of a novice's distress. Once the feasting is over, the family have left and the great doors are bolted against the world, a certain level of upset is only natural and even the most devout of young women can suffer a rush of panic when faced with the solitude and silence of the closed cell.

Those with relatives inside are the easiest to settle. Most of them have cut their teeth on convent cakes and biscuits, been so

pampered and fussed over through years of visiting that the cloister is already a second home to them. If – as it might – the day itself unleashes a flurry of exhausted tears, there is always an aunt, sister or cousin on hand to cajole or comfort them.

For others, who might have harboured dreams of a more flesh-and-blood bridegroom or left a favourite brother or doting mother, the tears are as much mourning the past as fear of the future. The sisters in charge treat them gently as they clamber out of dresses and petticoats, shivering from nerves rather than cold, their naked arms raised high in the air in readiness for the shift. But all the care in the world cannot disguise the loss of freedom and though some might later substitute silk for serge (such fashionable transgressions are ignored rather than allowed), that first night girls with soft skin and no proclivity for penance can be driven mad by the itch and the scratch. These tears have an edge of self-pity to them and it is better that they cry them now, for they can become a slow poison if left to fester.

Eventually the storm blows itself out and the convent returns to sleep. The watch sister will patrol the corridors, keeping tally of the hour until Matins, two hours after midnight, at which point she will pass through the great cloister in the dark, knocking on each door in turn but missing out that of the latest arrival. It is a custom of Santa Caterina that the newcomer spends her first night undisturbed, so the next day will find her refreshed and better prepared to enter her new life.

Tonight, however, no-one will do much sleeping.

In the bottom of the hourglass the hill of sand is almost complete, the wailing is grown so violent that Zuana feels it in her stomach as well as her head: as if a wayward troop of devils had forced its way inside the girl's cell and was even now winding her intestines on to a spit. In their dormitory the young

boarders will be waking in terror. The hours between Compline and Matins mark the longest sleep of the night and any disturbance now will make the convent bleary-eyed and foul-tempered tomorrow. In between the screams Zuana registers a cracked voice rising up in tuneless song from the infirmary. Night fevers can conjure up all manner of visions among the ill, not all of them holy, and it will not help to have the crazed and the sickly joining in the chorus.

Zuana leaves her cell swiftly, not bothering to take a candle, her feet knowing the way better than her eyes. She moves down the stairs into the cloister and as she enters the great courtyard she is held for a second, as she often is, by its sheer beauty. From the first moment she stood here, sixteen years ago, with the walls around threatening to crush her, it has offered a space for peace and dreams. By day the air is so still it seems as if time itself has stopped, while in the dark you can almost hear the rush of angels' wings behind you. Not tonight, though. Tonight the stone well in the middle looms up like a grey ship in a sea of black, the sound of the girl's sobbing a wild wind echoing around it. It reminds her of the story her father used to tell of the time he sailed to the East Indies to collect plant specimens and how they found a merchant boat abandoned in steamy waters, the only sign of life the screeching of a starving parrot left on board. 'Just imagine, carissima. If only we could have understood that bird's language, what secrets might it have revealed?'

Unlike him, Zuana has never seen the ocean and the only siren voices she knows are those of soaring sopranos in chapel or wailing women in the night. Or the yelping of noisy dogs – like the one now yapping in Suora Ysbeta's cell, a small, matted ball of hair and bad smells with teeth sharp enough to bite through its night muzzle and join in the drama. Yes, it is time for the sleeping draught.

The air in the infirmary is thick with tallow candle smoke and the rosemary fumigant that she keeps burning constantly to counteract the stench of illness. She passes the young choir sister crippled by her bleeding insides, her body curled in over itself, eyes tight shut in a way that speaks of prayer rather than sleep. In the remaining beds the other sisters are as old as they are ill, their lungs filled with winter damp so they bubble and rasp as they breathe. Most of them are deaf to anything but the voices of angels, though not above competing as to whose choir is the sweetest.

‘Oh, sweet Jesus! It is coming. Save us all.’

While Suora Clementia’s ears are still sharp enough to make out the pad of a cat’s paw, her mind is so clouded that she might read it as the footfall of the devil’s messenger or the first sign of the second coming.

‘Huuushhh.’

‘Hear the screaming. Hear the screaming!’ The old woman is bolt upright in the last bed, her arms flapping as if to beat off some invisible attack. ‘The graves are opening. We will all be consumed.’

Zuana catches her hands and pulls them down on to the sheets, holding them still while she waits for the nun to register her presence. In the Great Silence which runs from Compline until daybreak the ill and the mad will be forgiven for breaking the rule but others risk grave penance for any squandered speech.

‘Sshssh.’

Across the courtyard another howl rises up, followed by a crash and a splintering of wood. She pushes the old nun gently back down towards the bed, settling her as best she can. The tang of fresh urine lifts off the sheet. It can wait until morning. The servant sisters will be gentler if they have had some sleep.

Taking the night light, she moves swiftly into the dispensary, which lies behind a door at the far end of the infirmary. In front of her a wall of pots, vials and bottles dances in rhythm to the flickering flame. She knows each and every one of them; this room is her home, more familiar to her even than her cell. She takes a glass vial from a drawer and, after a second's hesitation, reaches for a bottle from the second shelf, uncorks it and adds some further drops of syrup. Any novice who breaks furniture as well as silence will need a stronger soporific.

Back in the main cloisters Zuana notes a ribbon of light now glowing under the door of the abbess's outer chamber. Madonna Chiara will be up and dressed, sitting at her carved walnut table, head erect, prayer book open under the silver crucifix, a cloak around her shoulders, no doubt, to keep out the night draughts. She will not interfere – not unless for some reason Zuana's intervention fails. They have an understanding on such matters.

Zuana moves quickly down the corridor, stopping briefly outside Suora Magdalena's door. She is the oldest nun in the convent, so old that there is no-one left alive who knows her age. Her decrepitude should have had her in the infirmary long ago, but her will and her piety are so fused that she will accept no comfort but prayer. She talks to no-one and never leaves her cell. Of all the souls inside Santa Caterina, God must surely be most eager for hers. Yet still He keeps her at arm's length. There are times when Zuana passes her cell at night when she might swear she can hear her lips moving through the wood, each word inching her closer to Paradise.

'But God is good and his mercy endureth for ever. Be thankful to Him and bless his name.' The words of the psalm flow into Zuana's head without her bidding as she moves along the corridor.

The new girl is in the double cell in the corner. Some might

argue that it was an unfortunate choice. Less than a month before, the sweet-voiced Suora Tommasa had been singing the latest madrigals in here, verses slipped in by a sister who had learned them at court, until some malignant growth had erupted in her brain and she had keeled over into a fit from which she never woke. They had barely cleaned the vomit off the walls by the time the new entrant had been approved. Zuana wonders now if perhaps they didn't clean hard enough. Over the years she has come to suspect that convent cells hold on to their past longer than other places. Certainly, she wouldn't be the first young novice to feel ecstasy or malignancy pulsing off the walls around her.

The sobs grow louder as she trips the outer latch and pushes open the door. For a second she has an image of a child in an endless tantrum, flailing across the bed or crouched, cornered like an animal, but instead her candle throws up a figure flat against the wall, shift sweat-sucked to her skin, hair plastered around her face. When glimpsed through the grille in church the girl had seemed too delicate for such a voice but she is more substantial in the flesh, every sob fuelled by a great lungful of air. The one she is reaching for now stops in her throat. What does she see in front of her? A jailer or a saviour? Zuana can still feel the terror of those first days; the way in which each and every nun looked the same. When had she started to spot the differences under the cloth? How strange that she can no longer remember something she thought she would never forget.

'Benedictus,' she says quietly, the word denoting her intention to break the Great Silence. In her head she hears the abbess's voice adding the absolution, 'Deo gracias.' Within her penance it will be recognised that she is about convent duty.

'God be with you, Serafina.' She lifts the candle higher so that the girl might see there is no malice in her eyes.

‘Aaaaagh!’ The held breath explodes in a wind of fury. ‘I am not Serafina. That’s not my name.’

The words reach Zuana as flecks of saliva on her face.

‘You will feel better when you have had some sleep.’

‘Ha! Ha . . . I will feel better when I’m dead.’

How old is this one? Fifteen? Maybe sixteen? Young enough to have a life to look forward to. Old enough to know when it is being cut short. What had the abbess told them when they had voted her in? That hers was a noble family from Milan with important business connections to Ferrara, eager to show loyalty to the city by giving their daughter to one of its greatest convents: a pure child bred on God’s love, with a voice like that of a nightingale. Sadly no-one had seen fit to mention the howling of a werewolf.

‘Maybe I am dead already. Buried in this . . . this stinking tomb.’ She kicks furiously at the ground, sending a ball of horse-hair spinning along the floor.

Zuana lifts the candle higher and registers the debris of the room: the bed tipped over on its side, the mattress and bolster ripped open, stuffing strewn everywhere. The chaos is impressive in its way.

The girl rubs the back of her hand roughly across her nose to stop the stream of tears and mucus. ‘You don’t understand.’ And now there is a furious pleading in the voice. ‘I should not be here. I am put in against my will.’

Zuana sees her, kneeling in a whirlpool of velvet before the altar, head bowed while the priest guides her through the litany of assent.

‘What about the vows you spoke in chapel,’ she says gently.

‘Words. I said words, that’s all. They came from my mouth, not my heart.’

Ah. Now it is clearer. The phrase is as well known as any

litany. Words from the mouth, not from the heart: the official language of coercion. In the right court, before a sympathetic judge, this is the defence a wife might use to try to get a desperate marriage annulled, or a novice before her bishop to have her vows dissolved. But they were a long way from any court here and it would help neither the girl nor the convent to be awake all night debating the problem.

‘Then you must tell the abbess. She is a wise woman and will guide you.’

‘So where is she now?’

Zuana smiles. ‘Like the rest of us she is trying to sleep.’

‘You think I am stupid?’ And the voice rises again. ‘She does not care about me. I’m only another dowry to her. Oh, I have no doubt my father paid very generously to keep me hidden.’

Each word that breaks the Great Silence is as painful to the Lord as it should be to the nun who utters it, but kindness and charity are also virtues within these walls; and anyway, Zuana is committed now. ‘Even the greatest dowries come with souls,’ she says gently. ‘You will come to understand that soon enough.’

‘No! Agh!’ And the girl flings her head against the wall, hard enough for them both to hear the thud. ‘No, no, no.’

But now when the tears come they are of despair as much as fury or pain, as if she knows the battle is already half lost and all she can do is mourn it. There are some sisters in Santa Caterina, women of great faith and compassion, who believe that this is the moment when Christ first truly enters into the young woman’s soul, His great love sowing seeds of hope and obedience in the soil of desperation. Zuana’s harvest had taken longer and over the years she has come to understand that the only true comfort that can be offered is the one that you yourself feel. While it is not something she is proud of, at moments such as this it is impossible to pretend otherwise.

‘Listen to me,’ she says quietly, moving closer now. ‘I cannot open the gates for you. But I can, if you let me, make tonight easier. Which in its way will help you with tomorrow, I promise you.’

And the girl is listening now. She can feel it. Her body has started to tremble and her eyes dart everywhere. What is going through her head? Escape? The cell is not locked and there is no-one to stop her flight. If she wanted she could easily push past her out of the door, across the cloisters, down the corridor towards the gatehouse – only to find that when she got there it was not the gatekeeper who held the night keys to the main door, but the abbess herself. Or out into the gardens, through the orchards until eventually she reaches the outer walls – except that they are so smooth and high that scaling them would be like trying to climb a sheet of ice. All this, of course, is common knowledge to those living within. Indeed for some the real terror only starts to bite when they imagine standing in the world outside.

‘No. No . . .’ But it is more a moan than a protest. She covers her face with her hands and slides slowly down the wall, her back scraping against the stone, until she is crouching, curled over, crushed with the sorrow.

Zuana kneels on the floor beside her.

She jerks away from her. ‘Get away from me. I don’t want your prayers.’

‘That’s just as well,’ Zuana says lightly, sweeping away the horsehair to find a safe spot to rest the candle. ‘Since our Lord is surely temporarily deaf by now.’ She smiles so the girl will know the words are meant kindly. Close to, in the candlelight, she has a lovely enough face, though a little swollen and pockmarked now with rage. Zuana can think of half a dozen giggling young novices who would happily help nurse her back to beauty again.

She takes the vial out from under her robe and uncorks it.

‘Stop crying.’ Her voice is firm now. ‘This panic that you feel will pass. And it will do nothing for you or your cause if you keep the convent awake all night. Do you understand me?’

Their eyes connect over the vial.

‘Here.’

‘What is it?’

‘Something to make you rest.’

‘What?’ She doesn’t touch it. ‘I still won’t sleep.’

‘If you drink this you will, I promise. The ingredients are those they give to criminals on the cart to the gallows so their drowsiness will blunt the torment long enough for the worst to be carried out. For those suffering less it brings a faster and sweeter relief.’

‘The gallows . . .’ She laughs bitterly. ‘Then you must be my executioner.’

I am the jailer then, Zuana thinks. So be it. How much energy it takes to fuel rebellion. And how hard it is when you are the only one . . . She holds the vial out further, as one might offer a titbit to a wild animal that could bolt at any moment.

Slowly, slowly the girl’s fingers reach out to take it. ‘It will not make me give in.’

Now Zuana cannot help but smile. If she knew how to make a draught that could do that every convent in the country would want her for their infirmary. ‘You don’t need to worry. My job is to tend your body, not your soul.’

The girl’s eyes lock on to Zuana’s as she swallows. The taste is strong and makes her choke, her throat raw already from the yelling. If that talk of a nightingale was not another lie, she will need a soothing syrup to coax her singing voice back out of her.

She finishes the draught and puts her head back against the wall. The tears keep flowing, but with less noise. Zuana watches

carefully, the healer in her now alert to the progress of the drug.

'Hear my prayer, O Lord, and let my crying come unto Thee.'

When was the last time she had to use this level of dosage? Two, no, three years ago, on a girl with an equally fat dowry but a hidden history of fitting. Her first-night panic had unleashed such a violent seizure that it had taken three sisters to hold her down. Had the family been more powerful the convent might have been forced to keep her, for though epilepsy is one of the few recognised causes for the annulment of vows, that, like many things, depends on levels of influence. As it was, Madonna Chiara had successfully negotiated her return, along with a portion of her dowry somewhat reduced for their trouble. Such was the diplomatic acumen of Santa Caterina's current abbess – though what she might do with this recalcitrant young spirit was yet to be seen.

'Hide not Thy face from me in the day of my distress.'

The voice inside Zuana's head grows into a whisper.

'Through the noise of my groaning my bones will scarce cleave to my flesh.'

When she thinks back on it later, she cannot remember what makes her pick this particular psalm, though once started, the words are apposite enough.

'I am like a pelican in the wilderness. Like an owl of the desert. I watch and I am as a sparrow that sitteth alone on the house top.'

'It's not working.' The girl shakes herself upright, flailing, angry again.

'Yes, yes, it is. Stop fighting and just breathe. *I have eaten ashes as if it were bread and mingled drink with weeping.*'

The novice gives a little cry, then slumps back down again.

'For Thou hast set me up and cast me down. My days fade away like shadows and I am withered like grass.'

She groans and closes her eyes.

It won't be long now. Zuana moves closer so that she can support her when she starts to slide. The girl pulls her arms tight around her knees, then after a while drops her head down on to them. It is a gesture of tiredness as much as defeat.

'But Thee, O God, endureth for ever: and Thy remembrance throughout all generations.'

Outside, the night silence renews itself, moving out through the cloisters, across the courtyard, nosing its way under the door frames. The convent lets out the breath it has been holding and slides towards sleep. The girl's body starts to lean towards Zuana's.

'So will He regard the prayers of the humble destitute and He will not despise their call.'

It is over: the rebellion is ended. In that moment Zuana registers a certain sadness mixed in with the relief, as if the words of the psalm might not after all be enough to guarantee comfort. She chides herself for the unworthiness of the thought. Her job is not to question, but to settle.

And it is happening. The girl will be unconscious soon enough. Zuana glances round the cell.

At the entrance to the second chamber is a heavy chest. With cunning packing a nun might carry half a world within it. Certainly she would have her own linen; those whose dowries buy double cells sleep on satin sheets and goose-feather pillows. The bed frame can be turned upright without help but even with the remains of the mattress in place she will need thicker covers. Her body, no longer heated by the force of her distress, will grow clammy and what has started as outrage might turn into fever.

'For He maketh the storm to cease so that the waters thereof are still.'

She moves her gently back against the wall and goes over to

the chest. The lid releases a wave of beeswax and camphor. A set of silver candlesticks lies across a bed of fabrics, a velvet cloak and linen shifts next to a wooden Christ-child doll. Further down there is a rug, thick Persian weave, and next to it a handsome Book of Hours, the cover elaborately embossed, newly commissioned no doubt for her entrance. She can think of a few sisters who will find themselves wrestling with the sin of envy when they see this in chapel. As she picks it up it falls open on to a lavishly illustrated text of the Magnificat: intricate figures and animals entwined in swirling tendrils of gold leaf, shimmering in the candlelight. And tucked inside, like a page marker, some sheets of paper covered in handwriting. Had they been read and passed as acceptable? Or had the inspecting gate sister perhaps missed them in among such riches? It would not be the first time.

‘What are you doing?’ She is alert again now, head jerking up despite the pull of the drug. ‘Those are mine.’

Mine. It is a word she will have to learn to use less in the coming months. The girl’s panic answers her question. Not prayers, evidently. Poems perhaps? Even letters from a loved one . . . As precious as any prayer . . . The light is too dim to make out any words. It is better that way. What she cannot read she cannot be expected to condemn.

She thinks of her own chest, and how the books inside it saved her life all those years ago. What if someone had seen fit to confiscate them? She would have needed more than a sleeping draught to dull the pain.

‘You have a rich life in here.’ She shuts the book and slips it back into the chest. ‘And you are lucky to have these rooms,’ she says, pulling out a piece of heavy velvet cloth. ‘The sister before you here kept court some evenings between dinner and Compline. Served wine and biscuits and played music, sang

court madrigals even.' She moves the bed upright and hauls the remains of the mattress back on to the frame.

'From the outside the walls are forbidding, I know. But once you get used to it, life in here need not be the desert you fear it to be.'

'Iss yourjob to tend mabody, no my soul.' Though she is still propped against the wall her eyes are half closed now and her words fall away into one another. While the spirit may be unwilling, the flesh at least is now weak.

'And they are glad because they are at rest and He bringeth them to a heaven wherein they would be.'

Zuana lays the coverlet carefully over the open mattress so she will not have the worst of the horsehair sticking into her skin. When she is finished the girl's eyes are closed again.

She pulls her up by the armpits, putting one of the girl's arms over her own shoulder and supporting her around the waist so she can steady her as they move. Her body is as plump as a partridge and heavy now with the drug. The remains of a perfumed oil she must have used that morning are mixed in with the sourness of her sweat. She feels her breath on her cheek, tangy from the poppy syrup. Ah — along with the club-footed and the squinty-eyed, Our Lord takes the most lovely of young women into his care to keep them from the defilement of the world beyond. She herself had never been so desirable. Not that such things had mattered to her, anyway.

'I amno . . . sleep,' she slurs defiantly as she falls on to the bed.

'Husssh.' She wraps the coverlet over her, tucking it tight underneath like a swaddling cloth. *'Give thanks unto God, for he is good and his mercy endureth for ever.'*

But there is no-one listening to her any more.

She manoeuvres the girl's body on to her side so that her face

is tilted to the mattress, as experience has taught her. Her father once treated a violent patient who – unbeknownst to him – had preceded the draught with an excess of wine. Halfway through the night he had retched up some of it and almost drowned in his own vomit as he lay unconscious on his back. Trial and observation. The true path to learning.

‘See how the marvels of nature work, Faustina? How a medicament, which taken alone can be fatal, becomes a healer if you understand how it moves with and complements other substances?’

His voice, as always, is ready at the edges of her mind, waiting for the moment when the prayers end and there is space for her own thoughts.

There was a time, at the beginning – she can no longer remember quite how long it went on – when his closeness was almost unbearable because it reminded her so powerfully of everything she could no longer have. But the idea of being without him had been even worse and eventually the grief had softened, so that his presence had become benign; a living teacher as much as a dead father. Of course she knows it is its own transgression for a nun to live in her past rather than her convent present but his companionship has become so normal that she doesn’t bother to take it to confession any more. There is a limit to the penance one can do for a sin that one cannot – will not – give up.

Watching over the sleeping young woman now, she invites him in again.

‘You must be sure to note the extra dose in your records. I know – I know – a few drops may seem a little but they can be a lot. Ah, what a harmony there is in measurement, child. Authority and empiricism, trial and observation: the combination of ancient knowledge in our new world. Of course, we can’t do

as the Greeks did and test out our remedies on criminals. If that were possible we might have rediscovered the secret of theriac by now and our dominion over all poisons would be secure. Imagine that! Still, we have already found much that was lost. And when you are unsure or when there is no patient on whom to test new compounds or balances then you can always try them on yourself. Though with potions that deaden the senses you should take every precaution and mark the moments constantly before you fall asleep, so that in this way you will have a close enough approximation when you wake up.'

She smiles. It was fine enough advice for all those university students who had queued for hours in the fog of a Ferrarese winter to gain entrance to his lectures and dissections. Over the years she had even met a few of them; his army of eager young scholars/physicians dedicated to prising the secrets out of God's wondrous universe. And she too had grown fat on his wisdom alongside them, though, of course, she could never show it in public. While his acolytes went on to courts and universities, taking their knowledge with them, she was tenured into another form of God's service, one where the pursuit of knowledge was second to acts of devotion, eight times a day, seven days a week, until death would them part. No wonder it had hurt so much at the beginning. There was precious little space for experiment within these walls. No time for a nun to become her own patient here.

Still, having worked her way to the office of dispensary sister, she does now as he would have done: harvests her plants, distils their juices and notes down their influences. While the steps may be small, she moves forward. It is more than she would have been allowed without him outside.

She puts a hand on the girl's pulse: steady, if a little slow. How long will she sleep? It is late already. They will never wake

her in time for Lauds, perhaps not even for Prime and Terce, though if they do rouse her she will have no appetite for resistance. Whatever the power of her will, for a while at least it will be tempered by physical compliance. The girl won't thank her for it, but Zuana more than most knows that it is a gift of sorts. If true acceptance comes only from God, nevertheless there is a kind of comfort to be gained from the passing of time; hour upon hour, day upon day, time falling like thick flakes of snow, the next laid upon the last, again and again, until what has been is gradually covered over, its original shape and colour hidden under the blanket of what is now.

Eventually the Matins bell rings out from the chapel. She hears the watch sister's footfalls on the flagstones as she makes her way through the cloisters. The knocks on the doors are sharp tonight. Habit (how apt that they should wear on their bodies what they have also to wear on their souls) will have some of them up and moving before they even know they are awake. But there will be others who have only just found sleep and will want to stay within it. In such circumstances the watch sister will be allowed to enter and shake the sleeper once by the shoulder. The ones who don't rise then will be confessing their misdemeanour before the abbess in chapter later.

The cell doors start to open, followed by the shuffling of feet as the nuns gather and move after the watch sister, a procession of black shadows moving through the gloom, candles flickering like fireflies in the darkness. As they pass the novice's door someone stifles a yawn.

Zuana waits. While the abbess knows of her night wanderings, it is important that she should disturb the routine of the convent as little as possible. The door to the chapel groans open on heavy hinges then closes again after the procession has passed through. Further snarls of wood mark out a first, then a second

latecomer. The sound of chanting is already seeping under the door frame as she leaves the cell and crosses into the darkness. In front of her she notices a small figure with a slight limp moving out into the courtyard from the upstairs cloister. This is a night wandering that wants to keep itself hidden. She lets the image slide from her mind. There has been enough emotion spent tonight. No point in making more trouble.

She waits until the chapel door is closed again, then enters quickly, head bowed, moving between the choir stalls to where the great crucifix hangs down in front of the grille that divides the nuns from the outer public church. She prostrates herself before it, registering the momentary shock of cold stone through her robes, before slipping into her place at the end of the second row of the choir stalls. She is without her breviary – the book left sitting on the table in her cell. While she knows the lessons and the psalms by heart its absence is still a misdemeanour. The abbess's eye passes quickly over her. Zuana opens her mouth and begins to sing.

The convent is not at its best tonight. Winter has scoured a number of throats and the chanting is disturbed by ragged bouts of coughing and sniffing. At night the church is fiercely cold and across the choir stalls the dozen or so novices are struggling. With their fat cheeks and downy skin they look too young to be up both so late and so early. When they are tired, Zuana has noticed, some of them rub their eyes with their fists like small children. The convent's indefatigable novice mistress, Suora Umiliana, is of the opinion that each new batch is worse than the last, more selfish and more prone to the vanities of life. The truth is probably more complex, since Umiliana herself is also changing, growing more fervent and demanding with the years, while they at least remain young. Either way, Zuana feels sympathy for them. Girls of their age are greedy for sleep and

Matins, slicing its way through the middle of the night, is the harshest of all the convent offices.

Yet its brutality is also its great sweetness, for its very meaning is to coax and draw up the soul through the body's resistance, and when one is pulled from sleep there can be less distraction from the noise and chatter of the mind. Zuana knows sisters who, as they age, grow to love this service above all others, to feed off it like nectar: for once you have disciplined yourself to transcend tiredness the wonder of being in His presence while the rest of the world is asleep is a rare gift; a form of privilege without pride, feasting without gluttony.

A few can become so close to God during such moments that they have been known to see angels hovering above them or in one case the figure of Christ lifting his arms off the great wooden crucifix and stretching out towards them. Such tremors of the soul happen more at Matins than at any other devotion, which is helpful for the young ones, as the occasional drama of palpitations or even fainting keeps them open to the possibility of ecstasy. Even Zuana herself, who has never been prone to visions, has felt moments of wonder: the way in which the night silence seems to make the voices more melodious, or how their breaths make the candles flare in the darkness, causing the most solid statues to melt and send dancing liquid shadows on to the walls.

There is little chance of such marvels tonight. Old Suora Agnesina sits febrile with devotion, head cocked to one side, vigilant as ever for the divine note inside the human chorus, but in the back stalls Suora Ysbeta is already asleep, making much the same wheezing sounds as her rancid little dog, and for the rest it is an achievement just to keep their minds on the text.

To counter her weariness Zuana pulls herself upright until

her shoulders connect with the back of the seat. In most choir stalls, nuns rest their backs against plain wood, polished by years of cloth rubbing against it. But Santa Caterina is different. For here the seats are decorated by the wonder of intarsia: hundreds of cuts of different coloured woods, inlaid and glued together to create scenes and pictures. The stalls were a gift from one of the convent's benefactresses during the reign of the great Borso d'Este over a century before and the story is that it took a father and son over twenty years to complete them. Now, as the sisters of Santa Caterina pray to God, each and every spine rests against a different image of their beloved city: streets, rooftops, chimney pots and spires, recognisable even down to the slivers of cherry or chestnut wood that mark out the edges of the wharves and the dark walnut veins that make the River Po. In this way, though they live separated from the city of their birth, their beloved Ferrara is kept alive for them.

When Zuana's mind suffers badly from distraction, as it does tonight, she uses these little jewels of perspective as a way of connecting back to God's devotion. She imagines the voices floating upwards, a cloud of sound rising high into the nave, up and through the chapel roof into the air outside, then moving like a long plume of smoke out into that same city; twisting and turning around warehouses and palazzos, passing along the side of the cathedral, hovering over the dank moat surrounding the d'Este Palace, poking its way through the windows and releasing mellifluous echoes around the great chambers, before slipping out and returning down to the edge of the river itself, from where it rises up towards the night stars and the heavens behind.

And the beauty and clarity of that thought makes her tiredness fall away, so that she too feels herself lifting free and growing towards something greater, even if the transcendence does not

manifest itself in the beating of angels' wings or the warmth of Christ's arms around her in the night.

In the cell across the courtyard, the angry novice moves heavily in her sleep, full of the wonder and madness of drugged dreams.