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Under a Sardinian Sky

Written by Sara Alexander

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SARA ALEXANDER

Under a Sardinian Sky



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES



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For Pietruccia and Carmela,
wheresoever they dance

Prologue



London, England—2007

In Zia Piera's wardrobe I can find anything from a fluorescent paisley dressing gown from 1963 to a pair of dejected Baghdad trousers with a jarring 1980s print. Hipsters would salivate over the latter. I've never grasped the concept of ironic dressing. I'm not a girl who could spend a day with that geometric noise on me. I like the anonymity of my half-dozen washed-out T-shirts and two pairs of jeans. It makes packing for my travel writing a swift affair so I can use my time for more fulfilling tasks like eating food I don't recognize and can't pronounce or sniffing out the local inebriation haunts in whichever nook of the globe my work has zapped me to.

I catch my reflection in the mirror on the inside of the wardrobe door as I open it. My body is straight as a board. My head is topped with a mass of rebellious black curls perched above a "thinker's" nose, as my uncle calls it, with little to ogle at in between. The mirror and I are fair-weather friends. My ancestral line suggests a predisposition to ample bosoms, a pert ass, irresistible olive skin, and those gooey chocolate eyes guys fall into, just like any prime example of a Sardinian female. My sister, not I, received such gifts at birth.

I'm inept at ironing, blow drying, and nail painting. I don't lick

my floors clean, wipe the sink with bleach after use, or stash half a pharmacy of feminine hygiene washes. I escaped those Italian manias. Doesn't mean I can't cook the best *gnocchetti* I've ever tasted, roast a suckling pig to perfection, and tell you the year any particular Cannonau red wine was barreled—just by the smell. I also give up very, very rarely, on anything. Ever. This alone proves I am not, in fact, adopted.

I peel off Zia Piera's tailored jacket, which, out of respect for my mother, I had borrowed for the service this morning to disguise myself as a bona fide Italian grown-up. I reach inside the wardrobe for a hanger. The five decades of hoarding clothes means there are suitable outfits for all occasions—whether it's a solemn day, like today, or a frivolous night at my best friend's house when she's ordered me to play a Russian duchess, complete with mink stole and sequins, at one of her murder mystery parties with her Shoreditch actor mates. I prefer necking espressos and whiskey, just the two of us, but her thespy darlings are good company when all is said and done, even if they spend too much time arguing over which locally brewed botanical spirit deserves supreme worship. I fit the jacket around the hanger and squeeze it into a narrow space on the burdened rack. Then I grab my tobacco out of my pocket and walk into my parents' spare room, slumping onto the bed to roll up.

Zia Piera's funeral this morning has emptied my tank. My aunt died five days ago. We had all taken turns to sit by her throughout the day and evening that led to the night she passed. She was skeletal, disappearing into the bedsheets. My ten-month-old nephew had refused to settle down to sleep in the next room; my sister was over to help and looked gaunt with worry and frustration. Sometimes Zia Piera's expression reminded me of my sister during labor. The pain, like contractions, seemed to come in waves. In between, she would settle, the thin skin on her cheeks hollowing into her face.

When my mother entered, not long before midnight, she'd taken one look at her sister and asked me to call for the doctor. I did. We'd helped Zia Piera onto a chair beside the bed when he arrived. He spoke softly, as if he was interrupting, like someone shuf-

fling along a full row of seats in the middle of a play. "I'm going to ask you a few questions, Piera," he'd said.

She nodded.

We looked at him.

"Can you tell me where it hurts?" he'd asked.

Mum and I turned back to Zia Piera.

In the second it took for us to do so, she had taken her last breath.

The doctor offered condolences. We all began talking in whispers. He started filling out forms. My mother had tapped into her nurse background and performed all the necessary procedures with clinical calm. My sister's baby finally fell asleep, as if he had intuited the release in the room next to his. My father brought up a bottle of *mirto*, an aromatic elixir, which my aunt had made some months ago by soaking wild myrtle berries in *aqua vitae*. We toasted her carcass. That is what it seemed to me. She was somewhere else now. Not there, in that skinny frame.

My Piera had fat fingers stacked with sparkling, semiprecious-gem rings that she'd bought after fierce haggling with the Senegalese beach sellers hawking the crowded Sardinian coast. My Piera wore rhinestone-encrusted sneakers and visited her sister, who now lives in my late grandmother's house, inland of those beaches, with cases full of curry powder, dry-roasted peanuts, and pyramidal British tea bags as exotic gifts. My Piera could cook for twenty-five people with the ease another would fry an egg. She had a tongue to cut through any bullshit and a razor-sharp memory that filed every wrong, every triumph, and every little beige moment in between—from the pope's visit to her hometown of Simius when she was three to what socks the local north London bus driver wore two weeks ago.

Now Zia Piera smiles at me, like she always does, from the photo on the bedside table of this tidy room reserved for guests or itinerant offspring. We took the shot at our favorite Sardinian cove on the last day of our stay at the summerhouse, when we knew she'd only ever return to her island as ashes. Cancer was rippling through her lungs even though, at seventy-three, she miraculously had come out on top after surgery and chemotherapy for pancre-

atic tumors. All the pictures of her during her final summer are resplendent. She'd gone on a last-minute retreat near Bologna with a friend and, in her words, "met the angels." She reconnected with her long-lost cousins in southern France.

In short, she did what I'd urged her to do one wet afternoon in Edinburgh, when she visited me while I covered the city's theatre festival for a broadsheet. I asked her then if she was scared. She responded with a quintessential Sardinian shrug. Could mean yes. Could mean no. Could mean I don't know; the universal body language for I can't give you words for that, or the Sardinian for I *won't* give you an answer to that. Why commit to a thought, a stance, when we could hover in the vagaries of a purgatorial no-man's-land?

"You are in a way really lucky," I'd said at the time, once again clawing out of the earthy pits of realism toward delusional optimism. "You've been given a warning. It's a chance to do everything you've always wanted. Don't waste it."

Her tears finally came—the first I'd seen since the ordeal started the previous year. In that condensation-thick Scottish café, Zia Piera and I sobbed into laughter, leaving little pools on the dirty floor for the impish shadow of Death to frolic in.

The only other time I'd seen her cry was when she talked about her beloved sister Carmela.

I stick my head out of the spare room window and inhale. I was with Zia Piera when the doctors diagnosed her pancreatic cancer. When they asked her if she exercised she answered them with a gruff "No!" Then they laughed—I explained she walked three miles daily because in the next neighborhood she could buy bananas two pence cheaper per kilo. When they asked her if she was on medication, she replied, "Yes, I take ibuprofen if I have a toothache." They didn't understand her at first, her thick Italian accent always elicited either condescension or bafflement from the listener. Once I had repeated it, they laughed at that too—at that sweet, old Italian lady with the funny voice and the dancing hands, whose number was almost up. Grimness and comedy twirled a dance—the perpetual symbiotic pair, like fish and chips, tea and cake, pasta and *parmigiano*.

I breathe out my smoke and watch it waft over my mother's prize-winning back garden. My boyfriend—I use the term with some hesitation—drifts into my mind. I stayed over at his place last night so I could cry loudly. Then we made love all night. He likes having sex to music. Last night it was the opening track of *Astral Weeks*. It played the first time we did it. That was the night I fed him nearly comatose with my family's guarded recipes: homemade *gnocchetti* with sage butter and a liberal, fresh grating of Sardinian *pecorino*, followed by braised lamb with fennel and green olives. Then I revived him with a truck driver's portion of very alcoholic tiramisu and a large pot of espresso to accompany my aunt's homemade *mirto*. Only then did he finally loosen his guard and perform a fine demonstration of unbridled British passion; much like the crackling of a suckling pig roast, if you have the time, it is worth the wait. Only I prefer to have sex without the music. I like to hear nothing but the charged breathing of a lover, his sweat on my throat, the squelch of his hand hot in mine as we lift off into the ether. I hate an underscore. It feels contrived.

That's why I know it can't last. He's a romantic, and his instinctive approach to seduction is like that of any true Brit: crablike. Couple this with the fact that my family can leave even the strongest soul bulldozed and it leaves little hope of a future together.

My father is my Jewish mother. He's armed with a colorful spectrum of passive aggression, an unstoppable zest for life, and bombastic meltdowns that are devastating and fortifying; after growing up with him, the newspaper editors I work for feel like puppies on Valium. He was born to Russian-Polish Jews, grew up in a leafy suburb of north London, and fell for a demure Catholic girl from a then-little-known rustic island in the Mediterranean. I went to a Catholic school with all the other local Italian, Ghanaian, and Irish families. I learned the Bible stories by heart. I chose favorite saints, dependent on which names I liked best rather than good deeds.

At home, however, I'd pore over my dad's collection of books about Atlantis and listen to his after-dinner lectures about space, or spirits being frequencies that we might tune into like a radio antenna—radical thinking for a nice Jewish boy from Golders Green.

When my elementary school teacher asked me to draw God, I did my best scribble of a mesh of yellow and blue light in the center of my page, because that's how my dad would describe Him/Her/The Universal Source. I remember my teacher's arched eyebrow, but nothing more came of it because I went to mass every week and my grades were good.

My family speak over one another. We overfeed. We argue for fun. Loudly. I watched my boyfriend at the crematorium, even though I had insisted his attendance was a punishment he didn't merit. I saw him look desperate to feel comfortable—and fall short despite his best efforts. No doubt he's in love with the idea of charging at this fairly successful, London-born, Sardinian-Jew (ish) travel writer with boy hips and a Medusa mop. But the reality must be exhausting, I'm sure.

I look down at the yellowing tip of my forefinger. It reminds me how deeply my smoking disappoints my mother. I start to sob again. My mother is halfway through her own course of chemotherapy for breast cancer. The two women I love most in the world have been out to battle for months. One has fallen.

Now I wade through the first stages of grief while watching my mother battle on. I feel helpless, except for the odd misplaced joke I can offer here and there to lift spirits. I've sat next to Mum as the chemicals drip into her vein. I've given a mouthful to the mincing male matron reigning over the night staff in the hospital, who had mistakenly taken her blood pressure on her arm when her notes explicitly said not to, due to the removal of several lymph nodes. I've watched her sleep through the thick panes of a solitary room when her white cell count was dangerously low and contact was unadvised because of the high risk of fatal infections. I've watched her hair fall out. We've laughed at her shiny new head. We've chuckled when strangers compliment her fashionable new hairstyle, because we know it's one of her wigs. We've clutched those snatched moments of happiness in all the small things, for each dinner she manages to cook on the good days. But there is still too much left unsaid. Too many questions I haven't had the courage to ask. At night I cry in the bath. I sob until it hurts.

I cry on her behalf, for losing the sister who held me first while

my mother rose to consciousness after a general anesthetic for a C-section during the heat wave of 1976. Zia Piera had lived in the house since that day. She had cooked for a small army every night. When we left for university she sent food parcels to my sister and me. Each delivery contained enough dried ramen to make you never want to set eyes on a noodle again, a lifetime supply of homemade biscuits, and tiny packets of *saporita*—a blend of spices, which, after much coercing, she had reluctantly revealed was her secret ingredient in tomato sauce, then dispatched them in wholesale quantities. I cry for two sisters facing a life without the other by their side.

When the tears fade into numbness, I feel a familiar, cold terror well up inside. I just let it drift through me, like a passing gray cloud. The worst has already happened. Zia Piera, who no one could imagine living to anything younger than 102, is dead. Yet the world plunders on. The sun rises, the weeds ramble, the universe squiggles into infinity. Mum and I have no choice but to face life and death with awe, fear, and joy.

I stub out my cigarette on a small ceramic dish and walk back into Zia Piera's room next door. I open the wardrobe again and nuzzle my face into the dresses. They smell of her. There's a bag hanging on a hook beside the mirror. I pull it down and run my hands over the soft leather. I like to imagine her fingerprints on the worn indentations along the front flap. I will take it everywhere I go now. There will be a warehouse amount of such vintage appendages to trawl when Mum and I feel ready to clear her room. What we will do with the 700 matchboxes and large collection of sugar sachets she'd pinched from every place she'd ever had a cup of tea in, ever, escapes me. In the end we'll manage to let those go too, I imagine. The top two shelves of her bookcase are lined with a collection of porcelain dolls, forever looking at a hypnotic apparition on the horizon. In the bathroom next door, which she had the sole use of, on account of the folks having a cheeky en suite put in, her colorful, glittery nail polishes still sparkle on the skinny glass shelves inside the mirrored cabinets, a miniature cross between a pound shop and Aladdin's cave.

I sit down on her bed. Mum changed the sheets after the pri-

vate ambulance took Zia Piera out of the house on a stretcher, surrounded by a black body bag. I look at her pillow. That's where I watched her toss and turn, every now and then mumbling inaudible mutterings. The last few words we exchanged echo in my mind. She had turned to me, eyes half closed. "Carmela?"

"No, Zia, it's Mina, your niece."

"I want to go with you to fetch the thread."

"It's all right, you can rest now."

I took her bony hand in mine. It was cold. My heart lurched.

"Carmela, where are you?" she asked, "Come back, Carmela. . . ." Her pleas faded into shallow breaths.

Carmela's life has been retold to me in barbed whispers. Sometimes, at the mere mention of her name, family members' and friends' eyes still well with tears. A palpable sadness tinges even the happiest of times. It has always seemed that my mother and her three siblings neither laugh with all their bones nor cry like no one is watching. As I consider how the two women I love most in the world have battled cancer, it strikes me that the stifling of unexpressed, unresolved pain over their eldest sister manifested as life-threatening illnesses. The past eats at the women I love most on this planet, and I'll be damned if I'm going to let those haunting memories do any more damage. No dignity in being that passive bystander, harboring their pain to pass on to the next generation. The responsibility of breaking this cycle falls to me. I won't watch my mother lose the fight.

Only one way to expose the real Carmela. Only one way to release her hold over my mothers. It's what I've always done.

I write.

Chapter 1



Seven years had passed since the roars of V-Day before the Sardinian town of Simius flung off its ashen veil of world war and threw an Assumption Day fiesta full of spectacle and hope. Children squealed beneath the strings of lights that rendered the stark, dusty central promenade unrecognizable. The narrow houses that lined the square, crushed together like skinny matriarchs pushing against one another for attention, boasted long strips of red and green fabric hung beneath their weary shutters. Benevolent, rosy-cheeked men butchered nougat. Farmers sold their pungent *pecorino*. Women flogged slabs of bitter almond brittle. And yet the Simiuns would never throw their hands in the air with the abandon of the singsong Neapolitans or caterwaul into the night with the joie de vivre gesticulation of the Romans.

Carmela looked over at the portly accordion player, who squeezed life into his instrument and bellowed a *ballu tundu*, a traditional dance performed in a circle, heralding the start of the festivities. A troupe from a neighboring town, south of Simius, swarmed the piazza. They interlocked arms in a tight line and began to dance. The accordion player's fingers raced up and down the keyboard as the tune whirled into a fast ditty.

Carmela admired the female dancers' costumes, and not simply

because she and her colleagues at her godmother's tailoring studio had made them. Their starched white headscarves were wrapped around their heads in a complicated crisscross pattern, held in place with gold pins on either side. The scarves framed their faces, drawing attention to the dark twinkle of their almond eyes, much like a Spanish mantilla or the veils of Arabian princesses; historic invaders from both places had left their mark on her island's history and traditional dress. They wore billowing white blouses with intricate laced cuffs and collars. Over these were very tight-fitting, sleeveless bodices in bright red satin with gold embroidery, which cinched in their tiny waists. The neckline was cut low to allow the ruffles of the collars to show. Their plain, long black skirts with angular creases were topped with narrow aprons festooned with vibrant needlework depicting flowers, birds, and patterns in primary colors as bold and joyous as their expressions were inscrutable. Around their necks were velvet chokers from which coral and turquoise crucifixes hung. In their ears, garnets and cornelians, with intricate gold settings as delicate as fine lace, swung as they bobbed into their steps. At the yoke of the neckline each dancer had a brooch, made from two flattened, golden conical shapes, like tiny Bronze Age shields, set with coral or turquoise at their centers.

The men, dressed in long black woolen waistcoats despite the balmy August evening, glided in white shirts with sleeves that ballooned toward tight, starched cuffs. The black tunics below flared out like skirts, reaching down to the middle of their thighs, where the tops of their white cotton trouser legs underneath puffed over the rims of their high black boots. The length of their velveteen black hats flopped over to one side, like a hare's ear.

The dancers stared out into the distance, their shoulders perfectly level, as their feet shuffled, syncopated and synchronized. Despite the joyous melody, their expressions were cool with indifference, as if their feet moved involuntarily. Their torsos were held bolt upright; they wove in and out of formations like ornate planks. Carmela would have liked to lose herself in the colorful beauty of the display but couldn't help dissecting their costumes with the mathematical eye of the seamstress who had crafted them

over the past year. Each autumn brought a slew of commissions for the numerous summer festivals in which the dancers would perform. As she tried to commit any improvements she would make to memory, there was an urgent tug at her elbow. "We're a girl down!" Carmela's sister Piera was flushed with panic. It made her look wirier than she was already.

"What?"

"Ripped her ankle. You're on!"

"Nonsense!"

"Here's her costume," Piera said, shoving a mass of color in front of Carmela. With that she grabbed Carmela's arm and dragged her down into the warren of darkened streets in a frantic search for an abandoned doorway to change in.

"This is ridiculous!" Carmela cried out, trying to catch her breath. Piera cut a sudden turn downhill, passing their Zio Raimondo's shoe shop. Then she jerked to a halt beneath the arches of The Old Spanish House, a high-walled diminutive fortress left by the sixteenth-century Spaniard invaders her islanders were so proud of.

"Just ask one of the Nugheddu girls!" Carmela said, trying to fight off her sister's quick hands scrambling over the buttons on the back of her dress.

"I'm not asking any of those trollops from the next town!"

"Then tell the dancer's partner to sit it out too, for goodness sake!" Carmela snapped, quickly reaching to catch her own dress as it fell over her slip toward the cobbles. "Piera!" she gasped, seizing her sister's hands. "Have you lost your mind?!"

"I let you out of my sight for two seconds and you're down an alley getting undressed!" a voice called out. The spidery silhouette of Carmela's fiancé, Franco, crept round the corner. She yanked her dress up high over her front, covering as much of her body as she could, though the warm night air still brushed over her bare shoulders.

"Perhaps you can knock some sense into my sister!" Carmela cried.

"Impossible," Franco replied. "She won't let any man in spitting

distance." He leaned against the wall of the house that flanked the steps.

Piera didn't mirror his grin. "Carmela's got two minutes to save us from disaster," she huffed, stuffing Carmela's feet into the black underskirt and yanking it up. "Turn around!" Piera ordered, spinning her to face the wall, throwing a blouse over her head, and beginning to squeeze her into the bodice.

"This dancer's half my size," Carmela muttered.

"Not everyone's been blessed with your curves. Take this shawl," Piera replied, throwing it over Carmela's shoulders and knotting it at the base of her back, "It'll hide the gap at the back."

Franco stood watching. Carmela felt her cheeks flush.

Piera whipped a scarf around Carmela's head and began fastening it at the back of her neck. Franco looked her up and down. "I've never liked those old-fashioned head things till now."

He sauntered down the last few steps and planted his lips on Carmela's before she could brush him off.

"Franco . . ." she said, smoothing the embroidered apron Piera was wrapping around her so it would lie as well as it might.

"Piera's almost my sister-in-law. Not the last time she'll see me kiss you."

"Not if I can help it," Piera piped from the hem of Carmela's skirt, where she crouched down to pick it out from under her square heels.

Franco smirked. "Tomboys make fine spinsters, Pie'."

"That's enough, you two!" Carmela said, feeling the heat of embarrassment and increasing nerves.

"Franco! *Vieni subito!*" a voice called.

The three looked up toward the steps.

"Cristiano?" Franco yelled up to his cousin as he came panting down toward them. Franco pulled away from Carmela. "What in God's name?"

Cristiano stood, breathless and giddy with liquor. "You must come—the boys have got the Americans in a drinking competition. We'll lose if you're not there!"

Carmela willed Cristiano's eyes to tear themselves away from her body.

Franco gave him a shove. "Where's your manners, you cretin? That's how you look at my fiancée?"

Carmela winced. She felt like a gormless mannequin wearing the wrong clothes.

"Come on, you imbecile," Franco said, giving his cousin a kick as they set off. "You watch this, Carmela," he called back with the malevolent bristle of an adolescent, "we'll show those G.I.s what Sardinians are made of!" With that they bounded around the corner to inebriation.

Before Carmela could take a breath, Piera grabbed her wrist and led her in a gallop back up through the alleys. Their footsteps ricocheted off the thick walls of the houses, which huddled along the *viccoli* barely wide enough for a loaded donkey. They reached the main square just as it was time for the local troupe to begin their performance. The injured dancer's partner moved toward Carmela and wrapped his arm around her waist. Before she could compose herself, she was spun around like a top, shuffling into the middle of the long line of dancers, hoping she didn't look as much the deer before a hunter as she felt. She adored creating the costumes, and her deft work attracting admiration, but being the center of attention in this way was something Carmela loathed. The entire dance was spent holding one side of the skirt down with her thumb so that it wouldn't ride up to her chest.

Carmela had watched every rehearsal, using the time in between choreography calls to give each of the performers their fittings, adjusting their costumes accordingly. By tonight, she was as familiar with the routines as threading a needle, though she had never planned to perform them. During the bridge, the dance mistress had chosen a few measures for the now-fallen dancer and her partner to perform alone while the remaining members of the troupe jigged upstage in a line. It was a scandalous departure from the military patterns of these traditional dances, and one Carmela had hoped to enjoy from the safety of a crowd.

Now she found herself led this way and that. The world whirred. She aimed to stare at a spot directly in front of her, to maintain balance in the fog, just as the dance mistress had instructed the dancers during rehearsals. Her eyes couldn't focus with the sea of faces ahead of her. She lost her footing. Her partner would have almost spun her horizontally had he not had the forethought to shunt them into a retreat and rejoin the line—a measure too early. The troupe, counting in their heads, was thrown off beat. The remainder of the dance was a ramshackle version of what they had spent months preparing for. Carmela could feel the hot glare from the dance mistress on the sidelines.

As soon as the accordion wheezed its closing chord, Carmela fled the square, grabbing her own dress and retreating to the secluded changing spot. She didn't wait for Piera. It was too painful to look anyone in the eye, even her own sister.

In the quiet, Carmela began to slip out of the costume she had spent hours making and back into her own. She brushed away embarrassment with each stroke of her ruffled hair. Why should she care what she looked like anyway? A betrothed woman had no place worrying about her appearance. Her job was to prepare for marriage, to portray a wholesome image to the world. To look good enough for a fiancé to invite her to be his wife, she supposed, but not so much that it would seem she chased attention elsewhere.

"Everything all right, ma'am?"

Carmela twisted around to the American voice, grasping the top of her dress and pulling it up to cover as much of herself as she could.

"Apologies, ma'am."

She squinted up toward the steps, at the unfamiliar silhouette. The man's voice was clear and warm, silky even, very different from the timbre Carmela was accustomed to hearing from the soldiers. Or perhaps it was her comprehension that had improved.

"I caught you running. I wanted to make sure I needn't be chasing after someone on your behalf," he continued, with a polite turn of his head away from her, signaling that he had noted her state of

near undress. What must he be thinking of her skulking in the shadows this way? The fading light from an oil street lamp streaked across his eyes for a brief moment. "You can't be too careful at these fiestas."

"Yes," Carmela replied, struck by something more startling than the blue of his eyes. She was half dressed down a darkened alley speaking English with a perfect stranger. He was a soldier, no less, and they weren't well known for their manners. Despite all of this, she felt something peculiar in the presence of this man she didn't know: safe. It was more disarming than fear itself.

Carmela recalled how she and her sisters, as young adolescents, had run down to the piazza when these corporals had arrived eight years ago. She imagined that those V-Day hero cheers from the mainland were still ringing in their ears as they swaggered into her town, victorious. They liberated the island from the decay of war with gum and smiles. The shoeless poor still ambled the white roads of neighboring villages, farms crumbling in the crags of the ancient valleys inland, and for many, hunger was entrenched in quotidian life. But the fatal sting of malaria had finally been eradicated, thanks to the Americans, and this alone was cause to celebrate. Carmela and her sisters had returned home that day with their pockets bulging with hard squares of pink, covered in wrappers they couldn't read, to be pummeled with their grandmother's vitriol against those devils incarnate. She had confiscated their loot, placing it into the glass urn filled with candy reserved for visitors.

"I'm fine, really," Carmela said at last, feeling as if she owed a decent reply to a genuine concern for her safety. "It is a long and silly story."

He smiled. "Your English is better than my Italian. Compliments."

"I work with people from London sometimes," she said. The little English she knew, she had learned from an adventurous London family, the Curwins, who took residence in a Victorian villa every summer since the war ended. Carmela and Piera worked for

them as seasonal domestics. Because of the eradication of malaria, Simiuns had felt the first blushes of tourism.

The soldier stepped back into a shaft of light, casting his shadow through one of the arches and onto the stucco wall beside him. He had an open, handsome face. Carmela had seen many handsome faces since the foreigners settled. Their tall, pale beauty was so different from the small, dark men most girls were promised to at a young age. It made the soldiers somewhat of a novelty, one that many local girls chased after but that always left Carmela cold.

She realized she must have been staring straight up into the light, because he had morphed back into a silhouette. Carmela shifted and grasped the tip of her dress tighter to her chest.

"Good night now," he said, breaking the silence.

With that he placed a cigarette onto his lips, turned on his heels, and climbed back up to the fiesta. She watched his smoke spiraling up into the night air.

After securing every button on her dress and clutching a carefully folded pile of costume, Carmela began her ascent toward the piazza. She placed the dancer's costume on a bench by a neighbor's sweet stall, relieved to find everyone's attention directed toward a new event taking place in the center of the piazza. She joined the throng, bristling with anticipation ahead of a live performance. The audience surrounded a smaller, impenetrable circle of an all-male choir. No danger of being asked to substitute this time.

Carmela noted the starkness of their expressions, that characteristic Sardinian stare that would not let on whether it loathed or loved what it saw. For a fleeting moment she perceived that hard, diffident shell for which her islanders were infamous, but also the molten center that it protected. Maybe this is what it felt like to stand close to a range of volcanoes.

Her eyes drifted over the American soldiers, dotted among her neighbors. For a split second she thought she caught sight of the alley soldier. She squinted. He was fair-haired, with the same white skin flushed with a rosy pallor. But even from this distance, she could see that the way he moved as he spoke with his colleagues was jerky and juvenile. He was a blond pup, with none of the un-

derstated grace of the man in the *viccolo*. She brushed away the futility of the thought without taking her eyes off the young soldier. Instead, she considered how different the Simiuns were compared to the prim Milanese, the refined Turinese, or the girdled girls who these young American men might have left behind before their journey to her craggy, crystalline-coved isle.

There was a rumble from the bass singers. A hush fell, so swift, so thick, that the night sky itself seemed to grow darker and the scatter of shimmering stars glistened brighter. Carmela couldn't remember the last time such a great number of Simiuns were so silent. Even in church, there would always be the echo of stray toddlers exploring the side chapels, followed by the tireless footsteps of their mothers, or older men who thought their whispered gossip couldn't be heard from the back pews.

The singers upheld the silence.

Finally, the bass singers took a breath, in perfect unison, as if they shared a set of lungs among them, and intoned several measures of percussive humming. Their voices rose as if from the earth underfoot, trembling the crust of the land, like the first warning of an impending earthquake or the distant rumble of a thousand wild horses thundering toward Simius from the parched plains that surrounded it.

Carmela could feel the vibrations on her chest from where she stood. Now the other singers joined in. A column of sound rose. The ancient harmonies mesmerized the crowd. Carmela allowed the honeyed notes to wash over her, as rich and deep as the burnished red of the naked trunk of a stripped cork tree. The melody was sonorous, full of loss and longing, somewhat at odds with the unadulterated joy of the surroundings.

The music described a long-lost antiquity. The chords crushed together, dissonant almost, sweeping Carmela back to a time when the Neolithic settlers sheltered in those caves carved into the rocks on the outskirts town. Where those peoples once saluted the sun and venerated pagan gods of fertility, her family now celebrated May 1, with picnics of homemade cheese and bread. She and her sisters would gaze out over the valley that looked like an

enormous emptied lake. They ate, sat upon that same stone, smooth with an age of travelers' steps. She pictured those Neolithic men now, beneath fat moons, wrapped in animal skins, singing these same melodies into the night. Carmela lived for these stolen moments of pleasure, a respite from arduous monotony, transported by the music in churchless worship.

Her eyes landed on Franco, on the opposite side of the outer circle. She watched him, glancing over the milieu, giving half nods to any of his father's compatriots at the town council office. His eyes returned to rest on her. He smirked, mischievous, then peeled the dress off her shoulder with his gaze. His smile was unchanged from the adolescent chimp she had acquiesced to during the cherry harvest in the early summer of their sixteenth year. Her breasts had had a growing season of their own, something that hadn't escaped the attentions of a young Franco. He was the son of one of the most influential landowners—a heavyweight on the town's council—a burden Franco carried with neither ease nor grace. Carmela watched him run a hand through his thick black hair, sharing a joke with his cousins, who shifted about him like the hungry stray cats that skulk along Simius's narrow *viccoli*.

A solo tenor's voice lifted up and over the group as he recounted the Sardinian tale of the deer woman who could settle for no man. The lyrics were plaited with fierce longing. He wailed his highest note, consumed with his song, as if this deer woman he sang of were his own lost love. It pierced the inky night, a lost sheep's bleat down a starlit valley.

The hairs on the back of Carmela's neck prickled. Franco's trysts, though exciting, never brought her this rapture. This heightened passion could only ever exist in song, surely, those fables of poetic love. This was not the real feet-in-the-dust, earth-in-your-hands love that Carmela could expect from joyful married life. A good wife would be rewarded with life's honest pleasures—food on her plate, babies with fleshy thighs at her breast, and wine to drink to her family's health.

The singers closed with a glissando and a final rich, hummed chord that hovered, golden, in the air. Then the night erupted

with applause. Carmela listened to the hands pounding with pride, but her eyes couldn't tear themselves from Franco. She remembered how it felt when his salty mouth had made her heart pound and his body felt like an unchartered universe to touch, taste, and discover. Like the choir's song, at once stirring yet distant, this boy, with his cherry and wild fennel kisses, felt like someone she once loved in a dream.