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Villa Serena

Domenica de Rosa

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Extract

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Chapter 1

Thoughts from Tuscany
By Emily Robertson

Today, I have been thinking about the rush hour. About my journey to work in London: the brisk walk through petrol fumes and flapping bin bags, the brief but violent struggle to board the tube, the journey spent snugly wedged under somebody's armpit, apologising whenever people tread on me, the surge up the escalator, and finally the arrival, exhausted, at my desk.

My journey to work now is as follows: awake to the operatic sound of my neighbours' new cockerel, throw open the heavy wooden shutters and allow the morning sun to infiltrate every wood-beamed, stone-floored inch of the bedroom, go downstairs to a cup of espresso, a slice of ripe melone *and a handful of figs, shower in the bathroom which looks out onto four uninterrupted acres of breathtaking Tuscan hillside, dress in a thin cotton skirt and T-shirt, then walk slowly to my table on the terrazzo under the olive trees. Sit. Think. Breathe.*

On days like this I don't worry about Spouse's latest idea to buy a pig and set up as a truffle hunter. I don't worry about Eldest Daughter's predilection for sitting in the piazza eyeing up passing Italian youths, or Younger Daughter's refusal to eat anything other than peeled grapes

and Mars bars. I don't worry that dear old Romano has told us that we must start the olive oil harvest when the moon is in Taurus. Or that the aqua minerale which flows, amazingly, from our very own well has slowed to a sulky trickle. No, I don't worry about anything. I sit and I think.

And, when I think of the rush hour, I smile.

'Mum. The water's gone off again.'

Emily Robertson looks at her elder daughter who is standing in a patch of golden sunlight. Behind her the silvery olive grove merges with the pale yellow hills, deepening to ochre where they meet the sky, the pine trees are almost mesmerisingly dark and the house itself, terracotta in the evening light, is now bleached to the palest pink. It is all relentlessly beautiful and it gives Emily no pleasure at all.

'Oh dear,' she says weakly. On the table in front of her the laptop glints and she presses 'send'. Another 'Thoughts from Tuscany' is dispatched.

'Oh dear? Is that it? Oh dear? Is that all you can say?' Siena's righteous fury threatens to catapult her into the air, like a modern-day assumption of the virgin. 'I've got to meet Giancarlo in an hour and I can't finish washing my hair. There's no water anywhere in this stupid house. Christ! No wonder Dad doesn't spend any time here.'

'He's coming home tomorrow,' says Emily, assailed by a tiny, a very tiny, twinge of fear.

Siena ignores this. 'What about my hair?'

'There's some water in the kettle,' says Emily. 'I'll get that.'

Emily rises from the table and winces as she steps out from the shade of the terrace. It is nearly midday and the sun is at its hottest. Emily feels it pounding on her head as she crosses the parched grass and climbs the shallow stone steps to the

kitchen door. Siena follows her, silent and watchful, refusing to be placated.

The kitchen is dark and cool. Emily's bare feet shrink with delight as they touch the cold, stone floor. The remains of breakfast, cornflakes, Marmite, Coco Pops, all brought from England, are still on the table. The kettle on the gas hob (impossible to find electric kettles in Italy) is still half full of water. Emily offers this humbly to Siena.

Siena mutters grudging thanks and makes her way out of the kitchen towards the narrow staircase that leads to the bedrooms. In the doorway she stops. Parting shots are her speciality.

'By the way, Mum,' she says. 'Your skirt's ripped at the back. Did you notice?'

Emily's younger daughter, Paris, writes in her diary. 'O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon.' She pauses for a moment to look at the words, satisfyingly black against the empty page, and to think that there is probably not a thirteen year old in the world who could quote *Samson Agonistes* in such an offhand yet utterly relevant way. After all, here she is, with the horrible, white-hot Italian sun blazing in through her window (not quite noon, true, but all great writers take liberties with the facts) and she is, quite simply, in *black despair*.

Slightly comforted at the thought of the blackness of her despair, Paris rolls over onto her back and stares at the ceiling. She is wearing just a white vest and football shorts but she is boiling; limp and exhausted from the heat. Her mother has given her a fan for her bedroom but all it seems to do is move the hot air to different places. The ceilings of the house are Emily's pride and joy, dark beams arching across authentic brickwork, like a cathedral, Emily says. But, to Paris, looking up, it feels more like being inside the ribcage of some

prehistoric monster. Unspoilt, Mum says, like going back in time. That's just it: going back and back until, in the end, you are just nothingness, just floating in some awful dark matter. The sun shines and the crickets sing and nothing ever happens, except that she, Paris, gets more and more unhappy and nobody ever notices.

'I hate this house,' she writes for what feels like the fifty millionth time. 'I hate Tuscany and I hate Italy and I hate having no friends and nothing to do and just lying on my bed waiting for it to get cooler so that I might, perhaps, go out for a walk.' She pauses, thinking how much she hates the phrase 'go out for a walk'. Her mum used to use it when they still lived in London: Sunday afternoons, too much lunch, football on the telly, 'Let's go out for a walk.' Dad was always too tired after a week at work, Charlie was too little and it was no good even asking Siena to do anything that sounded like exercise so it was always just her and Mum. The long, tedious slog past the shuttered shops, up to the common where families tried to fly kites in the windless air and small, shaven-headed boys played football with what looked like random violence. If they had had a dog, it might have been different, a dog would give purpose to a walk but Charlie (of course!) had asthma. 'Another reason to move to a warmer climate,' Mum had trilled. Another reason to hate Charlie.

'A walk,' she writes. 'You can't even walk in these stupid hills because they're full of horrible loose stones and bits of tree roots and, just as soon as you get to the bottom of one hill, there's another one right there in front of you. There's not one flat bit of land in the whole of Tuscany and, if there was, the boys at school would build a football pitch on it because football is literally *all* they ever think about.'

She lies back, exhausted with hatred, and the door opens (no

knock, of course) and Siena drifts in, wet hair plastered against her shoulders.

'Paris, can I borrow your red scrunchy?'

'No,' answers Paris, eyes closed.

'Oh, for God's sake!' Siena is furious though not, deep down, actually surprised. 'What do you need it for anyway? You can't use it now that your hair's so short.'

'I'm keeping it as an ornament,' says Paris, eyes still closed.

'Christ, you're pathetic,' Siena retreats to the door where she tries one last, desperate parting short. 'I'll tell Mum . . .'

Paris lets out a snort of contemptuous laughter. It is meant to silence Siena once and for all – and it does.

Olimpia, Emily's cleaner and part-time childminder, parks her wheezing, three-wheeled van outside the open door of the kitchen. Then she tenderly lifts down three-year-old Charlie who fell asleep on the drive home from his nursery school, where he goes three mornings a week to sing Italian songs and create pictures out of dried pasta and glittery glue.

'*Carissimo*.' Olimpia drops a kiss on his tousled, blond head. Charlie wakes up and pulls away irritably. Sometimes, when he is in a good mood or wants to annoy his mother, he will sit on Olimpia's lap and let her sing to him about a cricket and a grasshopper who are getting married. At other times he is cold and distant to his mother and to Olimpia, who both continue to adore him unreservedly. 'It's not even as if he was especially interesting,' wail Siena and Paris, united on this subject as on no other.

'He's nothing special,' Paris points out. 'He's just small. Midgets are small.'

'He's a boy,' replies Siena darkly.

In the kitchen, Emily is dispiritedly repairing her dress. She

can't be bothered to take it off so she has twisted it round and is sewing up the spilt with large, untidy stitches. Olimpia, Charlie in her arms, watches critically.

'*Uno strappo*,' explains Emily apologetically. She feels that Italian women would never tear their clothes and, if they did, they would have little women (probably Albanians) to mend them. Anyway, no Italian woman would be seen dead in ankle-length floral cotton.

'*Carlito é stanco*,' counters Olimpia. Sometimes, she will only speak to Emily in Italian, at other times she demonstrates considerable, though colloquial, fluency in English.

'Charlie! Baby!' Emily's face changes completely. Paris, watching from the doorway, thinks that her mother's face goes slack and pouchy whenever she looks at her youngest child. She prefers Emily's face tight and animated, every emotion signalled in advance, as it had been in the golden days before Charlie's birth. When they had lived in London.

'Want chocolate,' demands Charlie, in the whine he has developed since discovering that it works in two languages.

'Baby,' says Emily, 'we agreed. Only a tiny piece after your lunch. Now what have we got for lunch? Pasta? Eggy?'

It is no good. Charlie's mouth goes square and he howls to the newly restored ceiling that he wants chocolate and he wants it now, he does, he does, he does. Neither he nor Olimpia think it worth mentioning that he had two fingers of a Kit-Kat in the car.

Paris glides from the room like a ghost. When she was a child they had only had chocolate for a treat, at birthdays or at Christmas. She still remembers the taste of the chocolate money that they had in their stockings at Christmas, milky and foreign, not like proper chocolate at all. Come to think of it, not unlike Italian chocolate. Mum says that Italian chocolate is better than

English because it contains fewer additives. It has become obvious to Paris that it is the additives that make it nice. She thinks of Italian chocolate, ponced up in blue and silver bags and tied with bows, and she thinks of Mars bars, as solid and vivid in their black and red livery as the God of War himself. Her mouth waters. It seems a long time since breakfast (three perfectly peeled grapes and a breadstick) but she has promised herself not to eat anything else. More than that, it's a kind of deal. If she doesn't eat, things will get better: Mum will stop mooning over Charlie and ignoring everyone else, Dad will come home more, and Siena will just simply go away. It's all linked, in some complicated way that she doesn't quite understand, to the gnawing feeling in her stomach. A feeling which, uncomfortable though it might be, has become almost company, almost a friend.

As Paris reaches the kitchen door, the mosquito whine of a Vespa announces the arrival of Giancarlo. Thin and almost frighteningly dark, he grins at Paris before calling loudly for Siena. Don't come running, Paris silently urges her sister, make him get off his bloody bike at least. But an ecstatic cry of '*Pronta*' floats down through the house and, in a cloud of Mum's best perfume, Siena appears. As the Vespa squeals its way back down the drive, Paris gets a glimpse of the stolen scrunchy.

In the kitchen, Charlie sits happily at the table eating a bar of chocolate. Emily is sitting opposite, chopping tomatoes. Olimpia is noisily sweeping the hall.

'What shall we have for lunch, Paris? What about a lovely salad?'

'I loathe salad.'

'Oh darling.' That face again. 'You used to love it so. Remember when you went to Rebecca's for tea and asked for salad? I was so proud of you.'

'Mum, I was five.'

'That's what made it so unusual,' says Emily earnestly. 'When you think what most five year olds eat.'

'I'm trying not to,' says Paris, staring pointedly at Charlie's chocolate-smeared face.

'What about a pizza then?' persists her mother, not getting it at all.

'Mum, I'm just not hungry. It's too hot to eat.'

'At least have a cold drink.'

To shut her up, Paris goes to the tap over the authentic farmhouse sink (designed in Milan and ordered on the internet). A sad trickle of brown water splutters out.

'Mum! The water's gone off again.'

Far away, though not perhaps quite as far away as it feels, Petra McAllister sits in the basement kitchen of her Brighton home and reads the paper. Outside, horizontal grey rain lashes the deserted seafront. The few holidaymakers who have braved the pier huddle under its curly Victorian awnings, the lights from the rides barely visible in the fog, and the all-pervading music from the pier's very own DJ giving the whole scene a strange, surreal feel. The loudspeakers blare a jolly, summer song about fun and laughter and free drinks. Meanwhile the rain falls relentlessly from the lowering skies.

Petra hardly notices the rain, or the pier or the sodden tourists. She is used to Brighton in the summer. Besides, from her subterranean window, all she can see are feet hurrying past. Wet, cold feet in unsuitable sandals, smug feet in wellingtons and, occasionally, the bare feet of the army of homeless people who sleep in the nearby square.

Petra pours herself another cup of coffee and spreads the paper out on the table. She can hear the boys in the playroom upstairs and, although there are raised voices, she judges these

to be assumed for the purposes of play. 'How dare you break my track,' Jake is yelling, but Harry's nasal rendition of the Thomas the Tank Engine theme tune does not falter. That's all right then.

From habit, she flicks straight to the 'Thoughts from Tuscany' column. Next to it is a tasteful pencil drawing of a Tuscan villa, stark against the hillside, with one perfect olive tree growing beside it. Petra puts her coffee mug on top of the Tuscan house, noticing with satisfaction that some liquid has spilled over onto its picturesquely sloping gables.

'*Summer in the Villa Serena has a rhythm of its own*,' she reads. '*I wake at six in the shimmering beauty of the dawn, eat a slice of cool watermelon, do as many chores as I feel like and, by midday, I am ready for a siesta. I am convinced that I sleep better in those few hours than I ever did in London. Heavy, scented sleep, lulled by the crickets outside and the tinny whirr of my bedroom fan. I wake in the long afternoon and, finally, as night falls, we eat our first meal of the day, sitting out on the terrazzo as the stars come out*.'

Petra sighs and puts down her coffee cup. She can't remember when she last had a good night's sleep, scented or not. She thinks of Emily Robertson, who has been her friend since university. On the one hand, she is happy that Emily is having such a wonderful time in Italy, on the other she wants to slap her sun-kissed face very hard indeed. She also misses her very much.

Idly, Petra turns the pages. It is the Sunday paper (though today is Tuesday) and the pages are huge and unwieldy. Her cat, named Thomas by Harry but called the Fat Controller by the rest of the family, jumps heavily on the paper. Petra pushes him out of the way and begins to read an article about the dangers of drinking too much coffee. Then she stops. She pushes Thomas's fluffy bulk further and sees, under his left paw, a picture of a man, in his forties, good looking, half smiling. 'Dr Michael

Bartnicki,' she reads, 'consultant in neurology at King's College, London . . .' Then she reads it again.

'Michael,' she says aloud. 'So that's where you got to.'

In Tuscany, Emily is having a frustrating few hours trying to sort out the water situation. First she rings the Idraulica, the water company, situated in futuristic splendour a mere few hills away. However, though she has carefully composed a few Italian phrases in her head ('*non abbiamo acqua*'), the woman at the other end of the phone seems to have no idea what she is saying and preserves an incredulous electronic silence. Eventually, Emily scoops Charlie up (Olimpia has gone home) and trudges out to her tiny Fiat. 'Paris!' she calls. 'Do you want to come for a drive?' Another incredulous silence followed by a snort which Emily takes (rightly) for an answer in the negative.

The car is boiling. Charlie shrieks when his bare legs make contact with the seat. Frantically, Emily winds down the windows. 'It'll be better when we get going,' she promises. Charlie looks at her sulkily beneath lowered eyelashes. Paul's car has air conditioning but it is at Pisa airport, awaiting its master's return. 'Be sensible, darling,' Paul said. 'You can't expect me to meet clients in a Fiat Panda.' Emily gave in immediately. He had invoked the C word; clients are sacred in their family.

Now, as they wind their way down the drive, hot air blows in through the windows as if a giant hairdryer were pointing at them. At least Charlie cheers up, especially when Emily puts on his favourite tape, nursery rhymes sung by a relentlessly cheery trio with comforting northern accents. At home, Charlie had condemned this tape as hopelessly babyish but here he clings to it like the aural equivalent of a security blanket. Perhaps it is the voices, so cheerfully English with their flat vowel sounds

and breathless intonation. Emily doesn't like to admit that she, too, finds the voices obscurely comforting.

The Idraulica is only a few miles away but because it, like the Villa Serena, is built on top of a hill, this means going down one hill and up at least three others. The Mountains of the Moon, this area is called, the Alpe della Luna. It's a place of densely wooded hills, with an occasional gleam of white stone, startlingly flat plains and scattered hilltop towns, walled like fortresses. The nearest town to the Villa Serena is Monte Albano, a medieval citadel built around a square tower and a picturesque, cobbled piazza. Emily laboriously negotiates its narrow streets, entering through a low, stone archway and scattering tourists as she bumps the wrong way down several streets marked *senso unico* (she has been in Italy long enough to know that this is allowable, if not essential). Out the other side through another archway, down the hill through a succession of dusty hairpin bends, each one offering a brief, terrifying view of spectacular beauty. On the tape, jolly voices sing about double-decker buses. It all seems a million miles away.

Hands sweating on the wheel, she drives on through several equally beautiful hill towns, each with its Biblical backdrop of cypresses and mountains, past countless churches and wayside grottos (grotti?), on and on past perfect view after perfect view. When they had first arrived in Tuscany, Emily used to exclaim at each crumbling archway or lapis blue Madonna, until Siena and Paris began to mimic her savagely, 'Oh look! A dustbin. How charming! Oh look, a typical Italian drug addict. *Che carina*!' Paul had laughed and Emily lapsed into hurt silence. She still does think it all beautiful, really, but she has to admit that you can get used to beauty so that it becomes just another daily duty: make beds, cook lunch, sweep floors, admire view.

Like a modern castle, the Idraulica is visible for miles around, its new white walls shining painfully in the sun. 'Azienda Idraulica Comunale' reads the sign in small, unfriendly letters. Emily drives past rows of tankers and parks her car in front of the grandiose marble entrance. As she lifts Charlie out, he looks up in awe. 'Is this a palace?' he asks.

After the heat of the afternoon, the Idraulica's reception area is freezing. Weird, thinks Emily, shivering, how in a second your body can forget that it was ever hot. They cross what feels like acres of orange marble and stop in front of a desk grotesquely decorated with bronze snakes. The ornate furnishings and the icy-cold are beginning to make Emily feel as if she is inside a tomb. A glamorous receptionist, barricaded behind the snakes, eyes them without interest.

Emily begins hesitantly, '*Scusi. Abito a Villa Serena. Non abbiamo acqua.*'

'Have you paid the bill?' asks the receptionist in perfect English, drumming her elegant nails.

'Yes,' says Emily lapsing meekly into English, 'we pay by direct . . .'

The receptionist taps her details into the computer. 'Last month's payment is overdue,' she says, unsmiling.

'Is it? But the bank . . .'

'Better you pay me now,' says the receptionist flatly, 'and take it up with the bank.'

Emily empties her battered handbag (she can feel the receptionist looking at it with horror, she probably favours a minimalist Gucci number made from an endangered species) and finally unearths her chequebook. She writes a cheque for a dizzying amount of money and hands it over. Throughout all this, Charlie looks on, open-mouthed.

The receptionist prints out a receipt. '*Carino*,' she says, pointing

to Charlie, and then turns back to her computer. There seems nothing more to say.

Back at the Villa Serena, the water gushes triumphantly from the taps. In delight, Emily has a shower and bathes Charlie. Afterwards she sits outside on the terrace and watches Charlie play in the dusty earth under the olive trees. The faintest shiver of a breeze lifts her wet hair. She closes her eyes and feels that perhaps, somehow, maybe this is paradise after all. It is a few seconds before she realises that Paris is speaking to her.

'Mum? Your mobile was bleeping. You've got a message.'

Emily reaches out a hand for her phone. It must be Paul, she thinks, he is addicted to text messages and, indeed, to all forms of electronic communication. She hopes he isn't bringing clients home with him tomorrow. She doesn't think she can face hours of making crostini and saltimbocca while German businessmen drink Montepulciano and talk about motorways. I must be a better wife, she tells herself. I must welcome people into my gracious home, warm with home cooking and family life. Nobody minds a bit of untidiness. I must not be neurotic.

She clicks on the message icon. The text is brief: 'sorry darling. not cming home. am leaving you. p.'