The Maiden of Florence

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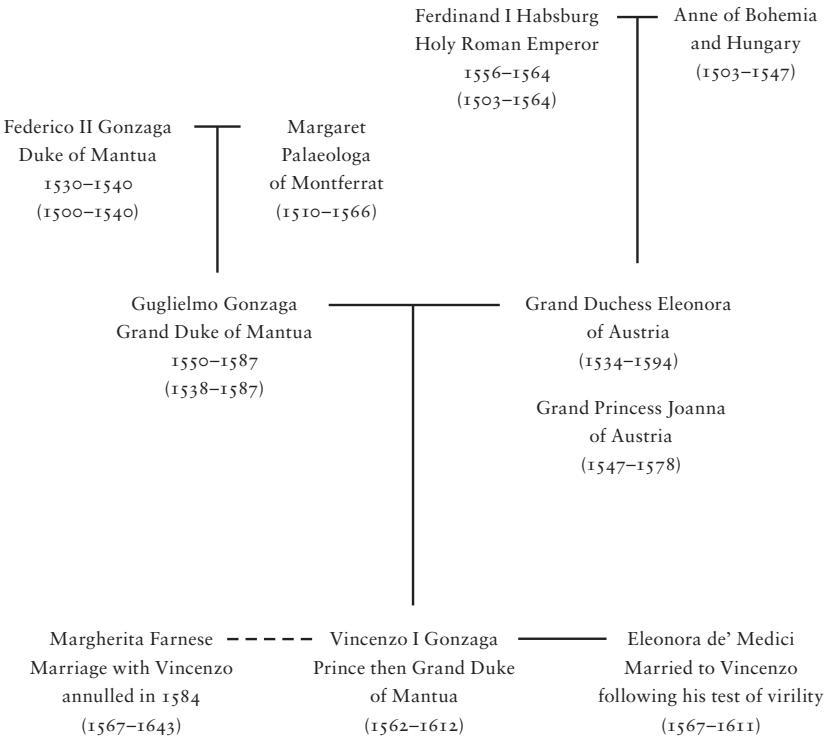
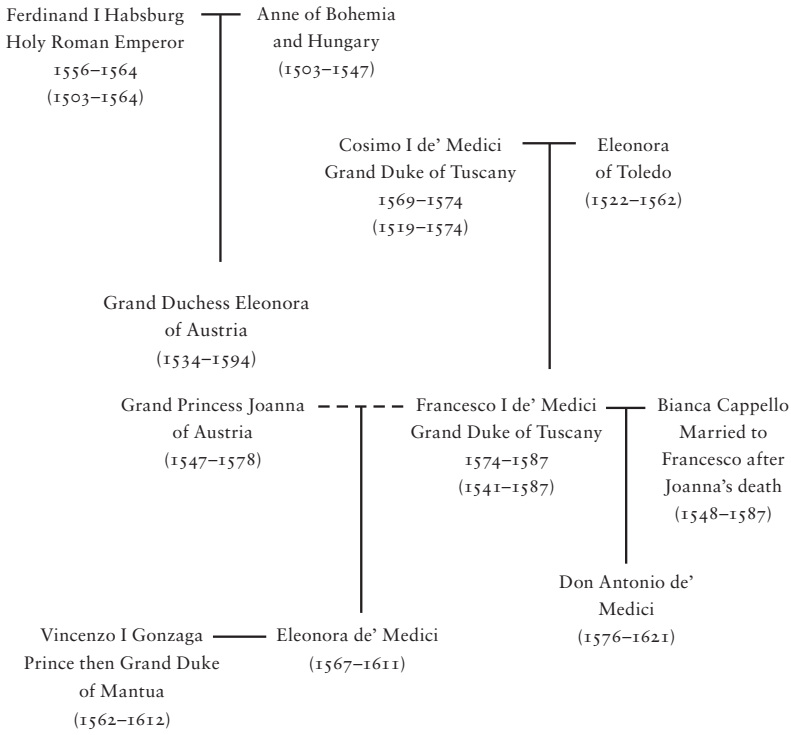
For Paola Tinagli

The Gonzaga Family
(abridged)



The de' Medici Family
(abridged)



PART I: GIULIA, AN ORPHAN OF FLORENCE

Chapter One

Campo San Giobbe, Venice, October 1612

No girl is to have a nickname, nor should any girl touch another in any way, nor have any possession of her own. Nor should she talk in church or in any place of prayer or in the refectory, dormitory, on the stairs or in any common area; furthermore, when she is spoken to she should respond humbly, 'Praise be to the Lord'.

From the statutes of the orphanage of the Pietà, Florence (25 March 1570)

My defloration was talked about in all the courts of Europe. My hymen, which the Prioress in Florence had urged me to dedicate to a holy bridegroom, was peered at by men, prodded, tested, certified, then overthrown, its bloody extinction observed and written of from Venice to Florence, to Mantua, to Ferrara, to Rome. The Prince boasted of his prowess, of the number of times he had had me, even as preparations were being made for his wedding, as boldly as if he had ridden across the causeway to his Mantuan palace with the bloodstained sheet tied to his lance.

Those events are almost thirty years old, but I remember them as if they happened thirty days ago, though I have tried to bury the memories. Nearly every player in that story is dead. It is only now that what happened can be told by me, not by the men – and

woman – who decided my fate. Those who sniggered behind their hands or craned from their windows to catch a glimpse of the heir to the Gonzaga dukedom as he passed through Florence to claim his bride did not even know, or care to know, my name. I heard the fanfare of that procession while I sat in that dark house, the Prince's child growing inside me, while I sewed for my marriage chest, and wondered about the husband they would choose for me.

It was a woman who came up with that shameful plan. But, fittingly, it was another who taught me to read and write, so that I may tell whoever will listen what was done to me.

A loom stands in the corner of this room. I was put to weaving in the orphanage and cannot remember when I did not know how. For that reason I didn't want one of my own for so long. It reminded me of my slavery. When the Prioress summoned me to meet those men who told me I was to be dowered and married, she said I should learn to be a gentlewoman, and that I should never have to work again. I rejoiced. It was more than I had ever dreamed of. But now, when I am grey-haired and have children who are generous to me, I find I cannot be idle. I can sit at the loom when the light is weaker, and I do not have to strain my eyes as I now do for work with my needle. I thought I should have forgotten how to weave, but it feels as natural as walking, and the rhythm of it is comforting. That clack and whirr – it frees my thoughts. God willing, I shall have another grandchild by Pentecost. My son's wife brought nothing with her but her love for him, and it pleases me to make things for the little one, and for their home. But in daylight, I weave with ink and paper. I am not used to expressing myself this way, as I was lettered only as a grown woman. I have learned, though, to put my thoughts down just as they come to me, as memory prompts me. Perhaps what I have to say will not interest others much. However, I am a mother, and anything a

child of mine does I treasure like a rare gem, so I am writing this for you, my own mother, who did not see me grow and so was deprived of moments like those that have meant so much to me.

What happened to me was no less than an affair of state. A mortal sin condoned by cardinals. To tell my story I must name those who are my betters – or consider themselves such. Vincenzo, Grand Duke of Mantua. His father-in-law Francesco, Grand Duke of Florence. Francesco's minister, Belisario Vinta, who, if he had not held that office, would be considered by honest men nothing more than a pander.

Now, there are those who would say that I was a fornicatrix, a temptress, to justify their greater sin. In Florence, the Grand Duke had absolute control even of my privy parts, though he knew no more of me than the name I had in the orphanage: Giulia Albizzi. Venice, by contrast, is a Republic – run, of course, by a small, closed clique of aristocratic men who manage things as best suits their own interests – but each is at least answerable to the others. I would like to say – or better, I hope – that what happened to me could not happen here. Yet I expect it happens daily. When a girl child leaves an orphanage to go into service, she of course enters into that little kingdom of a household where it is her master who is her absolute ruler. If he is a good man, then he will find her a husband when her indenture ends. If he is not, then she must bend to his humours, his caprices and, if he desires her, his lusts. He knows, of course, what to do with the child that is born of his tyranny. In Florence there was a wheel. Here there is the *scaffetta*, large enough only to allow a newborn to be passed through.

This story is not mine alone, however, but also my husband's – the man they found for me. He wrote his *ricordanze* regularly. He was not a Florentine, but he took on that Tuscan habit. His writings are more than a mere day book, though. Besides my mem-

ories – and my children – they are all I have left of him. They are, in part, an account of our love.

I believe I was born in Florence, though I do not know where, for I knew nothing of you, Mother, or my father, and no one has ever claimed kinship with me. Yet I bear a name, Albizzi, that I have since learned was once renowned in my native city. After I was taken from the hands of those pious, duplicitous women at my second orphanage, the Pietà, and entered the wider world I thought I should never see, it was to find that Albizzi men still held high office but had to work for a living. For many years I took it for granted therefore that my father was an Albizzi, and you, my mother, must have been a servant, and as such could count on no one for protection. Not all the girls in the Pietà were Florentines. Some came from quite far afield – Arezzo, even. A respectable family does not want to be reminded of a shameful birth, nor to encounter its likeness in the marketplace.

But unlike the other girls in the Pietà, I had been in another orphanage first. My earliest memories are of the Innocenti where I lived until I was about ten years of age, in almost exclusively feminine company. In age we girls ranged from babes at the wet nurse's breast right up to grey-haired women who had passed their entire lives within those walls. What we had in common was our abandonment, passed through an opening below the portico of the orphanage onto a cushion laid between praying statues of Our Lady and her husband Joseph. Every child, even girl infants, were thus – for a few scant moments until their cries attracted attention – at one with the King of Heaven. I have seen that opening since. There is a Latin inscription above it which my son Tino read and translated for me, for my eyes were already weakened: 'When my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up.'

There were boys in there too, but we girls spied them only at Mass. They were never as numerous as us. I learned later that

sometimes a man will acknowledge a male bastard but shrug off the fact that he has fathered a little girl. The only men I saw were the priests and deacons in the chapel, and the Prior – a Benedictine. Day to day we were cared for by women, and instructed by them – in spinning, weaving, embroidery. The boys, I learned later, were apprenticed to trades, for they had to make their way in the world. We had only to serve.

We orphans, I have noticed, can often find each other out, among strangers. And the hopes we all nurtured can be harder to kill than one might think. My commonest daydream when I was a very little girl was of my father coming to take me away. He would be finely dressed, a coat of arms upon his shoulder, a sword at his hip, riding upon a gleaming horse. All we girls sustained ourselves with images like that; the only singular thing about it was that our longings resembled one another's so closely. Nobody imagined her father as a workman in a greasy apron, with dirt under his nails. And no child ever said she dreamed of her mother, for it was impressed on us from the youngest age that we were the product of sin. If man was made in the image of God, then a woman's divine example was Our Lady, perpetual Virgin, and the fact that we bastards existed was proof of an offence done to the Queen of Heaven. Our parents' fault lay heavily on our shoulders, and we could only expiate it, and show gratitude for the charity shown us, by piety and hard work. Expelled from Eden, Eve span – and so did we. It was the silk merchants, those who had endowed our orphanage, who gained all the benefit of it, though.

No, nobody spoke of her mother and no more did I, though lying alongside my fidgeting companions – we were four or five to a bed – I longed for your arms. I did find a replacement mother, for sometimes it happens that as a child needs a mother there are those who also need a child, and I had Tommasa, another orphan. But only a father had the power to release any of us – and in all those years I was there, none did.

It was not that the Innocenti was a prison – or at least not in the way the Pietà was. I was sent out to beg alms. I have never told anyone of this before, except my husband. If they were fit for it, the girls of the Innocenti went out into service. I was told I would not, even though I was straight and strong, while some of the women in there were maimed, diseased or ugly with age. I thought I should become like them if I stayed all my time in the orphanage, so I wanted to go out, even to beg. They told me I was pretty, though I never saw my own face in a mirror until I was twenty years old. I would go to the doors of the churches, to the Annunziata, and to San Marco, and rattle my little box.

My husband once asked me if I had thought of running away, but where would I have gone? Tommasa, the girl I went out with, who slept beside me, could not have run anyway. She had one leg shorter than the other, so she walked with a lurch. I think now that is why they put us together: the poor maimed girl and the little one with the curls. It was the contrast we made. I loved Tommasa, and she loved me. She protected me like a she-wolf protects her cubs. There was always someone when we went begging who wanted to entice me away, you see, and even though they offered me sweet things to eat and used kind words, some instinct made me not trust them. To one man I said: 'I will come with you only if Tommasa comes too,' and he laughed and walked away. Even though I was little I knew that if a stranger really was gentle, he would show his gentleness to her too, but no one ever wanted poor Tommasa. After they had taken me to the Pietà and I realised I would never see her again, I thought I should never stop crying, even though they threatened to beat me for ingratitude. I never had an opportunity to say goodbye to her, she who was the nearest I had to a mother.

Chapter Two

Via del Mandorlo, Florence

1584

…[una] cortese, e ridente bocca… rotondo collo… petto… picciolo corpo… ellevato fianco… dritta gamba… picciolo piede…
…a courteous and smiling mouth, round neck, large breasts, small body, high hips, straight legs, small feet…

Ciro Spontone, *Hercole difensore d'Homero* (1595)

The author of this dialogue on ideal beauty in a woman was a politician and writer at one stage employed at the court of Vincenzo Gonzaga

I find that I can write of my earlier life without too much difficulty. What came later will be harder. I have to tell myself I had no choice, but I still blush with shame.

I was taken from the Innocenti to the Pietà without warning. I think I was about ten, because while I know my age, more or less, I do not know the day on which I was born. I had not been out to beg for two years or more, and I was excited at the chance of seeing a little more of the world than that rectangle of sky above the girls' courtyard. I held the matron's hand, chattering with excitement until she told me sharply to hold my peace. But she could not damp my enthusiasm. I couldn't know then that it would be another ten years before I would be able to speak so freely.

Anyone who is not an orphan and who moves from one place to another has belongings they take with them. I had none, for everything in the Innocenti was owned in common. I had no hint that I was doing anything other than going for a walk.

It was soon clear to me that the Pietà was quite a different place; not an academy for girls to be sent into service, but an anteroom to the cloister. I looked up at a sheer wall. There was no pretty colonnade with those roundels of swaddled babies as there was at the Innocenti – only small, barred windows. This place was run by pious widows, laywomen, those who did not want to submit to convent discipline so much as to impose it. I heard the clatter of looms the moment a gnarled old lay sister opened the gate to us, and smelled the pungent, bitter smell of silkworms being boiled to death to give up their precious thread. But with that, much of the resemblance to the place where I had spent my previous life ended.

The matron nudged me over the threshold. The lay sister took me by the shoulder and half pulled me inside, shutting and barring the great door behind me. The matron had gone without a word – she was not the last woman to have care of me to leave me in that way.

'You are not to look up at the windows,' whispered the lay sister, 'or you will be punished. Nor are you to talk – not at your loom, nor in the dormitory, nowhere. You may speak only if the Prioress or one of her assistants addresses you, and your answer must be as brief as her question requires.'

I soon discovered that the girls – for there were only girls in there – were for the most part older than I. I saw no men in all the years I was there save the priests, and occasionally a workman, at whom we all peeked, though he was always guarded – there is no other word for it – by two of the oldest inmates. And old they were, having passed all their lives there, a thought that makes me shiver still). In the Innocenti we could not speak to the boys, but we knew they existed and how they looked, sitting in their conical hats at

Mass on the other side of the chapel; and how they sounded, their shouts at playtime in their courtyard reaching over the roofs of the dormitories to where we played our more sedate games.

There was one crucial difference between these girls and those I had left behind. This was made to weigh on me, for every condition of life has its hierarchies, as it is part of the imperfection of being human that the most lowly among us will look to see if there is someone to despise even more than they themselves are despised. We were not all bastards. Some of my companions knew who they were. It was their fathers who had brought them there, driven by poverty. There were some, the offspring of priests, who were marked with a particular shame.

I say all of this as though we talked freely of ourselves, but of course we could not. None of us ever took a vow of silence, but silence was imposed on us in there. Yet we found ways to whisper in corners, a girl posted as look-out who would sneeze or cough to warn of coming danger, or we would mouth to each other and our mouths be read.

In my own daughters I have observed these milestones of life: the moment a child first contemplates the thought that one day she will be a woman, or when she first looks at herself in a glass and moves her face from side to side in deciding whether she is beautiful, and what it is that makes her so – or looking for defects others either would not notice or declare to be charming. I have dried the raging tears that come when a dearest friend betrays by preferring the company of another little girl. I have quietly explained what the changes in a girl's body mean – how they equip her to be a mother. In the Pietà all these thoughts and fears remained as hidden as our bodies in those shapeless tunics we all wore. That cramping pain and the blood that came with it as the moon turned were acknowledged only as a sign of our imperfection. Even simple friendship was looked upon askance, just as it is for those women who take the veil – as both a selfishness that

excludes others and another manifestation of worldly wealth that it was better to renounce. There was nothing in that life that prepared me for the direction mine was to take. Nothing.

I was twenty when those two men and an older lady came, and I was called to the Prioress's parlour. I should remember the date, but do not. I can only say that it was winter still, though the days were lengthening; there was more light, each day, streaming in from those high windows to where we sat at our looms. I had by then given up dreaming of another life, for to do so had become more a torment than a delight. By then I was resigned to a choice, if it can be called that, of only two paths: to remain where I was all my life, and to be a mother at most only as an instructress in spinning or weaving to the younger slaves of that place, or to walk the short distance to the sisters at Santa Caterina in Cafaggio, closer to the Innocenti – to have my head shaved and to be vested as a Dominican sister, though I had no calling to it.

I knew myself as Giulia Albizzi in the Pietà, but I heard the Prioress with her visitors – Belisario Vinta, the doctor, the matron – call me Giulia *of the* Albizzi. I never had the surname of a foundling: Diotallievi, Diotaiuti or anything like that. I know now that it was because of my name that the Prior of the Innocenti had sent me to the Pietà instead of into service, but no mother or father stepped forward to stop those visitors from taking me away that day. They told me I was honoured, those people who came for me: they had been elsewhere – to view girls of marriageable age in the Innocenti, among others – before they came for me.

It was not the first time I had been brought to the Lady Prioress's parlour. Sometimes I had sewn there, when there were visitors who wanted to buy what we made in the orphanage. I knew whenever that was going to happen, for I would be made to wash beforehand, and the water I was given was fresh, used only by me. Because I was one of the

girls regularly chosen for this kind of exhibition, I learned that I had something some of my companions did not: I was pleasing to look at. There was no other way of knowing this, for I had never seen my own face – we had no mirrors. I knew only that my skin was smooth and clear, because sometimes when no one was looking I would touch it.

That was then the loveliest chamber I had ever seen. The Prioress's parlour had tapestries around the walls, and above them, paintings of virgin martyrs: Agnes, covered in her own hair to protect her nakedness from those prying, humiliating eyes; Barbara, tortured and burned in every part of her that made her a woman; Catherine of Alexandria standing before men and countering them in argument (a thing extraordinary in itself) while in the background her executioners prepared the wheel – and Ursula. She was no poor girl, but a princess, and she was going to marry a prince, as if in a fable, only that she wanted first to go to Jerusalem on pilgrimage and the prince would have to come with her and her vast bevy of maidens. Her father must have loved her dearly to agree to all that she demanded. I never knew *my* father – and by then I thought that perhaps he had never known even of my existence – but I cannot imagine that there are many as obliging as Ursula's. Her fable did not end well (in my view), for she and her maidens were set upon by pagans in a country to the north of here – the kind where they say heretics flourish even now – yet they embraced death over dishonour. Ursula was looking towards heaven and a martyr's crown as the arrow pierced her throat. The poor young man who was to have been her husband they killed too. I thought all those saints very noble, very brave, and loved to hear their stories (the only ones we did hear, besides those in the Bible, some of which I confess frightened me, and still do). Now, of course, I can read what I like, but that does not mean I always do.

Those women were courageous defenders of their virtue. Yet that day the Prioress sat and smiled as she displayed me to her visitors – with no needlework in sight.

I recognised one of the men as a doctor because of the way he was dressed, with that wide-brimmed hat, and I trembled, for I remembered such men coming to the Innocenti sometimes, to see the older girls who had returned from service outside, and the cries and screams when they were ministered to. Doctors were not allowed in the Pietà, for when our own *medica* despaired of any girl lying sick in the infirmary, that girl was taken from her care to the hospital at Santa Maria Nuova. I do not remember anyone coming back from there. Perhaps if an orphan was to be given up for dead, the Prioress ceased to worry about the presence of men. This one they referred to as Master Cappelli.

The other man sitting there I later knew as the *cavaliere*, Belisario Vinta, minister to the Grand Duke himself. The matron's name was Giovanna Prati, she told me, but I do not remember anyone ever using it afterwards – they simply called her 'matron'. From the moment I left the Pietà, she was with me constantly – almost constantly – until one day she disappeared from my life without a word. The men were never with me unless she was present, but she always did what they told her. I came to realise that her presence was to protect them from evil tongues – not to protect me.

'A very great honour is to be bestowed on you,' began the Prioress, after presenting me to her visitors. 'His Highness Grand Duke Francesco, our patron, has in generous charity decided to dower a girl – for marriage, not for the cloister – and you are to be that girl.'

I looked from face to face, my mouth open. The cavaliere was nodding in satisfaction, the doctor commenting on the luminosity of my skin.

'He has stipulated only these conditions,' went on the Prioress. 'One is that the girl be beautiful, and capable of bearing beautiful children to the lasting honour of Florence. The other is that she should accompany this gentleman,' (the man called Vinta bowed) 'and this lady, on a journey. At the end of that journey a task

will be required of her which will not be onerous, but may indeed be pleasurable, and in which she will represent her city and our rulers. She is to carry out that task with grace and diligence, in gratitude for the care that has been taken of her.'

'How will I know what to do, Lady Prioress?' I saw the two men exchange smiles.

'You will be instructed.'

'And who is to be my husband?' I whispered. I thought I must be dreaming.

'He will be chosen for you. Before you meet him, though, you must be taught the obligations as well as the joys of the married state – let us say that you must be made ready for him. We expected to keep you here in the Pietà and for that reason you have never learned what it is to be a wife, nor indeed to live in the world. Here, I think, is where we should start.' Saying that, she handed me a mirror, a little gleaming oval in which I saw what others had seen all of my life, but I never at all. I knew the colour of my skin, the darkness of my hair on those occasions when it was unwrapped to be washed, and I knew the shape of my mouth and nose to the touch, but I looked into eyes I had never yet seen and realised why I had been chosen.

The cavaliere then spoke: 'Mother Prioress, recollect that she will be meeting a prince. It is he, we might say, who will be the making of her – of her fortune, I mean. She has a natural nobility of manner as well as a beautiful face, but for our endeavour to meet with full success she must be presented to the best advantage.'

I was dizzy listening to them, and fearful. Was I too, like Ursula, to go on some strange pilgrimage, and with a prince? What would a prince want with me? Would I be martyred with him also? I said something like that, and they laughed, and the cavaliere said I had a ready wit, which was most pleasing, but that the modesty and gracefulness of my demeanour was of even greater value. He asked the Prioress how long would it take for them to make me ready,

and she asked two days. No one told me what it was I was going to do, or why, only that I would bring great lustre to Florence. They said other girls had been selected, not from Florence but from some other city I had never heard of, but that though appetising, they did not fit the standard of beauty the Prince had demanded.

'You are to be married,' repeated the Prioress, 'and you will be rich enough that you need never work again.'

I stared at her, speechless, until I realised I was being very rude, and cast my eyes down, the way we had all been taught. I could not understand her words. I knew she was a widow, yet she and her assistants and our confessor had always dinned into us orphans that the married state was little else than a means of avoiding the fires of hell, as St Paul teaches, and that lifelong chastity – preferably behind convent walls as a bride of Christ himself – was the honourable choice. Furthermore, we girls had also been taught that idleness was the joy of the devil, and that the more productive we were at the loom or with our needles, the greater would be our reward in heaven (as any earthly rewards our work reaped we never saw ourselves). But after they told me I was to be married, I could barely hear anything else they said for excitement. I was to leave the Pietà. I would have a man to love me.

'Am I to marry this prince?' I asked.

They all laughed then, though I thought the Prioress's mirth was a little forced. Her laughter did not reach her eyes.

'No,' said the cavaliere, 'but he will help you understand the married state. As we have said, a husband shall be found for you.'

They asked me was I willing, and of course I said yes. I still couldn't understand what they really wanted of me, though I noticed they watched me very closely. I saw the rejoicing in their faces when I said yes, and was glad I had pleased them.

In those two days I was kept from the other girls, and never had the opportunity to say goodbye to them, any more than I had at the Innocenti. This I was not surprised at, however, for

I knew that any girl who left the Pietà and married (there were a few, collected for that purpose by parents whose course in life now ran smoother) was permitted no further contact with her old companions.

After the visitors had gone I was brought to a room where there was a bath made of marble, sunk in the floor. I had never seen it before and think it must have been the one the Prioress used, for we girls bathed standing in something like a large iron bucket, and I was never the first to use the water. Each of us entered one by one the room where that bucket was; I had never seen any of my companions unclothed nor they me. Yet this time four of the oldest women of the Pietà stripped and washed and scraped and perfumed me, but would not answer my questions about where I was to go. They puffed smoke at me too, the way the acolytes wave incense over the altar. My hair was washed also, and the animals that crept in it and made my head itch until I picked them out and cracked them with my nails were chased out of it on the point of a comb till my hair felt as though it no longer belonged to me; it was then brushed until it sparked and my head felt light with the air moving through each tendril. Before, you see, my hair had been tied and hidden beneath the caps we all wore; we girls were dressed more plainly than the nuns themselves. I learned for the first time that my hair reached to the hollow of my back, and its colour and thickness was made much of: 'autumn chestnuts,' said one of my attendants. Yet all my life I had been told that such things should not be admired, as they were occasions of sin, pride being the worst of all failings. I wondered at all this that was being done to me, thinking, *this must be how a bride is prepared*. I could barely stand still for excitement.

The Prioress inspected me after the first bath and said that my skin was merely downy and that those little hairs could lie undisturbed – neither wax nor sugar was required. Some dark hairs were torn from my big toes – I remember the pain of it still – and the hard skin of my heels was pared away. Never had anyone

looked at me so minutely, but in the days to come my body was no longer my own, with all the peerings and proddings they put me to. Then they gave me a clean linen shift – it looked new to me, such a marvellous thing! – and on top of it a dark green dress in a soft, supple wool the likes of which I had never seen, much less had upon my person. They tied on the sleeves and put little soft leather slippers on my feet in place of my clogs. I cried for joy, thinking myself a queen.

'A plain perpignan becomes her,' said the matron when she came back two days later. 'We need only garland her head.'

My last night in the Pietà I barely slept, and it was not just for excitement and anticipation but because I was at last to sleep alone, in that new clean shift, in a little chamber on a low bed with a downy mattress, not a scratchy palliasse of straw. I missed the sound of the other girls turning and muttering and crying in the dark, though when I was one of them, I thought they would eventually drive me mad.

I was bewildered by the light, the noise, the smells when I left the Pietà. We hardly ever went outside, you see, only for processions like Corpus Domini where, all dressed the same, we would walk behind the cross, strewing flowers. I was always made to walk within the procession, not at its edges where the older women were. Every year, for weeks after being outside on that bright June day my thoughts would be fired by the colours and richness of what I had seen: the silks and lace of the ladies, their supercilious expressions (only now do I realise that not all of them could have been respectable), the fine features of men I could have loved, the grotesquely distorted beggars whining for alms on their pallets. When the orphanage doors closed on us again after these outings I knew I should have been reflecting on the poor broken body of our Saviour who suffered for us, but instead all I thought about were those smiling dark eyes, the sunlight glinting off swords and scabbards, the shouts and laughter beyond the droning voice of the

priest and the sung responses. I was both excited by and frightened of that open space, all those people, because I was so used to the Pietà's confining walls.

And now, when they came to me with that dress, speaking to me of this unknown prince and the service I would do for one of the greatest houses in Italy, and of the man who afterwards would be my very own, I had my chance to explore that world. When the Prioress told me that even the Holy Father and all the cardinals blessed this endeavour it only added to my delirium.

The cavaliere came back for me with the matron when those women had done their work and I – marvellously! – smelled only of lavender. For as long as it is in my power, I shall always strive to be as clean as they made me then, and I have insisted (in the face of some resistance sometimes) that anyone living under the same roof as me take the same care. I was given another, simpler dress to wear, which they said had also been made for me, while the wool one was put into a leather bag they said was mine, along with more clean linen. They told me I would have other clothes in time, a proper *corredo* for a bride, something I had never thought about much less prepared for myself, believing that path in life to be closed to me. I wanted to carry my dress, not to let it out of my sight, for I had never had anything of my own, but there was a little page with them and the bag was given to him. I remember that as we walked, those two either side of me, I kept glancing behind to ensure the page was still following us.

'Stop looking back, child,' the matron reprimanded me. 'Only a hoyden fidgets like that. The boy is obedient; he won't run off.'

It was towards evening when they came, on what had been a bright cold day. They had put a wool cloak on me, with a hood, dark, but all lined with bright silk, and I remember the cavaliere saying to the matron: 'They say that Master Leonardo always advised one to walk out in the evening to observe faces, as they become more interesting and more characterful in that light than

when the sun is high and our eyes dazzled. He could also have said that they become more beautiful, for such is our Giulia.' I rejoiced when I heard him, thinking of the great things my beauty would bring me. Then he said something else, which at the time puzzled me: 'She is grateful for these clothes, for she has been used to those rough tunics they are made to wear in the Pietà. This is no disadvantage to us.'

As we stood outside our destination, a house on the Arno, Vinta turned to me, and addressed me directly for the first time since we had left the Pietà.

'Did any of those pious women letter you?'

'No, sir.'

'That is good, for your presence here must be a secret.' Then he laughed and added, 'I'm forgetting myself. Who could someone like you write to? You know no one.'

Historical Note

That an orphan called Giulia was taken from the Dominican-run female orphanage of the Pietà to serve as a human test bench for Vincenzo Gonzaga's proof of virility is historical fact, attested to with explicit detail in correspondence in the Medici archive of the Archivio di Stato, Florence. The first part of the novel depends heavily on these sources, which have not been exaggerated by me; I have reproduced some phrases almost word for word. Giulia herself disappears from the correspondence completely after her plaintive question about not seeing the Prince again, so everything I have written after that episode is invention. Later diarists attribute the surname Albizzi to Giulia, and record that on returning from Venice she was married to a Roman musician called Giuliano and dowered with three thousand gold scudi (some saying after she had given birth to a child by Vincenzo; the sex of the child is never specified). One diarist records a more sombre fate, stating that Giulia was reduced to begging a crust door to door, but his account includes some obvious inaccuracies, such as that the test took place in Mantua. The correspondence in the archive does specify Francesco de' Medici's intention to dower Giulia and find her a husband, so it is to be hoped that Vinta carried out this instruction as faithfully as he clearly did all others. Vinta's assault

of Giulia on the return from Venice is invented, but it is clear from the correspondence with Francesco de' Medici that the minister was attracted to Giulia and had absolute power over her.

There have been attempts to identify Giulia's husband as Giulio Caccini, the Roman musician and composer employed by the Medici (first proposed by Maria Bellonci, 1947). Apart from the fact that Giulio and Giuliano are not versions of the same name, Caccini was married twice, neither wife was named Giulia, and both wives were themselves musicians. Bellonci also stated that Giulia's child was taken to Mantua and that Giulia herself died young (presumably referring to the death of Caccini's first wife). Kate Simon (1988) repeats the story of the child, but neither provides a source. It is likely that we will never know exactly who the real Giulia was, nor her story after the Congress of Venice. I have invented a surname for her husband.

Giovan Battista Guarini's *Il Pastor Fido* was performed for Vincenzo Gonzaga in Mantua in 1598. The revival performance that Giulia witnesses is my invention, but in keeping with Vincenzo's nostalgia for lost youth.

Giulia's first home, the Ospedale degli Innocenti, built to the designs of Filippo Brunelleschi in 1419 and decorated along its façade with glazed terracotta roundels from the workshop of Andrea della Robbia of swaddled infants, still stands in Piazza Santissima Annunziata in Florence. Founded by the Silk Guild, the most powerful of the Florentine guilds, the Innocenti functioned as an orphanage into the twentieth century and still fulfils its mission of the care of children. The first administration of a smallpox vaccine in Italy took place in the Innocenti in 1756. Forty years ago, visiting the museum (where alongside works of art are to be found the unbearably moving tokens left by mothers with

their infants), I looked out into the courtyard to see wandering about a number of heavily pregnant girls about the same age as I was. Today, as well as providing help to needy families and facilitating fostering arrangements, the Innocenti is the headquarters of the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, supporting advocacy for children and facilitating the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child worldwide.

Founded in 1554, the Dominican-allied female orphanage of the Pietà moved in 1568 from its first home in Borgo Ognissanti to Via del Mandorlo (now Via Giuseppe Giusti); the building now houses the Kunsthistorisches Institut.