THE CHILDREN'S TRAIN

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A NOVEL

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1946

I

MAMMA IN FRONT; ME BEHIND. MAMMA strides through the narrow streets in the Spanish Quarter: it takes two steps of mine to keep up with every one of hers. I look at people's shoes. Shoes with no holes in them equal one point; shoes with holes in them, minus one point. No shoes: zero points. New shoes: I get a star-studded prize. I've never had a pair of shoes of my own; I wear other people's shoes and they always hurt. Mamma says I don't walk straight but it's not my fault; it's other people's shoes that are the problem. They are the shape of the feet that wore them before me. They've taken on their habits, walked on other streets, played other games. By the time they get to me, what do they know about the way I walk, or where I want to go? They need to get used to me little by little; but then my feet grow, the shoes get too small for me, and we're back to square one.

Mamma in front; me behind. I have no idea where we're going, she says it's for my own good. There must be a catch, like when I had head lice. It's for your own good, she said, and then she shaved

my head so I looked like a melon. Luckily, my friend Tommasino got the melon treatment, too, for his own good, of course. The kids in our street teased us, saying we looked like skulls that had escaped from the ossuary at Fontanelle Cemetery. In the beginning, Tommasino wasn't my friend. One day, I saw him steal an apple from Capajanca, the vegetable man with the barrow at Piazza del Mercato, and I thought we could never be friends because Mamma Antonietta always says we may be poor, but we are certainly not thieves. Better beggars than thieves. But Tommasino had seen me and had taken an apple for me, too. Since the apple had been given to me, and it wasn't me who stole it, I finished it off. I was so hungry he could see it in my eyes. We've been friends since then. Apple friends.

Mamma walks right in the middle of the street and never looks down. I drag my feet and count points so I don't get scared. I count up to ten on my fingers and then I start again. When I get to ten times ten, something nice will happen. That's how the game goes. Until now nothing nice has ever happened to me, though. Maybe I count the points wrong. I like numbers quite a lot. Letters not so much. One by one, I can recognize them, but when they're all mixed up into words, I get confused. Mamma says she doesn't want me to grow up like she did, and that's why she sent me to school. I went, but I didn't like it one bit. For one thing, the kids were yelling all day and I used to come home with a headache. The classroom was tiny and smelled like sweaty feet. And then I had to sit still all day at my desk in silence and draw rows and rows of straight lines. Our teacher had a pointy chin and spoke with a lisp. If anyone copied her, she would whack them on the head. I had ten whacks in five days. I counted them like my shoe points, and I didn't get a prize that time either. After a while, I decided I

didn't want to go to school anymore.

Mamma wasn't happy about it, but she said at least I had to learn a trade and so she sent me to collect rags. At first, I liked it. My job was to go from house to house, or down to the garbage dump, pick up old rags, and then take them to Capa 'e Fierro's market stall. After a few days, I was so tired from my rounds that I even missed the whacks the pointy-chinned teacher had given me.

Mamma stops in front of a gray-and-red building with big windows.

"It's here," she says.

This school looks nicer than the last one. It's quiet inside and there's no stench of feet. We go up to the second floor, and they make us sit on a wooden bench in a corridor, until a voice calls out: "Next." Since nobody else moves, Mamma thinks we must be next and we go in.

Mamma's name is Antonietta Speranza. The signorina waiting for us writes her name on a sheet of paper and says, "This is your last option." That's when I think: Okay, Mamma's going to turn around and go home now. But she doesn't move.

"Do you whack your pupils?" I ask the signorina, covering my head with my arms just in case. She laughs and pinches my cheek gently, without squeezing.

"Sit down," she says, and we sit down facing her.

The signorina doesn't look a bit like my last teacher. She doesn't stick her chin out, her smile is full of straight white teeth, her hair is cut short, and she wears pants like a man. We sit in silence. She says her name is Maddalena Criscuolo and that maybe mamma remembers her, because she had fought to liberate us from the oppression of the Nazi-Fascists. Mamma nods her head, but I

can tell that she has never heard the name Maddalena Criscuolo before today. Maddalena tells us that during the "Four Days of Naples" she had saved the bridge at Rione Sanità, because the Germans wanted to blow it up with dynamite; in the end, she says, she was given a bronze medal and a certificate. I think she would have done better with a pair of new shoes, because she has one good shoe and one with a hole in it (zero points). She says we did the right thing coming to see her, that most people are too ashamed, that she and her comrades had knocked on every single door in the neighborhood to convince mothers that this was a good thing, for them and for their children. She also says that they had a lot of doors slammed in their faces, and a few curses too. I can believe it because when I go and knock on doors looking for old rags, people often cuss at me. The signorina says that a lot of good families have trusted them, that Mamma Antonietta is a brave woman, and that she is giving an important gift to her son. I've never had a gift, except for an old tin sewing box I ~~use to~~ keep my precious things in.

Mamma Antonietta waits for Maddalena to stop talking, because talking is not her strong point. The woman says kids should be given a chance but, to tell the truth, I would be much happier with a slice of bread with ricotta cheese and sugar on top. I tried it once at a party I crashed with Tommasino, held by some Americans (old shoes: minus one point).

Mamma doesn't say a word, that's why Maddalena keeps talking: they've organized some special trains to take children up north. My mother finally says something.

"Are you sure you want him? Look at this kid. He was sent by God to punish us!"

Maddalena says they'll put a whole bunch of us on the train,

not just me.

So it's not a school, I finally realize, smiling.

Mamma isn't smiling.

"If I had a choice, I wouldn't be here. This is my only choice, so see what you can do."

When we leave, Mamma walks one step ahead of me, but more slowly than before. We walk by the pizza stall, where normally I would be pulling on her skirt and wailing until she walloped me. This time, though, she stops.

"Pork rind and ricotta cheese, please," she asks the boy behind the counter. "Just one."

I hadn't asked her for anything, and I realize that if Mamma, of her own accord, decides to buy me fried pizza for a mid-morning snack, there must be a catch somewhere.

The man wraps a piece of pizza as yellow as the sun and as wide as my face. I'm so scared I'll drop it that I grab on to it using both hands. It's warm and smells delicious; I blow on it and the aroma of olive oil fills my nose and mouth. Mamma bends down and looks me in the eye.

"You heard what she said, right? You're a big boy now; you'll be eight soon. You know the situation we're in, don't you?"

She wipes the grease off my face with the back of her hand.

"Come on, let me have a taste," she says, twisting off a corner of the dough with her fingers. Then she straightens up and starts for home. I don't ask her anything and set off after her. Mamma in front; me behind.

2

Maddalena didn't come up in conversation again. I thought Mamma must have forgotten or changed her mind. But then, a few days later, a nun came to the house, sent by Padre Gennaro. The nun knocked at the door and Mamma peeked out the window and said: "Now what does this penguin want?"

The sister knocked again, so mamma put her sewing down and opened the door a crack, so the nun could only get her face in. It was all yellow. The nun asked if she could come in, and Mamma opened the door a little wider, but you could see she really didn't want her there. The nun said she was a good Christian and Our Lord sees everything and His creatures do not belong to their mothers or their fathers; they are all God's children and, anyway, the politicians want to send us all to Russia, where we'll all be killed and nobody will ever make it back home. Mamma didn't say a word. She's really good at keeping quiet. After a while, the nun was bored and left. So I asked Mamma: "Do you really want

to send me to Russia?" She picked up her sewing again and started muttering to herself: "What Russia? Russia, huh? . . . I'd like to see that sister on her own with a child . . . it's easy to talk when you don't have kids of your own. Where was that penguin when my Luigino fell ill, eh?"

Luigi would have been my big brother if he hadn't gotten bronchial asthma as soon as he came into the world. In any case, by the time I came along, I was already an only child.

"Fascists, Communists, they're the same to me; just like priests and bishops," Mamma went on, because she doesn't talk much to other people, but she does talk to herself quite a bit. "Up till now, it's been nothing but hunger and hard work for me . . ."

If my big brother hadn't had the bad idea of getting bronchial asthma, he would now be three years older than me. Mamma hardly ever says his name but she keeps a picture of him on her bedside table with a little red light in front of it. Zandragliona, the nice lady who lives in the ground-floor apartment right in front of ours, told me about it. She says Mamma was so sad, they didn't think she would ever get over it. But then she gave birth to me, and she was happy again. Well, I don't make her happy like he did. Otherwise, she wouldn't be sending me to Russia.

I decide to go to see Zandragliona. She knows everything, and even if she doesn't, she knows how to make it up. Zandragliona says they're not taking me to Russia. She says that she knows Maddalena Criscuolo and that those women we saw want to help us; they want to give us hope. Well, I've got "hope" in my name because I'm called Speranza like Mamma Antonietta. My first name is Amerigo. Mamma said my father chose my name. I've never met him, and every time I ask Mamma, she rolls her eyes like it's about to rain and she hasn't had time to bring the washing in. She

says he's a truly great man. I think he must have gone to America to seek his fortune. "Will he ever come back?" I ask. "Sooner or later," she answers. "I hope so," I say. Well, that's all he left me. My name. I suppose that's something.

Since the news of the children's train transports came out, the neighborhood is abuzz. Each person says something different: they'll sell us and send us to America to work; they'll take us to Russia and gas us; the bad kids will be sent off and the good ones will get to stay. Some don't give a damn and carry on as if nothing is happening, because they are total ignoramuses. I'm ignorant, too, though in the neighborhood they call me "Nobèl" because I know so much. And because I talk a lot. I go around town. I hear stories. I stick my nose into other people's business. No one is born knowing everything.

Mamma Antonietta doesn't want me talking about her business. In fact, I don't tell anyone that Capa 'e Fierro has stashed packets of coffee under our bed. Nor do I say that Capa 'e Fierro comes to our house and locks himself in with Mamma. I wonder what he tells his wife? Maybe that he's playing pool. He sends me out when he comes. He says he and Mamma need to get down to work. So I go out and look for stuff: rags, remnants, clothes American soldiers have thrown away, dirty tatters full of fleas. When he first started coming to the house, I didn't want to leave them alone there. I didn't like Capa 'e Fierro acting like he was head of the family. But Mamma said I had to show respect, because he helps put food on our plates and, anyhow, he knows people in important places. She said he's a good salesman and that I should learn from him. That he could be my guide. I didn't answer her, but since then, whenever he comes, I go out. Whatever scraps I bring back home, Mamma has to scrub, clean, and mend,

and then we take them to Capa 'e Fierro, who has a stall at Piazza Mercato. Every now and again, he manages to sell something to people a little less poor than us. In the meantime, I look at everyone's shoes and count up the points on my fingers. When I get to ten times ten, something nice will happen: my father will come back from America, and I will be the one to throw Capa 'e Fierro out of the house, not the other way around.

Once the game actually worked, though. In front of the San Carlo Theater, I saw a man with such shiny, brand-new shoes that it earned me a hundred points straight off. And then, when I went home, Capa 'e Fierro was outside the door. Mamma had seen his wife on the Corso with a new handbag on her arm. Capa 'e Fierro said, "You have to learn to wait. If you wait, your time will come." But Mamma said, "Today, you can wait," and she didn't let him in. Capa 'e Fierro lit a cigarette and walked away, his hands in his pockets. I followed him because it gave me a kick to see him disappointed. I called out to him.

"No work today, Capa 'e Fierro? Is it a holiday?"

He turned around and squatted down in front of me. He pulled on his cigarette and then blew little smoke circles into my face.

"Well, young man. Women and wine are the same. Either you dominate them, or they dominate you. If you let them dominate you, you go crazy. You are a slave to them. I've always been free and I always will be. Come. Let's go to the osteria. Today, I'm going to introduce you to red wine. Today Capa 'e Fierro is going to make a man out of you!"

"Pity I can't oblige you, Capa 'e Fierro," I said. "I have things to do."

"What could you possibly have to do, young man?"

"I have to go and look for rags, as usual. They're worth nothing,

but at least they put food on the table. Please excuse me."

I left him there, the smoke rings vanishing into the air.

I put whatever rags I can collect into a basket Mamma gave me. Because the basket gets heavy when it fills up, I started balancing it on my head like I've seen women do at the market. But carry it today, carry it tomorrow, my hair started falling out and I ended up with a bald patch on my head. That's why she shaved my head, so I looked like a melon. It wasn't head lice!

During my scavenging, I ask around whether anyone knows about the trains but nobody does. Tommasino says he's not going, because they have everything they need at home, and his mother, Donna Armida, lacks for nothing. Pachiochia, who commands a lot of respect in our neighborhood, says that these things didn't use to happen when there was still a king in Italy; mothers didn't used to sell their children. She says that these days there's no longer any *dig-ni-ty*, and every time she says it like that, you can see her brown gums, as she clenches the few yellow teeth she has left in her mouth, and spits through the gaps. I think Pachiochia must have been born ugly, and that's why she never found a husband, but we're not allowed to say anything about this because it's her weak point. That and the fact that she doesn't have any kids. She once kept a little goldfinch, but it flew away. We're not supposed to talk about the goldfinch either.

Zandragliona also never married. She's still a signorina. Nobody knows why. Some people say she couldn't decide among her many suitors and ended up on her own. Everyone says she's quite rich and doesn't want to share her money. Some say she once had a fiancé but he died. Or that she had a fiancé, but then she found out he was married. I say they're all gossips.

Only once did Pachiochia and Zandragliona agree on some-

thing. That was when the Germans came all the way up to our street looking for something to eat, and our two neighbors put pigeon poop in the *casatiello* pie saying ~~they were~~ pork rind, which is a specialty of ours. The soldiers wolfed it down and said *gut, gut!* to Pachiochia and Zandragliona, who were poking each other in glee and laughing in their sleeves. We never saw the soldiers again, and there was never any punishment.

MAMMA ANTONIETTA HASN'T SOLD ME. NOT YET, anyway. But then, a couple of days later, I came home with my basket of rags and found Maddalena Criscuolo at the house. I said to myself: "Here we are. They've come to buy me, too!" So, while Mamma is talking to the lady, I'm spinning around the room like I'm half-crazy or something, and whenever they ask me anything, I either don't answer or I stammer and dribble on purpose. I'm trying to look like I'm brain-damaged so they won't want to buy me anymore. Who would be so dumb as to buy a cripple or a stutterer, huh?

Maddalena says she came from a poor family, too, and she isn't well-off even now. Being hungry isn't anything to be ashamed of, she says; it's an injustice, and women should unite to make things better. Pachiochia says that if all girls cut their hair short and wore pants like Maddalena then the world would go to hell in a handbasket. I say she shouldn't talk because she's the one with a mustache! Maddalena doesn't have a mustache. She has a lovely red mouth and white teeth.

Maddalena lowers her voice and says she knows Mamma's story. She knows how she suffered for her tragedy, and says women should help one another. She calls it solidarity. Mamma Antoni-

etta stares at a point on the wall, where there is nothing to look at, for two minutes, and I know she's thinking about my big brother, Luigino.

Before Maddalena, there were other ladies coming to the house, but they didn't have short hair and they didn't wear pants. They were real signoras with smart clothes and that blond fresh-from-the-hairdresser look. When they came into our street, Zandragliona would always make a face and say: "Here come the charity dames." At the beginning, we were happy because they brought us food packages, but then, when we opened them, we saw there was no pasta, no meat, no cheese, no nothing. There was rice. Always rice. Nothing but rice. When they came, Mamma would look up at the sky, as if a storm was coming and we were only halfway home, and say: "We'll kill ourselves laughing tonight with another risible risotto!" The charity dames didn't get it, but when they realized that nobody wanted the food packages, they said the rice was "Made in Italy" and they were working to promote it. Once they had confessed, people didn't even open their doors to them when they knocked. Pachiocchia says we know no gratitude, we deserve nothing, and there's no longer any *dig-ni-ty*. Zandragliona says the dames come to gloat. Them and their rice. Anytime someone gives away something useless, she says: "The charity dames are here!"

Maddalena promises we'll have fun on the train, and that the families up north will treat us like their own children. They'll take care of us and give us food and new clothes and shoes (two points). I stop my crippled dribbling act when I hear this and say: "Mamma! Sell me to this lady!" Maddalena's big red mouth opens wide into a laugh, just as Mamma gives me a clout around the ear with the back of her hand. I put my hands up to my face;

I don't know whether it's burning more from the smack or more from my shame. Maddalena stops laughing and reaches out to touch Mamma's arm. Mamma pulls away, as if she'd touched a boiling hot pan. She doesn't like being touched or even stroked. Then Maddalena speaks in a serious voice and says that she doesn't want to buy me. The Party is organizing something that has never been undertaken before, that will make history, and that people will remember for years to come. "You mean, like the pigeon poop in the *casatiello*?" I ask her. Mamma Antonietta looks at me, and I look at her. It feels like another spank is on its way but, instead, she says: "And you? What do you want to do?" I say that if they actually give me a pair of brand-new shoes (a star-studded prize), I'll go up north to the Communists like a shot, on foot if necessary. Maddalena smiles while Mamma's head moves up and down, which I know means I'm in.

3

MAMMA ANTONIETTA STOPS IN FRONT OF THE door where the Communists have their headquarters in Via Medina. Maddalena told us we had to put our name down on the list for the children's train. On the first floor, there ~~were~~ three young men and two signorinas. As soon as the signorinas see us, they lead us into a room where there is a desk with a red flag behind it. They tell us to sit down and start asking us thousands of questions. One signorina talks while the other writes everything down on a sheet of paper. When we're done, the one who was talking takes a candy out of a tin and hands it to me. The one who was writing takes the sheet and puts it on the desk in front of Mamma. Mamma doesn't know what she's supposed to do. The signorina puts a pen in Mamma's hand and tells her she has to sign. Mamma just sits there. I unwrap the candy and the lemon smell tickles my nose. I don't ~~eat~~ candy every day.

From the next room we can hear the three young men shouting. The signorinas look at each other without saying anything,

because you can see they're used to it and they know they can't do anything about it. In the meantime, Mamma Antonietta sits there with the sheet in front of her and the pen in her hand, which is hanging by her side. I ask why they're fighting like that in the other room. The one who was writing before says nothing. The other signorina who was talking before says that they're not fighting, they're just deciding what needs to be done, so that everyone can be better off, which she says is what politics is all about. So I say: "Excuse me, don't you all agree up here?" She pulls a face, like when you put an unripe walnut in your mouth and you don't expect it to be bitter, and then she says that even among themselves not everyone agrees with everyone else, there are currents and movements . . . at this point, the one who was writing before gives her a dig with her elbow, as if she's saying too much, and then turns to Mamma and tells her that if she doesn't know how to sign her name, she can put a cross on the dotted line, because they can both be witnesses. Mamma Antonietta blushes bright red and, without lifting her eyes from the paper, draws a slightly crooked X on the page. After everything I'd heard about the currents and movements, I'm feeling a little scared, because Zandragliona always says air currents and movements are what give kids colds and coughs, and I've heard that the sick kids don't get to go on the trains. And that's not fair either, because it's the sick kids who need to go and get taken care of, right? It's easy to talk about solidarity with the healthy kids, as Pachiochia would quite rightly say, since—apart from her mustache and brown gums—she's a nice lady underneath, and every now and again she even gives me two lire coins to spend.

The signorinas write a few more things in a big ledger and then walk with us to the door. When we go through to the other room,

the three young men are still arguing about politics. Every two or three exchanges, the thin blond one yells something about "the problem of the south" or "national integration." I watch Mamma closely to see whether she's understood, but she looks straight ahead and keeps on walking. The blond guy turns to me just as I'm passing, as if to say: "You say something. Tell him, will you?" I want to say that it's none of my business and that Mamma Antonietta is the one who brought me here for my own good, otherwise I wouldn't be here, but, before I can open my mouth, Mamma Antonietta yanks my arm and hisses: "You little show-off. Now you want to stick your nose into this stuff, too? Shut your mouth and get out of here!"

So we walk on, the blond guy following us with his eyes until we are out the door.

4

Bad weather has come all of a sudden. Mamma hasn't sent me out looking for rags, partly because it's raining and starting to be cold. She hasn't bought me any other fried pizzas, but she once made me a meat-and-onion *pasta alla genovese* I go crazy for. The nun hasn't showed her face recently, and in the neighborhood they've gotten bored of talking about the train thing.

Since we weren't doing so well at home these days, me and Tommasino went into business together. He wasn't that keen to begin with. Part of him was disgusted and part of him was scared his mother would find out and send him on the train as a punishment. I told him that if Capa 'e Fierro managed to make money with stuff we found in the garbage, we would be stupid not to try. So that is how we started with the sewer rats. Our deal was that I would catch them and he would paint them. We had an upturned box as a stall at the market, in the corner where they sell parrots and goldfinches. Our specialty was hamsters. I had

gotten the idea because I'd seen an American officer breeding them and selling them to rich ladies who weren't so rich anymore. They would skin them and make ~~a~~ fur ~~collar~~ for their coats, showing off and saving money at the same time. If we cut the tail off the sewer rats I caught and painted them brown and white with shoe polish, they looked just like the American officer's hamsters. Business was going well, and me and Tommasino had built up a good clientele. We would be rich by now if one terrible day it hadn't rained.

"Amerì," Tommasino had said that morning, "if we make enough money, you won't have to go up north with the Communists. "

"What does that have to do with anything?" I asked. "It'll be like a vacation."

"A vacation for the chicken shit of this world, you mean. Guess where *we're* going this summer? To the island of Ischia."

At that very moment, the sky went black, and it started pouring with rain like I'd never seen before.

"Tommasino," I said. "The next time you tell a whopper like that, bring an umbrella."

We ran for cover under the cornice of a building, but the stall with the painted sewer rats was still there. Before we even realized, the shoe polish had been washed away, and the hamsters had been transformed back into rats. The ladies around the cages started screaming.

"Ew! They'll give us cholera!"

We couldn't run away because the ladies' husbands were threatening to beat us up. Luckily, Capa 'e Fierro came along. He grabbed both of us by the collar and yelled, "Make that filthy shit go away right now. You and me will be having a good talk later."

I was sure I'd get a good dressing down when I got home, but he didn't mention the sewer rats at all. Then one day, when he came to the door to get down to work with Mamma, he took me aside before going in. He pulled on his cigarette so that all the smoke was inside his mouth and, before letting it out, he said, "It was a good idea. But the stall should have been in the covered market!" He laughed, and the smoke rings grew wider as they rose up into the air. "If you want to go into business, you need to come with me to the market. I'll teach you." He put his hand on my cheek, in what could have been a slap or a caress. It was impossible to tell. Then he left.

I was tempted by the idea of going to Capa 'e Fierro. If only to improve my business skills. But the police came and took him away. I think because of the contraband coffee. People in the neighborhood stopped talking about the painted hamsters, because they were too busy gossiping about Capa 'e Fierro in jail. I'd like to see him saying he'll always be free now!

As soon as Mamma heard the news, she moved all the stuff away, but for days, every time she heard a noise behind the door, she hid her face in her hands as if she wanted to disappear underground. Anyway, the police didn't come to our house, and after a few days people had gotten bored of that, too. People always talk up a storm, and then they forget everything. Except Mamma, who hardly ever talks, but remembers everything.

One morning, when I've stopped even thinking about the trains, she wakes me before the sun is out and it is still dark outside the window, puts on her best dress, and combs her hair in front of the mirror. She lays out a set of clothes that are a little less worn-out than usual for me and says: "Let's go, or we'll be late." That's when I get it.

We start walking. Mamma in front; me behind. In the meantime, it has started raining. I play around leaping over the puddles, and Mamma boxes me around the ears, but my feet are already wet, and there's still a long way to go. I look around to see if I can play my shoe game and win some more points, but today I don't feel like it. I'd like to hide my face in my hands, too, and disappear for a bit. There are lots of other mammas with their children walking alongside us. There are some papas too, but you can see they don't want to be there. One of them has written on a sheet of paper a list of instructions: what time his little boy gets up, what time he goes to bed, what he likes and doesn't like to eat, how many times he poops, remember to use a waterproof bed sheet because he wets his bed. He reads the list to his wife, the kid dying of embarrassment in front of all the others, folds it in four, and puts it in the boy's pocket. Then he has second thoughts, takes it out again, and jots down a quick "thank you" to the family that will be taking his son in, saying that, thank God, they are not in need, they would just like their kid to have a nice little vacation.

The ladies stride ahead defiantly, each with two, three, or four children tagging along behind. I'm an only child, since I didn't make it in time to meet my big brother, Luigi. I didn't make it in time to meet my father, either. I was born too late for everyone. It's better this way, though, because this way my father doesn't need to feel ashamed about putting ~~us~~ on the train.

We get to a long, long building. Mamma Antonietta calls it the Reclusorio. She says it's a hospice for the poor. "What?" I say. "Weren't they taking us up north so we could eat and drink? Now we're at the hospice for the poor. Things are getting worse instead of better! Wouldn't it be better if we just stayed home, on our street?" Mamma Antonietta says we're here because, before they

can take us north, they need to check us out to see whether we're healthy or sick, whether we're contagious . . .

"And then," Mamma Antonietta says, "they have to give us some warm clothes, coats, and shoes, because up north it's not like down here. They have real winters up there!"

"Brand-new shoes?" I ask.

"Brand-new, or used but new," she says.

"Two points!" I yell.

Forgetting for a moment that I'm about to leave, I start jumping around and around until Mamma grabs me by the arm.

There's a crowd forming in front of the long building. There are mothers with children of all ages: tiny, small, middle-sized, and big. I'm middle-sized. Standing in front of the gate, there's a signorina, but it's not Maddalena. It's not even one of the rice dames. She tells us we need to stand in line, as they're going to check us out and then, she says, they're going to stitch a number on us, so they know who we are. If not, I reckon, when we come back, they'll end up giving every mamma the wrong child. Mamma is the only thing I have, and I don't want to be mistaken for another child, so I cling to her bag and tell her I really don't need new shoes in the end and, if it's for my own good, we can go home immediately. I feel sad in my tummy and I think that if I had carried on dribbling and stuttering, I wouldn't have had to leave.

I turn around, because I don't want her to see me crying, but then I almost burst out laughing. Two rows behind me there's Tommasino.

"Hey, Tommasì," I call out. "Are you waiting for the ferry to Ischia?"

He glares at me, his face as white as a sheet. He's scared stiff,

I can see it. In the end, even his mother had to ask for charity! Pachiochia told me Donna Armida was once rich, very rich. She lived in a fancy building on the Corso and had servants. She used to make clothes for the finest ladies in the city and knew all the people that counted. Her husband, Don Gioacchino Saporito, was nearly, nearly going to buy a car.

Zandragliona, on the other hand, said Donna Armida had gotten ahead, no disrespect, by licking the feet of the Fascists. Then, when fascism went away, she went back to being a rag trader, which was in her nature, and her husband, who had been a big shot under fascism, was arrested and interrogated. Everybody expected some kind of example to be made of him. I don't know, something like a punishment, a conviction, prison. But nobody did anything. Zandragliona said there'd been an armistice, which is like, for example, when Mamma found out I'd broken the casserole dish we used for macaroni, which her mamma, Filomena, bless her soul, had left her, she said: "Get out of my sight or I'll beat the living daylights out of you." And I ran away and stayed at Zandragliona's, and didn't show my face back home for two days. Donna Armida's Fascist husband was released and went home, and nothing was ever said again. Now the two of them run their rag trade from a ground-floor tenement apartment in the alley right next to ours.

Tommasino, Donna Armida's little boy, had brand-new shoes (a star-studded prize!) when his mamma was a seamstress. Then, when she went back to being a rag trader and moved to our neighborhood, he still had the same shoes as before, but by that time they were old and full of holes (one point).

When she sees Tommasino, Mamma squeezes my hand to remind me of my promise. I squeeze hers back and turn to Tom-

masino, winking at him. Sometimes, Tommasino would come to look for rags with me. Donna Armida was not happy because she said her son should be keeping company with his betters, not with people like me who are worse off than him. When Mamma found out, she made me promise not to be friends with Tommasino, because he was the son of ignorant peasants who had made money and then lost it again, and anyhow, they were Fascists, as Zandragliona had said. I promised Mamma and Tommasino promised his. So every afternoon we would meet, but in secret.

More and more children are pouring in, some on foot and others jumping off the free buses that a lady next to us says the bus company has brought in specially. There are even some kids arriving in police jeeps. The jeeps with no soldiers in them, and all those kids carrying colored banners and waving to us, look like carnival floats in the Piedigrotta Festival. I ask Mamma if I can join them in the jeeps. She grips my hand even tighter and tells me to stick right by her side or I'll get lost. And if I really want to get lost, I should wait until they stitch a number on me. The crowd is getting thicker. The signorina tries to get us in line, but the line moves all the time, like an eel in the fishmonger's hand.

A little blond girl, who until today has been badgering her mother because she wanted to go on the train trip, is now crying her eyes out, saying she doesn't want to go anymore. A boy, just a little older than me, in a brown hat, who came to see his brother off, is saying it's not fair that he has to stay here when his brother is leaving for the good life, and he starts blubbering, too. There is scolding and tongue-lashing all around but the kids go on wailing, and the mammas don't know which way to turn. In the end, one of the signorinas arrives with the lists and solves the problem. She crosses out the little blond girl's name and puts the

name of the boy in the brown hat down instead, making everyone happy. Except the little blond girl's mamma, who storms off saying: "We'll settle this when we get home."

At one point, I hear a voice I know well. Striding in front of the group of ladies marching in a procession is Pachiochia. She's swinging her arms and barking out commands with all the breath in her body. There's a picture of King Umberto I pinned to her breast. The first time I had seen the photo I had said: "Who's this handsome man with the mustache? Your fiancé?" Pachiochia had started kicking me, because I'd offended her dearly departed husband-to-be who'd died in the First World War and whom she'd never betrayed, even in her thoughts, God bless us! Then she'd crossed herself three times, the third time kissing the tips of her fingers and lobbing the kiss up to the sky. Pachiochia had said the handsome man with the mustache was our last king, Umberto, who was finished before he even started, because those people had gotten it into their heads to make our country a republic and cheated with the ballot sheets, so they would win. Pachiochia had said that she was a *mon-ar-chist*, and that the Communists had turned the world upside down and now nothing made any sense at all. Crooks and thugs, the whole lot of them. In fact, she'd said, my father was probably a red Commie crook and a thug himself, and that's why he'd had to get away. America, ha-ha! I thought she could be right, because I have red hair and Mamma's hair is black . . . so the carrot must be from my father. Since then, I don't get upset when people call me "evil hair," as they often do.

Pachiochia, with the portrait on her breast, leads the procession of ladies, who have no kids with them. These women start giving a piece of their mind to the mothers in the crowd with their kids.

"Don't sell your children," they shout. "They've turned your heads with their talk, but the truth is they'll be taking your children to Siberia to put them to work, if they don't die of cold first."

The little ones don't want to leave, and the older ones dig their heels in and say they want to leave. It's like St. Gennaro's feast day, but without the miracles. The more Pachiochia beats her breast, the more she pummels the mustached king who is pinned there. If Zandragliona were here, she would say something back, but she hasn't arrived yet. Pachiochia goes on. "Don't let your children leave! They won't allow them back. Hold your children close, like when we were under the bombs, and you were all they needed to protect them. With Providence on your side."

I remember the wailing of the sirens and everyone screaming. When the bombs came, Mamma would pick me up and run to the shelter with me in her arms. Once we were inside, she would hold me tight all the time. I was happy during the air raids.

The procession of ladies with no children plows past the crowd of mothers and us kids, who have somehow finally managed to get in line, and everything turns into a mess again. A few more signorinas rush out the front door of the long, long building to try to make peace.

"Don't leave," they say. "Don't deprive your children of this chance. Think of the winter that's coming. Think of the cold, the trachoma infections, your damp houses . . ."

In the meantime, the signorinas go up to every kid and hand out a little package wrapped in silver foil.

"We're mothers, too," they go on. "Your children will be warm over the winter; they'll have food and they'll be taken care of. There are families in Bologna, Modena, and Rimini waiting to welcome them into their families. They'll come back prettier,

healthier, chubbier. They'll have food on their plates every day: breakfast, lunch, and dinner."

Then a signorina comes and gives me a package wrapped in silver foil, too. I tear the wrapper off, and there's a dark brown bar inside.

"Eat it, my sweet boy. It's chocolate!" she says.

"Yeah, I've heard about it," I say, trying to look indifferent.

"Donna Antonietta, are you selling your son, too?" Pachiochia calls out at that very moment, her hand resting on the photo of the mustached king, pounded so much that it is crumpled and almost unrecognizable. "I didn't think you would stoop so low! You are not that needy. Is it because they took Capa 'e Fierro away? If you had asked me, I would have offered you a nice cup of coffee."

Mamma Antonietta gives me an ugly look, convinced I was the coffee spy, but I go on munching my chocolate bar and pretend to keep my eyes closed.

"Donna Pachiochia, I've never asked anything of anyone, and if I ever have, I've always paid everything back. When I can't pay someone back, I don't ask. My husband had to go away to seek his fortune, and when he comes back . . . You know my story. I don't need to explain anything to you."

"What fortune, Donna Antoniè? Who are you kidding? There's no longer any *dig-ni-ty*!"

When Pachiochia says the word *dignity*, I really do close my eyes, so I don't have to see the flecks of spit flying through the gaps in her brown gums. But I open them again when I realize Mamma Antonietta isn't answering, which is never a good sign. Not saying anything when she's being taunted is not like her. So I take the last piece of chocolate out of the foil, crush the silver paper into a little ball, and put it in my pocket so I can use it as a cannonball

for a tin soldier I found the day before yesterday on the Corso. In the end, I'm the one that speaks up for Mamma.

"Donna Pachiò, I have a father some place or other. What about you, though? Do you have a child?"

Pachiochia places her hand on her breast and strokes the poor crumpled mustached king.

"You don't, right? Is a portrait of King Umberto all you have left?"

Pachiochia's brown gums quiver with anger.

"What a pity! If you had a child, I'd give him this last piece of chocolate. See this?"

And I toss the whole thing in my mouth.

5

LADIES, LADIES! LISTEN UP! I'M MADDALENA Criscuolo from Santa Lucia. I fought in the four-day uprising here."

The mothers go quiet. Maddalena stands on a vegetable cart and speaks through a metal funnel that makes her voice louder.

"When we had to drive out the Germans, we women did our part. Mothers, daughters, wives, young and old: we went down into the streets and we fought with our men. You were there, and so was I. This is another battle, but the enemy is more dangerous: hunger and poverty. If you fight now, your children will be the ones to gain something!"

Every mamma looks down at ~~their~~ children.

"They'll come back fatter and more beautiful, and you will be able to rest after the endless toil that life has been for you until today. When you embrace your children again, you, too, will be fatter and more beautiful. I'll bring them back myself; I swear on my honor this is as true as the fact that my name is Maddalena

Criscuolo."

Everyone was quiet, even the kids.

Maddalena climbs down from the vegetable cart and starts walking through the crowd of mothers, with kids hanging on to their skirts, and she starts singing through the metal funnel. She has a nice voice, like the ones I hear when I go and sit outside the Conservatory, waiting for Carolina to come out with her violin.

"*Sebben che siamo donne, paura non abbiamo . . .*" she starts. It's a song about a union, where women aren't scared, because they are together and they love their children and they want something called socialism: *"Per amor dei nostri figli, socialismo noi vogliamo."*

The other signorinas follow Maddalena's lead. The mothers stand there in silence, but then a few of them take courage and start singing, too. Then they all join in. That is when Pachiochia and the ladies in her procession start singing the royal anthem: *"Viva il Re!"* "Long live the king. The happy trumpets blast." *"Viva il Re! Viva il Re!"* But there are not very many of them, and in any case, they sing out of tune, and so our mammas' voices drown them out, as they sing louder and louder, and in the end, you can only hear their voices, their kids' singing along too. It's the first time I've ever heard Mamma Antonietta sing. Pachiochia clamps her mouth shut, hiding her gums. Then she turns around, positions herself at the head of the procession, and leads her ladies away. As she passes right next to me, I hear her say, "Hunger is stronger than fear . . ." but then the crowd closes around her, and I can't hear the rest.

Maddalena speaks through the metal funnel again and tells us we should say goodbye to our mammas and go into the long, long building because they need to wash us and give us a checkup from a doctor. She promises that the kids who behave will get

more chocolate. I hold Mamma's hand tightly, and when I look at her, I see that her eyes are a strange color, like the uniforms of the German soldiers when they came to raid our neighborhood for food. So I open up my arms like I once saw an orchestra conductor doing, when I snuck into the theater with Carolina during a rehearsal for a concert, and I hug Mamma with all my strength. My face is flattened against her belly, and I feel as though my eyes are turning the same color as the German soldiers' uniform when Pachiochia and Zandragliona made them eat pigeon poop. Mamma Antonietta is surprised, because hugs are not our strong point. But then I feel her hands in my hair moving slowly back and forth. Her hands are soft, like soapstone underwater. It doesn't last long.

One of the signorinas comes up to me and asks my name.

"Amerigo Speranza, like Mamma Antonietta," I answer.

She sticks a card on my shirt with a pin. There's my name, last name, and a number on it. She gives another card just like mine to Mamma, who tucks it into her bra, where she keeps all the important stuff: a little money, a holy card of St. Anthony—the enemy of the devil—a hankie embroidered by her mamma, Filomena—bless her soul—and now this card with my number on it. That way, when I'm gone, she can keep everything close to her heart.

When all the kids and mothers have been given their numbers, Maddalena picks up the metal funnel again and starts talking, her head turning one way then the other so that everyone can hear.

"Ladies, ladies! Don't go away yet. Wait a moment. Stand in a line everyone, each mother with her children in front of her, so we can take a photograph."

The mothers are so stunned by this idea that they all start mill-

ing around again, breaking up the line that took God Almighty himself to form. One of them straightens her hair, another pinches her cheeks to make them rosy, yet another bites her lips to make them look like she's got lipstick on: she's seen it in the portraits of the ladies in the photographer's window on the Corso. Mamma Antonietta licks her hand and wets my hair, which is growing fast after my melon crew cut, to make a parting. Maddalena walks through the crowd and divides the mothers and children into groups. She's holding a big piece of card with writing on it.

"What does it say, Amerì?" my mother asks. I look at the letters. I can read some of them, but not all of them. I get muddled up when I try and put them together. I like numbers better.

"What did I send you to school for? To warm up the chair?"

Luckily, Maddalena picks up the funnel and reads it out to all of us. It says that we're the children of the Mezzogiorno whom northern Italians are waiting to host, and that this is called solidarity. I wanted to ask her what *solidarity* meant, but a big boy in a jacket and slightly worn-out gray pants tells us to get ready for the photograph. When everyone is in position, Mamma Antonietta puts a hand on my shoulder. I turn around to look at her. It almost looks as though she's smiling, but at the last minute, she changes her mind and pulls her same old face.

Finally, we get to go inside the long, long building. We all look smaller without our mammas next to us, even the boys who were acting tough while we were waiting outside. The signorinas put us into rows of three and leave us in the dark corridor.

I GO AND STAND RIGHT NEXT TO TOMMASINO, whose legs are shaking worse than the drenched hamsters when

they were turning back into sewer rats. I wanted to give him some courage. The third kid in our row is a thin little girl with short hair called Mariuccia. She's the cobbler's little girl, the one who resoles shoes up on Pizzofalcone. I recognize her, because Mamma Antonietta had once taken me to her father to ask whether he could teach me the trade, since I was so obsessed with shoes. The shoe mender had looked at me, then at my mother, and finally he had pointed behind the counter: there were four kids of different ages with shoes, nails, and glue in their hands. They were the four kids his wife, bless her soul, had had the courage to burden him with before disappearing to the other world. Mariuccia was the only girl, and one day, when she was a little older, she would keep house and look after her brothers. Anyway, at that time, the father was keeping all four kids in the store as apprentice shoe-menders, so his answer to Mamma had been no.

Zandragliona had told me that when Maddalena and the others went and talked to him about the trains, the cobbler decided to send Mariuccia, since the others were boys and could be useful in the store. Mariuccia was a girl, but she didn't even know how to heat up leftover macaroni, so she wasn't good for anything. When we were told to get into a line, Mariuccia's face was white and her eyes wild. "I don't want to go. I don't want to! They'll cut off my hands and put me in the oven!"

There were other kids who were so desperate to leave, they were calling out: "I have an eye infection," "I have trachoma," as if they had hit the jackpot rather than caught a disease. And then all the others started acting important and yelling, "We have trachoma, we have trachoma," because they thought that they would only let you get on the train if you had trachoma.

Me, Mariuccia, and Tommasino sit next to one another. Every

now and again, Mariuccia sniffs the air. But she can't smell any burning or cooked flesh and she can't see any smoke. So, for now, they're not putting us in a gas oven. All we see are signorinas running up and down and stopping in front of a tall young man holding a big ledger, where every now and again he jots something down with a pencil. They call him Comrade Maurizio. He walks up and down, too. He listens to everyone and has an answer to every question. When he comes up to us, he stops and looks at us.

"And you? What are your names?"

We're too embarrassed to answer.

"Hey, I'm talking to you. Don't you have any tongues?" he asks, laughing. "Did they cut them off or something?"

"Well, not yet," Tommasino says, scared to death.

"Why? Are they going to cut them off?" Mariuccia asks. "So, Pachiochia was right after all."

Comrade Maurizio laughs again. Then he gives us each a pat on the head.

"Come on, show me. Stick them out!"

We all three look at one another and then stick our tongues out.

"If it were up to me, I'd cut the tips off because they're a bit too long for my taste . . ."

Mariuccia pulls her tongue back in and crosses her hands in an X over her mouth.

". . . but the regulations don't allow it . . ."

Comrade Maurizio flicks through the pages of the ledger he's holding.

". . . you see, it's written here. Can you read? No? What a pity. If you could, I would show you. It says here in the regulations of the Committee for Children's Salvation, Article 103: It is forbidden

to cut children's tongues off . . ." and off he goes, laughing again.

Then he turns the book around and shows us a blank page.

"Comrade Maurizio likes joking!" Tommasino says, some color coming back to his cheeks.

"Bravo! That's exactly right!" Comrade Maurizio says. "And there's something else I like doing too. Sit still for five minutes."

He starts drawing with his pencil on the blank page he showed us. He looks at us and then draws, stops, looks at us again, and draws a little more. He looks at the page, looks back at us, and then rips the page out of the ledger. Our faces are on the sheet of paper. Spitting images. He gives the sheet to Tommasino, who puts it in his pocket.

From the end of the corridor, two signorinas in white coats and white gloves tell us to take our clothes and shoes off. Tommasino, Mariuccia, and I look at one another and start crying. Tommasino because he's scared they'll take away his old shoes full of holes, Mariuccia because she's embarrassed to strip naked in front of everyone, and me because my underpants are patched up and my socks are dirty. So I go up to one of the signorinas in a white coat and gloves and I tell her I can't take my clothes off, because I'm cold, and my two friends follow my example.

Luckily, Maddalena comes along.

"Let's play a new game, okay?" she says. "A game you've never played before!"

Tommasino stops blubbering and stares at her.

"But if we're going to play this game, you need to take your clothes off. Then we'll give you some new clothes that are nice and warm."

"Shoes, too?" I chip in.

"New shoes for everyone!" she says, tucking her hair behind her

ears.

The three of us strip off, and Maddalena takes us into another room with some pipes that spray water from the ceiling. It's kind of like rain, but it's hot.

I stand under the pipe and feel the first drops falling. I keep my eyes tightly shut as I'm scared of drowning, but then Maddalena comes up to me with a sponge and soap and covers me with sweet-smelling bubbles. She washes my hair, my arms, my legs, my feet. The soapy aroma reminds me of Carolina, who smelled of violets when we hid in the theater listening to music, and I get a tickly feeling in my belly. When I open my eyes, I see Tommasino next to me splashing, and Mariuccia stamping her feet in a gray puddle.

Maddalena lathers and rinses the other two and then she wraps us all in rough white sheets. After our shower, she takes us into another room where all the kids who have already been washed are sitting on wooden benches, every one of them wrapped in a rough white sheet. Then a Communist signorina does the rounds with a basket full of bread rolls on her arm, and hands us one roll each. She tells us the bread is from the doctor who is going to be giving us a checkup; the one in the room next door. I've never seen a doctor before, and I don't want to start now. In the meantime, though, I eat my bread with my eyes shut, breathing in the strong smell of soap.

6

THE TRACKS AT THE PIAZZA GARIBALDI RAILway station are full of rubble, and the trains have been damaged by the bombing. A bit like the soldiers I once saw at a parade, who were waving flags, but who were all incomplete: some missing an arm, others a leg, others again an eye. The wrecked train cars looked like war veterans. They are wounded trains, but they are not dead.

The ones still working, though, are gigantic. You can see the head of the train but not the tail. Maddalena told us that our mammas would be coming to say goodbye when we leave, but I'm pretty sure they won't recognize us when they see us. Luckily, we still have our numbers pinned onto our coats, otherwise they would mistake us for northern kids and they wouldn't even be able to bless our journey with a little prayer, like "May the Virgin Mary be with you."

Tommasino and all the other boys have had their hair cut,

and they are dressed in shorts and thick socks, a woolen undershirt, a shirt, and a coat. They left my hair as it was, because my head had already been shorn to look like a melon. The girls have all had their hair braided and tied up with red and green ribbons, and they are wearing little dresses or skirts, with coats on top, too. Then there are the shoes. Every child has a new pair of shoes. I've counted so many star-studded prizes that I've won the championship. Only, when it was my turn, Maddalena told me they'd run out of my size. So they gave me a brand-new, shiny pair of brown shoes with laces. But they were one size too small.

"How do they fit? Are you comfortable?"

I tried walking in them, taking a few steps back and forth, and they were too tight. But I was so scared they would take them away again that I said, "Fine. Fine. They're fine," and so I kept them.

They lined us up in front of the train and they gave us instructions: don't dirty anything, don't shout, don't open the windows, don't exchange shoes or pants, don't untie your braids. Then, since we were hungry again, after the bread rolls, they gave us two slices of cheese. But there was no more chocolate.

When I saw the train, I boasted a little and said that my father had taken a train when he went to America; if he had waited for me to be born, we could have set off together. Mariuccia said, "You can't go to America on a train; you need a ship." I said, "What do you know about America? Your father has never even been there," and she said, "You moron, everyone knows that America is on the other side of the sea." Mariuccia is older than me, and she says she went to school for a while before her mother had had the bad idea to die and leave her and her brothers alone

with their cobbler father. If Zandragliona were here, I could ask her if America really was on the other side of the sea and whether it's true you can only get there by ship. But Zandragliona's not here and neither is Mamma Antonietta. Not that she would know, because knowing things is not her strong point. The person who is here is the blond Communist with the sad face. The one who was arguing with his comrades in the apartment in Via Medina. He helps Maddalena count the kids, and when he's with her, he doesn't look so sad after all. Maybe she managed to solve that "problem of the south" for him; the one that was making him so worked up and unhappy.

From far away, the train is the spitting image of a model train I once saw in a toy-store window on the Corso. As it comes closer, it gets bigger and bigger and then it's suddenly ginormous. Tommasino hides behind me, he's so scared. He doesn't realize how scared I am, too.

The signorinas check the numbers pinned onto our coats, and read our names from a list. "Amerigo Speranza," one of the signorinas calls out when it's my turn. I climb up three iron steps and find myself inside the train. It's damp and smells soggy, like Pachiochia's ground-floor apartment. From the outside it looks big, but inside it's narrow and cramped, with a long line of compartments, one after the other, each one with a door that you open and close with an iron handle. Now that I'm here, it feels like everything has gone so fast that, even if I wanted to, I wouldn't be able to go back. Mamma must be home now in our tenement apartment, and I feel sad in my stomach. Mariuccia and Tommasino climb up after me. We look at one another, and I can see they're unsure, too, as if they're thinking, "What the heck are we doing here?" The signorinas go on calling names,

and the train slowly fills up with kids. Some are sitting, others are standing, still others are running from one compartment to another; some are hungry, some are thirsty, and some others are crying. Comrade Maurizio appears, the one who wanted to cut our tongues off but then drew a picture of us, and walks from one compartment to the next saying, "Quiet, quiet now. Sit down, everybody. It's a long journey." But we keep misbehaving. He's not laughing now. I think that he must be fed up, too, and that soon they're going to take everything away from us. The train, the shoes, the coats. We don't deserve them, Pachiochia's right. We don't deserve anything. I sit on the wooden train bench, rest my face against the stained wall of the compartment, and feel my eyes pricking with tears, because of the soggy smell, the wooden seat, the dirty wall, and because I'm thinking about Mamma.

Then I hear Tommasino and Mariuccia shouting: "Amerigo, Amerì! Get over here! Run! Look out there!"

I get up and race to the window. I push my way past the heads of all the other kids who are all reaching out of the carriage window, straining to touch their mothers' hands. Tommasino moves over a little so that I can see Mamma Antonietta. She looks smaller, in the middle of all the other mothers. It feels like she's far away, even though the train hasn't moved yet. Zandragliona is standing next to her. She's come to say goodbye to me, even though she had a memorial service for a relative today. Mamma comes right up to the window and puts something in my hand. It's a small, red, round apple. An annurca apple. I stick it in my pocket to keep it safe. I think it's so beautiful, I'll never eat it. It looks to me like a red heart, like the one I once saw when I crept in and hid in the Sansevero Chapel.

Zandragliona had told me there were two live skeletons, complete with bones, and veins, and hearts, and everything. So I ventured into the dark chapel. When I lit a candle, I saw two bright white statues that seemed to be walking out of the stone they were carved in. The closer I got with the candle, the more alive they looked. There was also a Jesus Christ made of marble, lying under a sheet that was also made of stone. It looked like he was breathing in his sleep, and, as if the sheet covering him were so light that he might wake up at any moment. I started walking between the statues, my heart beating in my head, and that's when I saw them. The two skeletons were standing there, alive as anything, as if they'd been flesh and bone a minute before. Their heads were shiny, with no hair. They were smiling, with no teeth. Their bones were tied together in a tangle of red and blue veins. In the middle was a red heart, as round and red as an annurca apple. I dropped the candle and found myself in the dark again. I groped around but I couldn't find the way out, so I started screaming, but nobody came. I somehow managed to get to the door, and, once I was outside, I saw that night had fallen. But the dark was nothing compared to the blackness in the chapel. I still have nightmares about Prince Sangro's skeletons, every now and again.

I look at Mamma through the window. She's wrapped up in her shawl in silence. Silence is her strong point. Then the train suddenly screeches, louder than my teacher with the pointed chin when she found the dead beetle we had hidden in her alphabet book. All the mothers on the platform start waving their arms frantically. It looks like they're saying goodbye, but they're not.

All the kids on the train shrug themselves out of their coats

and start pushing them through the open windows into their mothers' arms. Mariuccia and Tommasino take theirs off, too.

"For the love of God, what are you doing?" I ask them. "Up in northern Italy you'll be dying of cold."

"We promised, "Tommasino explained. "The kids who get to go on the train have to leave their coats to the brothers and sisters who are left behind, because the winter is cold up in northern Italy, but it's not warm here, either."

"What about us?"

"The Communists will give us another coat, because they're rich and they can afford it," Mariuccia explains, as she throws her coat to her cobbler father, who puts it straight onto one of her orphan brothers.

I don't know what to do: I don't have any siblings. My big brother, Luigi, could have done with it a while back, but he has no use for it now. Then I think that Mamma could always turn it around and make a jacket for herself out of my coat. So I slip it off and throw it to her. I'm keeping the apple, though. Mamma Antonietta catches it in midair and looks at me. It's almost as if she's smiling.

The signorinas start shouting from the compartments on both sides. I stay at the window to see what is going on. The station master walks up and down the platform not knowing what to do: whether to stop the train to get the coats back, or order us all off as a punishment for double-crossing them . . . Comrade Maurizio leaps off the train in a hurry to talk to the stationmaster. The stationmaster says they'll hitch a radiator car to our train to make it warmer.

So, with the signorinas scolding us, the mothers stampeding to get away with our coats tucked under their arms, and the

children on the train laughing, the stationmaster waves his flag and the train lurches forward. It starts slowly, slowly, and then gains a little speed. Mamma Antonietta is in a corner of the station that is getting farther and farther away. She's holding my coat to her breast. As if she were holding me tight during the air raids.

7

Now that they've taken our coats, how are they going to recognize us?" Mariuccia asks, worried sick.

"Well, by our faces, right?" Tommasino answers.

"Okay, but how will the Communists know who I am and who you are? We all look the same to them, like black American soldiers do to us. We're all kids who are dying of hunger. There's no difference between us. How are they going to give us back the right mamma at the end?"

"I think they did it on purpose," a kid with yellow hair and a gap three teeth wide in his mouth says. "They must have told our mothers to take our coats, so that when we get to Russia, they can't find us."

"And we'll die of cold," another kid next to him adds.

Mariuccia looks at me, her eyes welling, to see whether this is true.

"Did you know that in Russia they eat babies for breakfast?" the boy with gaps in his mouth says to Mariuccia, who is as white as a sheet.

"Well, they'll be sending *you* back, then, since you're all skin and bones . . ." I say. "And anyway, who told you we were going to Russia? I heard we were going up to northern Italy."

Mariuccia looks a little calmer but the boy with the straw-colored hair goes on.

"They only say northern Italy to convince our mothers. But the truth is they're taking us to Russia and they'll put us in houses made of ice, with ice beds, ice tables, and ice sofas . . ."

Mariuccia starts crying silently. Tommasino holds her hand tight while her tears fall onto her new dress.

"Sure. We'll have a nice *granita* then. What flavor do you like your water ice, Mariù? Lemon or coffee?"

Comrade Maurizio comes into our compartment with a tall, thin man wearing glasses. The kids start teasing him: four-eyes, goggles, blinkers, you name it.

"Be quiet, the lot of you!" Comrade Maurizio shouts. "You may not know it, but if you're on this train it's all thanks to this person here."

"Who is this person, then?" the short dark boy asks.

"My name is Gaetano Macchiaroli, but people know me as Turzo 'e Penniello," the man in the glasses says, in good Italian, not dialect, "and my job is looking after books."

We are so quiet that anyone would think out tongues had actually been cut out.

"I organized this nice trip for you, together with other comrades."

"Why? What do you get out of it? You're not our father or our mother," the short, dark-faced boy challenges. He's the only one that isn't scared.

"When necessary, we are all fathers and mothers of those in need. That's why we're taking you to stay with people who will take care of you and treat you as if you were their children, for your own good."

"So, are they going to shave our hair off, so we look like melons?" I ask, almost in a whisper.

The man in glasses doesn't hear me. He waves his hands in the air as if he's saying goodbye.

"Have a great trip, kids! Be good and have fun!"

When the tall, thin man leaves the compartment, nobody dares breathe.

Comrade Maurizio sits down right next to us and opens his ledger.

"Since you all decided to give your mothers your coats with your names and numbers written on them," and he looks each and every one of us straight in the eye, "now we have to identify you again from scratch. In this ledger there are all the lists of all the children, car by car." He says he wants to know our first name, last name, mother's name, and father's name. We answer one by one, and he pins a card with our name on the sleeve. When he comes to the blond boy with no teeth, Maurizio has to ask him his name two or three times, but he never opens his mouth. He pretends to be deaf and dumb. Maurizio tries calling him different names to see if he will react. Pasquale, Giuseppe, Antonio. Nothing. Maurizio gets fed up and goes to the next compartment.

"Why are you playing deaf and dumb?" Tommasino asks him. "You were driving the poor guy crazy."

The blond boy gives us a nasty smile.

"You'd have to be dumb to tell them your name," he says, making a rude gesture.

"How will they identify you, then?" Mariuccia asks. "Aren't you scared they won't give you back to your mother?"

"My mother?" the blond boy says. "She's the one who told me that anyone working in contraband should never, ever tell anyone their name, or where they live, or who their family are. Even in an air raid. Especially to the police!"

The blond boy makes a face as if to say he's better than us and know things we don't. We're all quiet. Him, too. I'm pretty sure he's getting scared that, after acting so smart, they won't know who to give him back to.

After a while, another signorina I haven't seen before comes in. She sits down with the lists in her hands and starts again. When it's my turn, she asks me my name.

"Amerigo Speranza," I say.

"Age?"

"Seven."

"Father and mother?"

"Antonietta Speranza."

"And what's your father's name? What does he do?"

"I don't know," I say, flushed with embarrassment.

"You don't know what job your father does?" she asks.

"I don't know if I have a father or if I don't. Some say I do; others say I don't. Mamma Antonietta says he left. Pachiochia says he ran away . . ."

"Shall we right 'missing,' then?"

"Can we leave it blank so that when he comes back, we can fill it in?" I ask.

The signorina looks at me, lifts her pen, and moves on to the line below.

"Next!" she says.

8

The journey is long. All the shouting, wailing, and laughing when we pulled out of the station has gone. All you can hear is the rolling of the train, hammering the same rhythm all the way. Then there's the stink of warmed-up damp. I sit and stare out the window, like all the others. I think about the spot in Mamma's bed where I sleep, with Capa 'e Fierro's stashes of coffee hidden under it. I think about the streets where I roam all day, rain or shine, looking for rags. I think about Pachiochia, who must by this time be in bed in her tenement apartment with the picture of the mustached king on her bedside table. I think about Zandragliona, and I can almost smell her onion frittata. I think about the alleyways where I live, which are narrower and shorter than this train. I think about my father, who has gone to America, and my big brother, Luigi, who has gone to the other world with his bronchial asthma and left me to leave on the train all on my own.

While I'm thinking, I nod off every now and again. My head

lolls, my eyes close, and my thoughts get all mixed up. Nearly everyone is asleep around me. I look out the window a little longer. I see the moon running over the fields, as if it were playing tag with the train. I pull my legs up onto the bench and put my arms around them. Hot, sticky tears are rolling down my cheeks and running into my mouth. They are salty and they ruin the memory of the flavor of chocolate. Tommasino is fast asleep in front of me. He of all people, who is scared of his own shadow during the day! And look at me. I used to be brave enough to go down into the sewers and catch rats, and now all I want is for the train to stop, and for everyone to come and get me and take me back. All I want is to hear Mamma's voice saying, "Amerì, come along now. It's time to go home!"

Just as I am about to doze off, there is a screech that makes my skin crawl, like nails scratching the bottom of a saucepan. The train comes to an abrupt halt, and we are all thrown off our seats, one on top of the other. I find myself facedown on the floor. Mariuccia, who was fast asleep, starts crying, scared that she had torn her new dress. The lights go out and we are plunged into the dark.

"Who gave this guy his license?" the blond boy calls out from somewhere in the compartment.

"Maybe we're there," Tommasino says.

"No," said another boy, who had gotten on the train with us and told the signorinas his name was Mimmo. "Mamma told me that we have to wait the whole night, and then we arrive tomorrow evening."

"I bet they throw us all out of the train and leave us in the dark," says someone, maybe the blond boy, but maybe another boy, making the most of the dark when we can't see anyone's face, to frighten us to death.

"I think the train has broken down," I say, holding Mariuccia's hand tight, to give her courage, and maybe to give myself some, too. I'm actually thinking that the Fascists have blown up the line to stop us leaving, like Pachiochia said they would. Mariuccia starts blubbering again anyway:

"We're going to die either of cold or of hunger."

I put my hands over my ears, screw up my eyes, and wait for the explosion. But nothing happens. Maybe Maddalena managed to stop them just in time. That's what she won her medal for, after all. For saving the bridge in the Sanità quarter. In the darkness I feel the icy, bony fingers of the Prince of Sangro's skeletons at the back of my neck. So I open my eyes and unblock my ears. We hear the door of the compartment open. Nobody says a word. Nobody breathes. We are completely still.

"Who pulled the alarm?" Maddalena says, just as the lights come back on. Her face is serious, and she's so nervous her forehead is split down the middle with a deep gray line. "Trains are not a joking matter," she says, looking annoyed and staring at the blond boy. He understands and acts offended. I think he's regretting not giving his name, just a little. Because now they're going to blame him for every single thing. It serves him right.

"We didn't pull it!" Tommasino says, getting the toothless smuggler out of trouble, too.

"We were all asleep," Mariuccia adds, now that she has stopped crying, because her dress is still as good as new.

"It doesn't matter who it was," Maddalena says. "Whoever it was, you need to keep your hands to yourselves and not touch anything else, or tomorrow you'll spend the day at the police station."

"Which lever stops the train? Is it the red one?" the blond

smart-ass smuggler asks.

"I'm not so stupid that I would tell you!" Maddalena answers.

The boy realizes she's kidding him and shuts up.

"Anyway, I'll stay here now. We'll have one of us in every compartment to keep an eye on you. That way, we can avoid any further unplanned stops!"

Maddalena sits in a corner and smiles. She's never sad. It's like she has a light on inside her eyes at all times. Maybe that's why they gave her a medal.

9

EVERYONE IS ASLEEP EXCEPT ME. I DON'T LIKE the silence. In the street where I live, it's always noon, even at night. Life never stops, even when there's been a war. Instead, here I am looking through the window and all I can see are ruins. Upside-down tanks, wrecked airplane fuselages, bombed buildings only half standing. I feel sadness welling up in my belly. Like that time when Mamma Antonietta sang me a lullaby that goes *"Ninnaò, Ninnaò, questo bimbo a chi lo do . . ."* and it sent all my sleepiness away, because the person the song ~~suggests~~ is giving the baby to a bogeyman, who's going to keep it for a whole year. But then, even the bogeyman doesn't want the baby anymore, and he gives it to someone else, and that person gives it to someone else again, and then you never know what happens to the baby in the end.

The train stops every now and again and more children get on. The screaming, crying, and laughing starts again, but not for long. Then the quiet comes back, and there's only the chugging of the train and the sad feeling in my belly. When I was sad, back

home, I'd usually go to Zandragliona's apartment. Before leaving, I had put all my precious things in an old tin box that Mamma Antonietta had given me, and she had hidden it under a tile where she keeps her precious stuff, too. Pachiochia says Zandragliona keeps all her money under a tile, but I think she's just jealous.

Tommasino turns in his sleep and mutters something I can't make out. He's dreaming. He opens his eyes, laughs, and then goes back to sleep. Maybe he's dreaming of Capajanca's fruit cart, the Commie ovens, his mother's lashings when he came home after the hamster fiasco, who knows? Whatever he's dreaming, lucky him. At least he's asleep! I'd rather have bad dreams than waking nightmares.

Zandragliona says that when sleep doesn't come to you, you shouldn't go looking for it. So I get up from the train seat and go out of the compartment. The corridor is long and narrow. I start walking up and down and, every now and again, I peek into the other compartments. There are so many faces, so many kids piled on top of one another. They've all fallen asleep as if they were home, as if nothing had happened. I think about my mamma. When I go to bed, I put my cold feet between her thighs, and she starts yelling, "What do you take me for? Your personal bed warmer? Get these slabs of stockfish off me!" But then she takes my feet and warms them up with her hands, toe by toe, and I fall asleep with my toes in her fingers.

I walk back along the corridor to our compartment, but I don't open the door. I pull out the folding seat in the corridor and sit with my forehead against the window. It's dark outside. I can't see a thing. Who knows where we are, how far we are from home, and how long it will take to arrive, nobody even knows where. The window is cold and wet, and my face is dripping. It's a good thing,

because at least no one will know I am crying. But Maddalena notices. She sits next to me and gives me a pat. Maybe sleep didn't come to her either.

"Why are you crying?" she asks. "Do you miss your mamma?"

I hide my tears, but accept her caresses.

"No, no, not a bit. I'm not crying for my mamma. It's my shoes. They're too tight."

"Why don't you take them off now that it's nighttime? That way you'll be more comfortable. There's still a long way to go."

"Signorina, thank you, but I'm scared someone will steal them, and I will have to wear someone else's shoes again. I don't want to wear other people's shoes ever again."

10

All of a sudden, there is a dazzlingly bright light after all the darkness. The train has come out of a tunnel, and a big moon lights up the sky. Everything is white: the streets, the trees, the mountains, the houses. There are lots of white bread crumbs falling, some big and some small.

"It's snowing!" I say out loud to convince myself. "It's snowing! It's snowing!" I say again, louder this time. But nobody wakes up. Not even the boy with the straw-colored hair, who said they were taking us to live in ice houses. I'd like to see his face now, him and his Russia! I rest my head against the window again and follow the snowflakes as they flutter down. That is how my eyes finally close.

Mariuccia shakes me awake, screaming like crazy.

"There's ricotta cheese everywhere!"

Mariuccia runs up to me and shakes me awake.

"Amerigo, Amerì . . . wake up! There's ricotta all over the

ground. On the streets. On the trees. On the mountains! It's raining ricotta . . ."

The night is over, and a pale ray of sunlight shines through the window.

"Mariù, it's not cream or ricotta cheese. It's snow . . ."

"Snow?"

"Frozen water."

"Like the one Don Mimmì sells from his cart?"

"Kind of, but without the black-cherry syrup on top."

My eyes are still sticky with sleep, and they burn when I try to open them. The white snow shines through the window, and I can't see anything else. It's cold in the train. All the kids' faces are glued to the windows, staring at the white outside.

"Have you never seen snow?" Maddalena asks.

Mariuccia shakes her head, a little ashamed for mistaking snow for ricotta cheese.

"Signorì," she says. "When we get there, are they going to give us something to eat? I'm dying of hunger, worse than at home . . ."

Maddalena laughs. It's her way of answering questions. First, she laughs; then she speaks. She says Mariuccia is right, and that when we get there, all the comrades of central Italy will be waiting for us. There will be a big party, with a brass band, banners, and lots of things to eat.

"Are they happy we're going there, then?" I ask her.

"Weren't they forced to take us?" Mariuccia adds.

Maddalena says they weren't. They're happy to have us.

"But why are they happy that we are coming to eat all their food?"

"Because it is their way of expressing sol-i-dar-i-ty," Maddalena says.

"You mean like dig-ni-ty?" I ask.

Maddalena says solidarity is like dignity toward other people. She says we need to help one another. "If I have two salami today, I should give one to you, so that if you have two *cacciotta* cheeses tomorrow, you can give one to me."

I think this sounds like a good idea. But I also think that if people in northern Italy have two salami today, and they give one to me, how am I supposed to give them a *cacciotta* tomorrow when, until yesterday, I didn't even have any shoes?

"I tasted salami once," Tommasino mumbles, still half asleep. "A grocer in Foria gave me a slice . . ."

"Did he really give it to you?" Mariuccia says, digging her elbows into Tommasino's side, signaling with her hand that maybe he stole it.

Tommasino flushes, and I change the subject, because I know him only too well. Maddalena luckily doesn't hear a thing, because all the kids have started shrieking again. I look out the window and see what all the fuss is about. On the other side of the beach, covered in snow, there's the sea. But it's different from the sea I know. It's as still and smooth as a cat's fur.

"What now? You've never seen the sea before?" Maddalena asks.

"I know the sea," Tommasino says.

"Mamma Antonietta says that the sea has no purpose, except to give us cholera and weak lungs."

"Is that true, signorina?" Mariuccia, who never trusts anyone, asks.

"The sea is for swimming in," Maddalena answers. "For diving and having fun."

"Will the Communists up in northern Italy let us dive?" Mariuccia asks.

"Yes, they will!" Maddalena says. "But not now. It's too cold. When it's the right season."

"I can't swim," Tommasino says.

"What?" I tease him. "You were going to have a vacation on Ischia, don't you remember?"

He crosses his arms and turns the other way.

"They're only taking us to the sea so they can drown us," the blond boy says, without actually believing it. He's just trying to stir Mariuccia up.

"They're tongue waggers, that's all," Maddalena says. "You shouldn't take any notice."

"Excuse me, do you have any children?" Mariuccia asks, doubtful as ever.

Maddalena, for the first time since I met her, makes a sad face.

"Why would she have kids?" I say, to get on Maddalena's good side. "She's far too young!"

"But if you had kids, would you put them on the train or not?" the blond boy asks.

"You don't get it!" I cut in. "Only the needy kids get to go on the train, not the ones who are doing okay. Otherwise, it wouldn't be solidarity, would it?"

Maddalena nods, but doesn't say anything.

"Tell me something, signorina," Mariuccia says with a mischievous grin. "That blond man at the station who was helping you count us kids. . . . Is he your sweetheart?"

"What sweetheart? Sweetheart indeed!" I say, since Maddalena is not speaking anymore. "He's a Communist, too. I saw him at the Party headquarters before leaving."

"So what? What does that mean?" Mariuccia insists. "Just

because you're a Communist doesn't mean you can't be a sweetheart, right?"

"That Communist?" I answer. "He has the 'problem of the south' to deal with; he's not going to be thinking about love."

"Love has many different faces," Maddalena says. "Not just the ones you're thinking about. For example, isn't being here, with all you disobedient pests, love? And your mothers, who let you come on the train to go far away to Bologna and Rimini and Modena . . . isn't that love, too?"

"Why? Does somebody who sends you away love you, then?"

"Amerigo, sometimes letting you go shows greater love than keeping you."

I don't understand but I don't answer back, either. Maddalena says she has to go check on the kids in the other compartments to make sure everyone is okay, and so she leaves. Me, Tommasino, and Mariuccia start playing rock, paper, scissors to pass the time. After a while, the train slows down and finally stops. The signorinas tell us to hold hands and form a line, two by two; to be good, and to wait quietly until it is our turn to go out. Once we are out in the street, we need to stay put, otherwise we will get lost, and then where would the solidarity go if we were all in different places?

When we pull into the station, there's a band playing, and a white banner that one of the signorinas reads us. It says, "Welcome to the children from the Mezzogiorno." They have come all the way here to welcome us. It's like the festival of Our Lady of the Arch, except there are no people dressed in white, throwing themselves on the ground in convulsions, shouting *"Madonna dell'Arco"* because they've received a miracle.

The musicians are playing a song all the signorinas know, because they keep shouting *"bella ciao ciao ciao"* and, when the song finishes, they hold their fists up to the sky. The sky is gray and full of long, thin clouds. Mariuccia and Tommasino think they are making fists because they are fighting, but I know it is the Communist salute, because Zandragliona has taught me. It's different from the Fascist salute, which I know, because Pachiochia has taught me. In fact, when crossing paths in our alleyway, Zandragliona and Pachiochia greeted each other with their own salutes, and it looked just like they were playing rock, paper, scissors.

I hold hands with Mariuccia in one row and Tommasino is behind, holding a slightly bigger girl's hand. We walk through the crowd of people waving white, red, and green flags and smiling, clapping, and shouting hello. It feels like we have won a prize, and we have come to northern Italy as a favor to them, not vice versa. Some men in hats with thick mustaches wave red flags with a yellow half-circle in the middle, singing a song I don't know. Every now and again I hear the word *in-ter-na-zio-nale*.

After a while, the ladies start singing, too. They are the wives of the men in hats with thick mustaches carrying the red flags with the yellow half-circle in the middle. I know the song they are singing, because it's the one Maddalena sang through the metal funnel to send Pachiochia away. The one about the women who are not afraid, even if they are women. Or maybe because they are women; I'm not sure. Their voices are getting louder, and many of them look like they are crying as they are singing. I can't understand all the words, because they must be in the language of the north, but I know it's about mothers and children, for one thing, because the signorinas from the train and the Communist ladies from northern Italy look at us and smile as if we were all their own children.

We are led into the big room full of Italian flags and red flags. There's a long, long table in the middle full of good things to eat: cheese, ham, salami, bread, pasta . . . Us kids were desperate to throw ourselves on the food, but a signorina shouts into the metal funnel.

"Children, there's enough for everyone. Don't move. You will each get a plate, a napkin, tableware, and a glass of water. As long as you are here, you will never suffer hunger."

The kids look around wide-eyed and dig one another in the ribs as if to say, "Today's our lucky day; what was that about Communists eating babies?"

Gradually, we get to sink our teeth into the food, and you cannot hear a pin drop. Mariuccia, Tommasino, and I sit next to one another. On our plates, there's a slice of pink ham full of white spots, one soft cheese, one as hard as a rock, and one that stinks of smelly feet. We look at one another, but none of us starts eating, even though we are starving. You can read it in our eyes. Luckily, Maddalena soon arrives.

"What's up now? Aren't you hungry any longer?"

"Signorì . . ." Mariuccia says, "are you sure these northerners haven't given us their old food? The ham is full of white spots and the cheese is soft and moldy."

"Of course, they want to poison us," the blond boy with no teeth says.

"If I wanted to get cholera, I'd prefer to eat the mussels down at the port, with all due respect," Tommasino says.

Maddalena picks up a slice of the ham with white spots on it and puts it in her mouth. She says we have to get used to these new specialties: Bologna ham, Parmesan, and Gorgonzola . . .

I pluck up courage and try a little piece of the ham with spots

on it. Mariuccia and Tommasino gape at me. They can see from my face, though, that it's delicious, and so they tuck in, too. And then there is no stopping us. We polish off everything, including the soft cheese, the one with the green mold in it, and even the rock-hard, salty one that prickles your taste buds.

"Don't they have mozzarella cheese here?" Tommasino asks.

"You can eat mozzarella back home in Mondragone," Maddalena jokes.

Then a Communist signorina comes around with a trolley full of little cups with white foam inside.

"It's ricotta, it's ricotta," Mariuccia says.

"It's snow, it's snow," Tommasino says.

I pick up a teaspoon and stick a blob of white foam into my mouth: it's freezing and it tastes of milk and sugar. It's soft, iced milk.

"It's ricotta with sugar!" Mariuccia insists.

"It's grated ice with milk!" Tommasino answers.

Mariuccia eats it slowly, leaving a tiny bit in the cup.

"What's wrong? Don't you like ice cream?" Maddalena asks.

"Not really," Mariuccia says, but we all know it's a fib.

"Well, if you really don't like it," Maddalena goes on, "we can give what you've left over to Tommasino and Amerigo, okay?"

"No!" Mariuccia bursts out, tears squeezing out of her eyes. Then she looks down at the ground and blushes. "Actually, I wanted to save a little for my brothers, when I get back home, and I wanted to hide it in the pocket of my dress."

"But you can't save ice cream; it melts!" Maddalena says.

"If it melts, how am I going to do the solidarity thing?"

Maddalena dips her hand into her bag and takes out five or six candies.

"Here you go; these are better for solidarity. You can keep them for your brothers."

Mariuccia holds the candies as if they were a string of diamonds and puts them in her pocket. Then, finally, she eats the last of her ice cream.

II

THE COMMUNIST SIGNORINAS SIT US ON LONG benches, in rows. They come by holding a black book, read the numbers on our shirtsleeves, ask us our names, and write them down in the book.

"Annichiaro, Maria?" a signorina asks Mariuccia, and she nods. The woman pins a red badge on Mariuccia's chest and turns to Tommasino.

"Saporito, Tommaso?"

"Present," he says, standing up as if he were answering the roll call at school.

The signorina ties his shoelaces, pins his badge, and moves on.

"I'm Speranza," I say, calling her back.

She turns, looks for my name in her ledger, and writes something down.

"What about the badge?" I ask as she is walking away.

"I've finished mine; another comrade will be coming, don't worry."

I wait and wait, but nobody else comes, and I'm beginning to get worried.

This is when the families from northern Italy start to file in. Some adults come in a gaggle with their kids, others come alone. There are both men and women. Then there are couples, husbands and wives with no children, who are the most excited, because it is as if they are coming to pick a kid of their own, exactly how they want it.

All the people from northern Italy, the men, the women, and the children, are bigger and fatter than we are, and their faces pink and white. Maybe because they've eaten so much of that ham with white spots. I think that if I stay here for a while, when I go home I'll be bigger and fatter, too, and I'm pretty sure Mamma Antonietta will say, "Weeds grow the fastest," because giving compliments is not her strong point.

The signorina with the black ledger comes along with a couple from the north, who stop in front of a little girl three places in front of me. She has long blond hair and blue eyes, and they pick her immediately. Nobody comes near me, maybe because I still have a melon head. The couple from the north hold the little blond girl's hand and lead her out of the room. The signorina then goes up to a plump woman with red hair. They wander around the room and stop in front of two girls with chestnut braids in the row right in front of me. Since they look alike, I think they must be sisters. In fact, the redheaded lady takes them both, holding both by the hand, one on each side.

Mariuccia, Tommasino, and I huddle close together, hoping they will take all three of us.

"Amerì," Tommasino says. "These people are from the north. They're not blind. Don't you think they can see we are not from

the same family: you're a redhead, I'm black as pitch, and Mariuccia's hair is straw yellow. How could we possibly be brothers and sisters?"

Tommasino's right, and I feel confused. All the other kids are going off with their new parents, and we're still here. Nobody likes the coal-head, the evil-haired boy, or the scruffy, straw-haired tomboy.

As the room empties out, it gets bigger and colder. Every noise, even the softest sound, rumbles like thunder. I shift my weight on the bench and let out a fart. I'm so ashamed, I want to disappear. Mariuccia, Tommasino, and I don't dare say a word, so we start gesticulating. Tommasino forms a gun with his fingers and then shakes it, as if to say, "There's no room for us here." Mariuccia makes a fist and shakes it, as if to say, "What the heck are we doing up here." I shrug and open my hands, as if to say, "What do I know about it?" Then Tommasino raises his eyebrows and opens his hands, looking at me, "Weren't you supposed to be Nobèl?" "Yes, yes. I was Nobèl on my street, but I'm nobody up here," is what I'd like to say, but there are no gestures to express it, and so I pull in air with my nose and puff it out of my mouth like Capa 'e Fierro does when he's smoking.

Maddalena looks at us from a distance and starts gesturing, too. She puts an open hand up, as if to say, "Be patient, wait, it will be your turn soon." But I'm thinking of Mamma Antonietta's face when they send me back after nobody has picked me. She'll say, "So, you made a name for yourself even up in northern Italy, did you?" because consoling people is not her strong point either.

A young couple comes up to us, accompanied by one of the signorinas. They stop and look at us. The woman is wearing a headscarf, but I can see that underneath her hair is as black as

Mamma's. She's neither tall nor fat, and her skin is dark. She looks over all three of us. Her coat is open, and I can see she's wearing a dress with a red flowery pattern on it.

"My mother has a housecoat that is the twin of your dress," I say, trying to butter her up. She doesn't understand me and turns her head the other way like the hen Pachiochia used to keep.

"Her housecoat . . ." I pick up again, but I feel less and less sure of myself. The signorina takes her arm, whispers something in her ear, and then leads her away to another group of kids.

Tommasino and Mariuccia are staring at me, but I don't dare lift my eyes from my brown laces. Before leaving, I thought I could go anywhere and do anything with new shoes. Instead, the shoes are tight, and I'm still here. Nobody wants me.

Maddalena is watching from the other side of the room. She goes up to two signorinas, and then all three turn and look at us. Maddalena points us out, one by one. The signorinas run around the room talking to people here and there, and finally a young couple, husband and wife, and an older man with a salt-and-pepper mustache, approach us. The young couple smiles at Mariuccia. The wife, who is really young and has blond hair the color of straw, reaches out and strokes Mariuccia's head. She feels the hard stubble of her hair starting to grow back and makes a sad face, as if it were Mariuccia's fault her father had shaved her head. She looks at her husband and then squats down to Mariuccia's level.

"Would you like to come home with us?"

Mariuccia doesn't know what to say. I give her a poke with my elbow, because if she doesn't open her mouth, they'll think she's deaf, as well as dirty, and then they won't pick her. So Mariuccia moves her head up and down slowly.

"What's your name?" the kind young wife asks, resting both her hands on Mariuccia's shoulders.

"Maria," Mariuccia says, to sound less Neapolitan.

"Maria. What a lovely name! Here you go, Maria. This is for you!" She puts a little tin in front of her with cookies, candies, and a little bead bracelet in it.

Mariuccia keeps her hands behind her back without speaking.

The lady looks upset.

"Don't you like candies, Maria? Take them. They're yours . . ."

Mariuccia finally plucks up the courage and says, "I can't, ma'am. They told me that if I take my hands out from behind my back, they'll cut them off, and then how will I be able to help my father with the shoe repairs?"

The lady and her husband look at each other. Then the lady gets down on her knees and takes Mariuccia's hands, which were crossed behind her back, holding them tight.

"You don't need to worry. You are my daughter now. These little hands will be safe."

When Mariuccia's hears "my daughter," she smiles for the first time since I met her. Then she reaches out and picks up the tin.

"Thank you, sir, thank you, ma'am," she says. "But why did you get me a present? It's not my name day."

The couple look at each other again, a question mark written in their eyebrows. Luckily, Maddalena is there and she tells them that back home, Mariuccia would receive little gifts only on her feast day.

Mariuccia is flushed with embarrassment and she grabs the young wife's hand just in case the couple changes their mind. But the young wife hasn't changed her mind. The opposite: her heart has melted.

"I'll give you lots of presents, my lovely daughter, you'll see! You'll get so many, you won't even remember when your saint's day is!"

Mariuccia grips the kind lady's hand and won't let go. Either because she's worried that she won't remember her name day anymore, or because the blond lady reminds her of her mamma, bless her soul. Who knows? Anyway, she opens and closes her fingers to wave *ciao* and goes off with the young couple. Me and Tommasino are the last kids in the room.

The man with the salt-and-pepper mustache comes up to Tommasino and holds out his hand.

"I'm Libero, it's a pleasure to meet you!" he says, as if he were kidding.

"I'm free, too," Tommasino says, unsure what he is supposed to do. Then he sticks his hand out and the two shake hands. The man with the mustache doesn't understand the joke, but goes along anyway.

"Would this nice tanned young man like to come with me?"

"Is there a lot of work involved?" Tommasino asked.

"No, the automobile is just outside. It'll take no longer than half an hour."

"Automobile? Are you a cab driver?"

"Come, now . . . I could see from the start that this boy likes a good joke. He has a sense of humor, this one! Come along now, Gina is waiting for us with hot food on the table . . ."

As soon as Tommasino hears the words *hot*, *food*, and *table* he makes up his mind on the spot and slips away like an eel.

"Bye, Amerì. *Arrivederci!* Good Luck!"

"See you soon, Tommasino. Take care . . ."

12

TOMMASINO HAS GONE, TOO, AND I'M LEFT alone on the wooden bench, my tight shoes pinching my feet and sadness filling my belly. My eyes are pricking. It's like there's a needle behind my eyes holding my tears one by one, and if one drops, they will all unthread like a beaded necklace. When we were all together in the train, with all the kids laughing, blubbering, or running around, I felt as strong as my American father. As long as Mariuccia and Tommasino were there, scared to death, I could act strong, joshing with them and talking. I was still Nobèl. But now I feel like that day when I was biting into a pork-fat-and-pepper *tarallo* cracker and I felt a terrible pain in my mouth. I fished out my tooth, all covered in blood, and ran to Mamma Antonietta, but she was locked in with Capa 'e Fierro and couldn't talk to me. So I went to Zandragliona's house, and she sat me down in my usual chair and rinsed my mouth out with water mixed with a sachet of Idrolitina, bicarbonate of soda and lemon, to disinfect everything and explained how I would lose

all my milk teeth one after another, just as they had grown one after another when I was a baby, and that my big teeth would soon grow in to replace them.

Well, that's how I feel now. Like a tooth that has fallen out. Where the tooth used to be, there is a big gap, but the new tooth isn't there yet.

I look around to see whether the lady in the red flowery dress has changed her mind and is coming to get me. Maybe she wanted to look at all the kids before choosing. As Zandragliona always says when we go shopping, "Never stop at the first stall!" In fact, we would always go around all the vegetable stalls to see who had the freshest produce. Zandragliona would stop in front of a basket of melons, touch them, smell them, prod the skin with her thumb to see if it was ripe or not. Maybe you can do the same thing with kids? Prod them to see if they're good or bad inside.

The lady with the red flowery dress and her husband have done one round of the whole hall, accompanied by the signorina with the black ledger, as if they were looking for someone in particular. I sit up straight on the bench, practically holding my breath. She doesn't look like Mamma after all. I thought she did because she wasn't smiling either. It looks like they're heading for the exit. They must have changed their mind: none of the fruit was fresh enough. But then the signorina with the black ledger leads them to a corner where there is the gap-toothed blond boy. I didn't realize he was still here; I thought I was the only one left. From a distance, I can see the signorina reading the number pinned to his sleeve. The boy isn't even looking at them. He stares down at his nails, which are now as black as they were before they made us have a shower. The husband says

something to the boy, but he doesn't answer. He moves his head up and down as if he were doing them a favor, not the other way around. As he gets up and follows them out of the hall he turns and grins at me with a mean face as if to say, "They took me even though I didn't tell them my name, and nobody's taking you."

The couple have made quite a bargain! If Zandragliona had been here, she would have discarded that melon for sure . . . but the truth is that he's right. I'm the only one nobody wants.

Maddalena looks at me from the other side of the room as she talks to a lady in a gray skirt, a white blouse, and a coat. She must be the one who takes the discarded kids back home, because she's wearing a badge with the Communist flag on it, and she looks strict and serious. Her hair is blond, but not like Zandragliona's; it's a more delicate, pale yellow. The lady is listening to her, but she doesn't move. She doesn't even turn around to look when Maddalena points at me. Then she nods her head a few times as if to say, "Yes, yes, I'll take care of this one." Then they both walk to me. I force my feet back into my shoes, straighten my jacket, and stand up.

"My name is Derna," the lady says.

"Amerigo Speranza," I answer, holding out my hand like Tommasino did with the salt-and-pepper-mustached man. She holds it, but doesn't squeeze it.

I can see talking is not her strong point. She just wants to get on with it and go home. Maddalena gives me a kiss on the forehead and says goodbye.

"Be good, Amerì. I'm leaving you in good hands."

"Let's go, son. It's getting late," the lady says, grabbing my arm and pulling me. "We'll miss the bus if we don't hurry."

We hurry away, me and the lady, like thieves running away from the police. We walk close together, at the same pace, not too fast and not too slow, and soon find ourselves outside the train station. There's an enormous square in front of us, with red brick buildings and lots of trees.

"Where are we?" I ask, a little dazed.

"This city is called Bologna. It's a nice city, but we need to go home now.

"Are you taking me home with you, signorina?"

"Of course I am, son."

"Don't we need to go on a train?"

"It's quicker on the bus."

AT THE BUS STOP I START SHAKING.

"Are you cold?"

I feel shivers running up and down my spine, but I don't know whether it's the cold or my fear. The lady opens her coat wide and lets me come inside.

"With this cold and damp weather, they send them up here with no coats. My God . . ."

I don't say anything about throwing our coats out the train window, or about the mothers giving them to their other children. I just think about my mother's face when she sees I've been sent back like the discards from the vegetable market. I plunge my hands deep into my jacket pockets and that's when I realize Mamma's apple is still there. I pull it out, but I can't bring myself to eat it. My stomach is in knots.

"One adult, one child," the lady says to the ticket man when the bus comes. We climb on and sit side by side. The new shoes

are hurting. It feels like I've been wearing them for a whole year, not just one day. The bus leaves. It's getting dark and my eyes are drooping. Before falling asleep, I slip my shoes off under the seat and leave them there. What use are they, anyway? I was barefoot when I left, and I'll be barefoot when I get sent back.