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Last Supper in Cori¹

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While we walked on, we had wandered further away from the cottage. Once we had reached a distance of a few kilometres, we turned around and started to head back as Fiorina continued telling her story.

“I remember the shops and boutiques as if it were a dream. Meddio’s food store, the barber, Attilio the saddler, Giovannotto the blacksmith, Sdannillao the butcher, the Coronati’s shop with Luigino, called ‘the Little Hunchback,’ who was a friend of my father’s and who, just like my father, liked hunting and doing crossword puzzles. I wanted to go in and say hello, but I didn’t have the heart. I reached Monte Pio.² Some women and a few boys were in line with their jugs to get water from the fountain. Those who had already filled their jugs had placed them on their heads and were chatting with friends as they walked away.

“The coopers were outside the shop hammering away at their new butts. Lord only knows how many times I had seen my grandfather do the same thing. It was almost harvest time. You could still see hay, but also the damage left from the war. The town was still full of piles of ruins. The part of town closest to the sea was gone. Even the convent and numerous houses were gone. As for Saint Peter’s Church, only the bell tower and the nearby Temple of Ercole dating from the first century BC were still there, thanks to some miracle. Saint Peter’s Square had become larger. It was full of kids playing.

“I looked out below. It was beautiful—on one side the purplish colours of Monte Arrestino, and on the other those of the Faiola. The sun was still high enough that it lit all the roofs of the houses in the valley. Here and there the holes created by bombs could be seen, as well as houses that had yet to be repaired. Poor people, they had been through a lot and only the Lord knows how many of them, like me, had received wounds that were deep enough to cut into their souls.

¹ Excerpt from the novel *Fiorina: A Woman in the Wind* by Pietro Vitelli (Montreal: Longbridge Books, 2016).

² Monte Pio is a famous fountain monument and a landmark in Cori Mount.

"While walking and thinking, my throat became dry and I wanted to take a drink from the Saint Anna Fountain. Instead, seeing that it was late, I turned onto Via Piranesi and took a shortcut so that I would reach Via delle Pietre. In the cellars, on the steps and in between the houses there were people working. A group of women and kids stood along the lane of Via De Rossi-Via Cavour. The older ones wore blouses, underskirts, and aprons. Almost all of them were knitting. There were at least fifteen people. They almost seemed like a big family. You could see donkeys and mules climbing up, followed by men and women. You could read the fatigue on their faces, but there was also a sense of peace, satisfaction, and resignation. These same feelings had made me decide to leave and end up who knows where.

"I hurried along. A few saddlers and some carpenters were still closing up their shops. I walked down the Stretta Stracci, the staircase that cut the curve of Via Nuova, the small alley of Straccia, then Via Puzzo. I cut across Via Laurienti, walked down the path of Vento and across Via Colonne, and went to the small San Salvatore Square so that I could look out at Pozzo Dorico. I didn't go inside the church because I was dead tired. As quick as a rabbit I hurried towards my grandparents' house. Once there, I washed up and lay down for a bit on the bed. Around seven o'clock I knocked on Costina's door.

"How are you, daughter of mine? You're beautiful! Come, let's go in. I'm sure that Peppe and his wife will be here soon. She's a good woman. Let's sit down at the table while we wait. My dear daughter, Peppe's the only son who's still here out of the whole bunch. Even Mimma, who is the youngest, is living with her older brothers in Australia. One by one all the others left, as well. Her brothers are all construction workers, and she works as a waitress in a restaurant. They wrote and said that all was well and that she's happy. Every time she writes she sends what money she can. My poor children! I know now that I will not see them ever again!"

"Costina broke out in tears but regained her posture almost right away. She told me that she didn't want her eldest to see her like this. She said that she was happy reading the things that her sons and daughter wrote. They were all doing well. They worked a lot and they weren't lacking for anything. Costina's house was big, especially now that she was by herself. The kitchen was long with a big table in the middle that could seat at least ten people. Even the fireplace was big, with a fire burning away in it. Costina was finishing cooking chicken soup with tagliolini. Basically, Costina had prepared a feast.

"She told me that Cesira, Peppe's wife had been widowed when her first husband, who was in the army, died in Russia during the war. She married Peppe only a few months ago. He was older than her by a year. They got by with what they had, which wasn't much: a little vineyard that Cesira had and a few things that Peppe's brothers had left him. Cesira's late husband had left her pregnant and now her daughter was six years old.

"Cesira and Peppe didn't bring her with them to the dinner because she was with her grandparents on her dad's side. Cesira was happy because her daughter really loved Peppe and the family was growing together nicely. The only thing that worried them and caused them pain was that all their brothers and sisters were so far away and that they didn't know if they would ever see them again.

"I felt like I was part of the family and so it was easy for me to tell them what had happened to me and that I had decided to move to Canada. They stared at me with their mouths and eyes wide open and without saying a word.

"Then Costina blurted out, 'My poor daughter, my poor child... what kind of world is this? I raised my kids and then I had to watch them leave one by one. I only have my dear Peppe and this saint of a woman Cesira, and that young dear child who never saw or knew her real father all because of Musolinaccio's cursed war.'³

"Costina's words choked me up, thinking about that poor child, my son, and how he had come into this world. Costina had prepared a feast, but at times it felt like a funeral wake. And yet it was an evening that I'd never be able to forget. It was almost like a going-away party for me, as I was about to leave the town of my parents, where I had spent years of carefree days as well as days of real pain and suffering, which are hard to explain."

I tightly squeezed Fiorina's arm, in silence. I heard her relate details and emotions that were so real that I felt like I was Fiorina. Believe me, I had heard many stories, stories of immigrants and other sad stories. As a boy, I had seen friends with whom I had played who had left for faraway places. I myself had been far away from my family for at least ten years because I was working in Northern Italy, spending the best years of my youth with people and a way of life that was completely different from the things that I had known my first twenty years. But Fiorina's pain and suffering were greater than mine. Now Fiorina had transmitted hers to me. I felt as if they were mine. But I couldn't find the words to tell Fiorina. After a few more steps without

saying a word, Fiorina started again.

"It was Peppe who wrote and read the letters for Costina. He read the latest letter that Mimma had sent from Australia. It made us laugh when she described the different things that had happened to her with regard to English, and it made us cry as she wrote about her mother and Cori. She was doing well, but you could tell that she was homesick for her mother and Cori. It ate away at her, even if she had all her brothers there with her. She couldn't help but think about her mother and father as soon as she had a bit of free time, about the hard work and sacrifices and everything they had been through.

"Silently I thought to myself what kind of homesickness I would feel for Cori and Rome, seeing as I no longer had any close relatives or anyone for that matter. Soon it was time for bed. The next morning, I had to wake up at five to get ready to leave. I told Costina that I would leave the house keys by the door and if she could give them to the notary when he came. I wanted him to sell it for me. I also asked if she could close it up as best as she could, even if she had to nail wooden boards to the windows. We hugged each other, our eyes filled with tears. Then Costina threw her arms around me and held me tightly to her chest as if it were her daughter who was moving far away.

"Back at home I threw myself on my bed and managed to fall asleep despite all the thoughts floating around and the fact that my heart was beating like a train. I woke up the next morning before the alarm clock even rang. I opened the window. A brisk wind blew and it brought a breath of fresh air. It seemed almost like it wanted to caress me. From the street you could hear the hooves of the mules and donkeys as they went by. The people had already left the town on their way to work in the vineyards and olive groves.

"I got ready in a flash, I closed up and locked up the house as best I could. I took my bag, which contained the few things that I wanted to bring with me. It also contained the two handfuls of dirt that I had taken from the cemetery. I closed my eyes and, as a tear slid down my face, in a second, I saw the twenty years of my life flash before me and the world that I was about to leave behind. What would happen to me and my poor innocent child?

"I walked out of the house and I remained dumbstruck. On the steps I found Costina waiting. 'Oh, my child! Last night I didn't manage to sleep at all, and so I got up to say goodbye. Here's a bag with some things. There's a container of olive oil, a loaf of bread, cooked figs and a bag of dried apples. I thought they could be useful. Go on ahead. I'll

bring it for you to the bus stop.'

"I never ever forgot that moment, and when I stop to think about it, in my mind I see that Costina has my mother's face."

At that precise moment Jadwiga came running downhill towards us. Lunch was ready. Fiorina started walking back at a faster pace. I watched Fiorina walking away. With that red baseball cap and her ponytail sticking out, her shoulders, her long toned legs, and that tight white sweat suit, she looked no older than forty.

She turned around and shot me a devastating smile. "Hurry! Barbecued fish is best when it's hot."

Retelling her story had caused her to shed a few tears. Yet you could tell that it also made her feel good. To tell your own story is to relive it many times over.