

## Constellation of the Horse

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*Josephina*

I find myself searching for the quiet places, places where the children on the Seventy-third Street hitting their balls with broomsticks and running the leather off their shoes, can't be heard. The basement will do. Occasionally a red sock runs by the window. Someone stops to tug on it, bring it back up to his knee. That would be my youngest son, Valentino.

I understand the quiet of the basement, how dust motes twist silently one way, then in a breath, they twist another. I make them change direction by speaking to them: *mug-hra-bi, ya-teem*. I speak these two words, words which mean "foreigner" and "orphan." *Mughrabi* makes the dust move three times. *Yateem*, twice. These are the only Arabic words I have saved inside my dress.

These are the only words I have room for, in this life of saving.

Near the window, three porcelain tubs stand, covered with an oil-cloth. As I lift this cover, the smell of vinegar and brine rises. Eggs bob in the first tub, with black olives and saltpeter. It took half of a day to lay the sardines in the second, back-to-back and belly-to-belly, as I learned when I was small, so they wouldn't spoil. Here they are with their tails laced in little rows, their mouths astonished and empty.

I drop the cloth and it falls, back over the tubs. Dust waves move from sun to unseen galaxies swirling in the slant of light from overhead. All this saving could be a dream. This whole house above me could be a dark cloud, conjured when I was a young girl in the sea village of Tarmut.

But I know that Syria is the dream. I am Josephina Cavallo. I was

born in the hill country above Rome and I am the wife of Salvatori Cavallo, the tailor, twenty-two years in this country, twenty-three years my husband. Ask anyone on Seventy-third Street, and they will say the same. Ask them and they will say that we worked hard, that our children are handsome, that my youngest son is the handsomest of all. My little sheik.

In these quiet moments in the basement, I forget their voices, the butcher who speaks *Calabrese*, the fireman who rents the upstairs half of our house, his wife who has a newborn and milk stains on her dress. I forget to be Josephina Cavallo. I forget and I hold the silence up to my ear like an empty shell, and listen to the roar of my life. Such as it has always been with the people of Tarmut. We look to the sea. We look to the stars.

That's where this dream began, on a starry night in 1924, on a hillside in Palermo. There I was, looking at the stars, and wondering what I was going to do.

### *Salvatori*

Soap bubbles gather between my fingers, as I rub the smell of sardines from my hands. I've saved my stories inside me, the way my wife saves food in our basement. Someday, I will tell my children all they deserve to know. I will tell them about the pig that roamed our village at dusk, and how each house left out trash in clay pots, because the pig belonged to the priest and we didn't want the priest to have a skinny pig. The water stops gurgling from the faucet. I will tell them of the forest, and the evenings the women boiled pine cones down to liniment. Where is the towel? I will tell them of the oil we pressed from pignolas to cure all our ills. I'll tell them these things, and I'll smooth down their hair, the way I smooth the curtains over the sink. Then, they will smile and remember, and if they remember well, I will tell them of the hillside in Palermo and the night I learned to speak.

I was such a thin young man. Perhaps that was why sewing came so easy. My fingers were slender and held the needle well. But that was not the only reason I became a tailor. It was the silence, the long hours of stitch upon stitch, the lengthening line of thread which joined cloth to

cloth.

Even on the streets of Palermo, I was a silent young man, a foreigner from the boot with a crooked tongue. I walked with the crowds through the city and kept my mouth shut. Ahead of me, two men on opposite sides of the avenue steadied long poles cinched into belts at their waists. A cable linked the two poles together at the top, and a yellow harness dangled from the cable, wrapping the body of a girl. A pair of wings attached to her gown hid most of the crisscrossed harness straps. I think they were chicken feathers, those wings.

As the two pole-bearers walked, they moved the poles together and apart, and the tethered girl rose up and down, swooping her arms through the air like a swimmer. It was such a sight, a welcomed relief from the boat and the sailors who were always trying to make me to talk. A whole pageant of angels, balloon moons and paper stars with silver and gold ribbon tails proceeded through the stone streets, and I was there too, walking.

Behind me, a statue of the Madonna swayed from side to side. Swaths of blue silk flowed around her, down to a litter of ferns borne aloft by men with wreaths of white flowers on their heads, their faces painted black. People with lanterns shined their beams on the Madonna, and it looked as if she were floating on a sea of white flowers. Rose petals and confetti rained down from balconies and windows. Every few feet, feathers shook loose from the bouncing angel's wings. A woman in front of me jumped to catch one as it swooshed in the air. We nearly collided. She steadied herself in my arms and laughed, then placed the feather behind my ear. "So the angels can hear your prayers," she said.

I was always startled by women, how they could do so much to me by doing so little. My first wife was barely with me a month before she died of the cough. Barely a month, and the next month without her was enough to make me leave Campobasso, and the stone house where she'd stood behind a veil of steam, pressing the pants I sewed.

Who was going to buy all those pants anyway? Sure, Don Cimino and his sons wore out the seats of theirs on those six horses they rode, and rode, and rode. Up the valley. Down the valley. To the cafe. From the cafe, and barely a stop in front of my window, "Salvatori, we'll need those britches before Sunday!" I would watch them ride away, a little

cloud, a dust tangle rounding the hill to the next village.

But who else needed a tailor in Campobasso? Most men only had need of one good suit, and things had become so sparse in the hill country that sometimes they didn't get it until their families buried them in it. I had plenty of that kind of business, but Josephina didn't like it.

"Don't take that death suit out the front door," she'd say. "You invite bad tidings. Take it out the back."

"I'm not a superstitious man," I'd say, the words fighting their way out of my mouth. She didn't laugh. No matter how thick or slurred my speech, she never laughed. She just watched my mouth until it was done, as if she were reading the little, white words at the bottom of a cinema screen.

Barely a month since she was gone, and there I was in Palermo, staring at an angel with chicken feather wings and yellow straps that crossed between her breasts. I should have listened to Josephina as well as she'd listened to me. I should have taken that suit out the back door.

People started to sing. A man nudged me with his elbow to join in. I was alone in Palermo, in a crowd of Sicilians, in a crowd of happy, singing people, and I, Salvatori Cavallo, I had no song. Not only did I have no song, but I had no tongue for singing, and I knew if I tried to sing, the crowd would move away from me as if I'd been scratching my head. That's what you do when you see someone scratching their head—you move away—so you don't catch lice. I stepped into the shadow of a stone portico and let the crowd pass.

I slipped out of town, over a sewer ditch, to a little hillside behind some buildings. I thought the harbor was on the other side of the hill. I thought if I climbed to the top of the hill, I might be within a stone's throw of the docks, and then I'd find some stones and throw them—at the sailors on the *Regiona Mare*. There were certainly enough stones to be had. Pebbles of all sizes covered the hillside, making it slick under my shoes. My feet slipped as I climbed. I turned around. I sat. I looked down at Palermo. I looked up at the sky.

### *Josephina*

There I was, looking at the stars and wondering what I was going to

do. My father had left with my brothers and they were sailing to America, even though we'd been told *only one hundred Arabs per year*. The year before, more than twelve-thousand, then, only one hundred. It didn't make sense.

We came down the coast of Syria, through Beirut, over the Mediterranean, to Sicily. Beirut was the most beautiful city I'd ever seen, with its tiled doorways and people in suits and hats of all shapes. My father knew a man, who knew a man, who had a boat. I held on to the handle of our little cart while I stood behind my brothers. I peeked through their arms and around their *jilaba* sleeves, as my father talked to this boat owner, this sea captain. It was a long conversation. Every once in a while my father opened his right hand, and Soroush or Madzoob passed him a package from the cart. At one point they stopped talking and my father waved to my brothers to come over. I stood there with the cart and looked up and down the street at the cafes and the people eating foods, some of which I'd seen, and some of which I'd never seen. I was so hungry.

When I looked back at my father and my brothers and the sea captain, they were looking at me and the packages left in the cart. Had I missed my father's signal? I took a step toward him, but he put his hand up to stop. He and the sea captain walked away, and my brothers put the parcels they'd removed, back in the cart, and pulled it toward the docks.

I stood on that hillside in Palermo and thought about my father and my brothers. I didn't know anybody in Palermo, except for Senora Helena, the woman whose house I cleaned. Everyday I dusted the portrait of her husband, the sea captain. I dusted it right after I dusted the small ships lined up on the carved credenza below it. I dusted the last ship very carefully, making sure the decks and the rails were very tidy. I wanted my father and my brothers to be clean when they got to America, so the Americans would let them stay. I wanted my father to have good work and good food, so the shadows would leave his cheeks, and he would send for me.

I stood on the hillside watching the stars and the people singing below. It didn't make sense. Some places in the world people were starving. Some places they were singing. Senora Helena was probably sitting on her balcony throwing rose petals. Some places in the world, rose petals

were a meal.

I learned many words from Senora Helena: chair, mop, floor, door, dust, street, ocean, stars. I could say them all in her tongue. She was a good teacher. She didn't pamper me by asking for the words in Arabic. She corrected me often and said the words very loud so I could hear them. After five months of waiting for a message from my father and brothers, the hunger that had stabbed my stomach became a memory, and I could almost hold a perfect conversation with the butcher. Of course Senora Helena was there to correct me too, and to tell the butcher my accent was Spanish.

Still, I didn't know what I was going to do. I stood on the hillside with my black shawl wrapped around me. I opened my hand in the moonlight and looked at the coins Senora Helena had given me for the Madonna. I had learned that too, how much the different coins were worth. I had also learned Senora Helena would give me a coin each morning if I told her I was going to the church, and I could stop in the little alley near the fruit stand and sew them into the hem of my dress. I kept a needle and thread pinned inside my bodice all the time, just in case.

I could have put the coins inside the black and yellow inlaid box my father left with me, but Senora Helena took the box, along with the other bundles my father had left in her parlor. She unwrapped them one by one, held them up to the light, sniffed them. She sniffed me too, and probably would have unwrapped me, if I hadn't hidden under the blue divan.

### *Salvatori*

When you are sitting on a hillside watching happy people and you know you are not happy, it only makes the pain in your heart worse. Even the touch of my shirt hurt. I crumpled it in my fists and pulled it away. I tugged it hard. It felt like a yoke around my neck and water began to leave my eyes.

I let go of my shirt and smoothed it down. The hairs on the back of my neck sprang into place. I stroked the front of my shirt flat with the palms of my hands, first one, then the other. I patted faster and faster. I slapped that fabric back into place. I pounded my shirt with my fists. I

felt the thuds, deep in my lungs. I cried.

I yelled at the people in the town. I yelled at the sky. I don't remember what I yelled, but I remember my own voice sounded silly to me, like a baby's voice, like it wanted to say something but didn't know how.

I was ashamed of myself, alone there on that hillside. I was ashamed of my tongue pinned to the bottom of my mouth. I was so ashamed I stopped crying and just stared at the city, at the procession of the Madonna. She reached the stone galleria in the center of town, and all her angels and stars circled around her.

What good would it do to cry anymore? Had all my sorrow stopped the world for even one second? People still rose at dawn and ships still sailed the seas. The sailors had caught me crying one night and the next morning there had been a pile of salt under my hammock.

"Look what you did Salvatori," they'd laughed. "Salvatori Cavallo, he has horse tears. He even speaks in horse."

"That's enough," the cook had said, but I knew he was in on it. How else would they get the salt?

Since I was small, the only one who'd never laughed was Josephina. I took out my handkerchief. I blew my nose. She never laughed and she never talked about me over a clothes line, and the one thing she asked me to do, I didn't do.

I wiped my face. I smoothed my hair down and found that I still had the feather behind my ear. *So the angels can hear your prayers* the woman had said. I had a prayer all right. It wasn't a reasonable prayer, and it may even have been a prayer against heaven, but I took that feather from behind my ear and I made it anyway. I prayed for my wife to come back to me.

### *Josephina*

What do you do when you see a man yelling at the sky? I knew I shouldn't have watched, but I took my problems to the hillside first. He was probably a hungry man, or a poor man who'd lost his home. He sounded a little drunk. He yelled at the stars. I knew groups of stars had names, but I didn't know what they were, or where one group ended and another began. The sky was one big tent top to me, stitched in a crazy

pattern. Which star was he angry at?

He took a thing from behind his ear and examined it, then went to put it in his shoe. I kept money in my dress and he kept things in his shoes. What did he have to hide?

My father would never have done such a thing. He kept his money around his waist or under his arm. My father was good at keeping money, and any day soon he was going to send for me. I was going to leave on a ship, like the ones on the walnut credenza I dusted every day. I was going to sail the ocean, with the stars hanging all around me, down to the tucked-in ends of the horizon.

The man below took off his boot and reached into it. He took something out, and placed this thing from his ear in the middle of it. I didn't know what the thing from his ear was, a bit of tobacco perhaps. I couldn't tell. The something from his shoe didn't look like a tobacco pouch. It crinkled like paper. Perhaps he'd had a bit of saffron behind his ear?

He put the whole packet back in his shoe. He stood up. He stomped his foot on the ground, then bent over and reached for his laces. He didn't finish. He straightened up and stomped the ground again, and that is when it happened. The hillside sunk like a pile of flour when you drop an egg on it. I raised my hand and started to shout, "Oh!" but there was no one to shout to. He was gone.

### *Salvatori*

The sky behind her face was deep blue-black and pocked by stars. I was confused by those white points, and by her hair, which rimmed her face in dark scallops. A breeze caught these waves of black, blending them into the night sky. It was as if all the stars were part of her hair, and I thought for a moment she was falling toward me. I thought I was staring at a painting, a cathedral ceiling, large and hollow and painted with night.

"Are you hurt?" she said. Sicilians had such strange accents, leaving off the vowels at the ends of their words, putting them in other places. I wanted to answer, but I was confused, and a little afraid. I sat up and looked at my shoes.

"I tied them for you," she said. "You fell. From up there." She pointed over my shoulder.

I looked where she pointed, but something about what she said was not anchored in her words. I looked back down the hillside. I was closer to the city than I remembered, and I couldn't see the whole of the Madonna's procession anymore, just one of the balloon moons. It tottered on its rope, bouncing slowly along a line of roof tiles. Why hadn't I noticed before its two faces? It was inked on both sides, one blue nose pointing forward, one blue nose pointing back.

"Are you with drink?"

When she asked that, a small bit of anger came over me. Without thinking, I opened my mouth and stuck out my tongue as far as I could, to let her know she was wrong. I immediately felt I shouldn't have done that. The sides of my tongue strained and rolled over my lower teeth.

"Oh," she said, "you have a heart in your mouth."

### *Josephina*

Maybe the right thing to do was to run to Senora Helena and get help, but maybe the man was a thief, and they'd throw him in jail for whatever he'd put in his shoe. I felt sorry for him. He was probably from a smaller village, a village along the coast. Maybe there, people were starving. Maybe he needed to hide things in his shoes. Maybe it was money.

He lay face down, his arms out, his body aimed toward town like an arrow. I prayed to Allah for his health. I grabbed his ankles and dragged them around, so he pointed up the hill. I rolled him over to make sure he was breathing. He was so young. The way he'd been sitting with his shoulders slumped, I'd thought he was an old man or a beggar, but his clothes and his face were none of these. His eyebrows gleamed in the moonlight like little fish. Tears and dirt from the hillside muddied his pink cheeks, and his hair—it wasn't gray—it was the color of beach sand.

I squeezed his arms to see if they were broken. I held his wrists and turned them over. I brushed the dirt from his hands. His nails were smooth, as if they'd been oiled and rubbed with a cloth. He wasn't bleeding, no broken ribs, and his legs seemed as they should be, although I didn't touch them. His shoe was missing. I found it near a rock. I turned it over to empty the gravel and the papers fell out.

The young man moaned as if he'd dreamed something horrible. I shoved the papers inside my dress and scurried across the hill. I put his shoe back on his foot.

*Salvatori*

The hot blood filled my cheeks as I ran to the docks. I kept my gaze on the name of my ship, on the white letters *Regiona Mare* which swayed with the lilt of the water. It seemed like the whole world swayed, like everything had gone crazy with motion. I hesitated before I stepped onto the ramp. I looked down and saw the water, how it seemed bottomless, like a deep cavern I could fall into between the ship and the dock. I grabbed the ropes and steadied myself. I had to get back to the cabin.

By the time I caught up with myself, I was lying in my hammock, in the dark. I was dizzy with the sound of her words. I put my arm out to stop the rocking. I flattened my palm against the ship's hull, keeping my arm tensed and straight. It only made the motion worse. My whole body rose with the ship, as if I were riding the heaving back of a bull.

I let go and wrapped my arms across my chest. The hammock swayed like the ticking of a clock. It was too much. She'd seen my tongue, how it held back my words as if it were a bridle, how my words in turn were misshapen, how they were too soft and too silly to be the words of a man. *You have a heart in your mouth.*

She'd seen this, that girl on the hillside. Perhaps all women saw it and that was why they moved through me like hot steel and left a ringing in my head. In the darkness of the cabin I waited for the ringing to stop. I tried to listen to the steady creaking of the ship. I tried not to be the iron bell swinging in the little tower in Campobasso. I tried to think of Josephina's face behind the veil of steam, but the memory wavered, like a reflection in broken water.

A swiftness disturbed the air above me, and the weight of many arms and shoulders pressed down on me. My hammock snapped and fell to the floor. A light struck my eyes and I tried to scream. Something rough grabbed my tongue and let loose a fire in my mouth. I did scream, but the sound gurgled in my throat, nearly choking me.

*"Andiamo,"* someone shouted. "Let him be."

Heavy footsteps ran away and left me rolling on the planks, a thousand needles stabbing my face with pain. They'd left the lantern on the floor and I spat the salt from my mouth into its ring of light. Blood. A lot of blood. Down my chin and the front of my shirt.

"They did you a favor Salvatori." I struggled to my knees. I saw black shoes and the bottom of the cook's filthy, white apron in the low ring of lamplight. "It should have been done when you were born."

I wanted to grab his legs and climb him as if I were a cat scratching my way to the top of a tree. I lunged for his feet, but he moved. The lamp oil swayed and dowsed the wick. I was left in darkness.

### *Josephina*

I didn't know what I'd said. I wanted to tell him that I understood the heart of his problem, but I think I said it wrong. Maybe I wasn't supposed to understand a man's problems. I didn't understand my father, nor his dealings with other men. I didn't understand why he left me with the sea captain's wife; I only knew he'd licked his palms, smoothed down my hair and told me to stay. I'd felt sure in the way he'd studied my face and kissed my forehead, that he was coming back. I didn't have the boldness to ask.

I had never been as bold as I was on that hillside. It was partly the sight of the tongue, so divided down the middle and straining against itself, and partly it was my own shock for not putting those wrappers back in his shoe. I should have returned them, but once I had the thought to take them, I didn't have time for the thought to put them back. He ran.

I could have run after him. I heard his shoes scuttling down the hillside and slapping the alley below. He headed for the docks. I could have gotten there faster and said, "Here, these are your papers. You dropped them, Sir." I could have said, "Don't mind me, I'm just a girl, a Spanish girl. I don't know what I'm saying," but I didn't. I stood there wondering why he was running, and if he really was a thief. I stood there wondering if I had something very valuable in my dress, valuable enough for a ticket to America. I told myself I couldn't go to the docks because Senora Helena said I shouldn't. I told myself I was a good girl because I listened to Senora Helena, and if what I had in my dress was stolen, I wasn't the

one who stole it.

God punished me for what I did. When I got to Senora Helena's house, a pain caught me below the navel and I had to lie down. I woke the next morning, my thighs stuck together with blood. My stomach hurt as if it had been kicked. I lay in my cot in the little room behind the kitchen and moaned. When Senora Helena grew tired of waiting upstairs for her breakfast, she came down and pulled the wool blanket off me. "Let me die," I bleated out.

"Silly girl," she said, "you're not dying."

That day, I stayed in the little room behind the kitchen instead of doing chores, and I didn't die. I listened to the floor creaking above me as Senora Helena walked from her pink silk chair, to her armoire, to her dressing table. Each moment the floor was silent, I imagined Senora Helena arranging her hair, or pulling on a glove. I thought of Senora Helena doing these things, and I remembered her words as she handed me a bundle of rags and instructed me to wash myself, "Now you are a woman," she'd said, then she'd told me to put a rag between my legs and be careful where I sat.

I waited for the moaning of the floor to stop and for the clicking of Senora Helena's boot heels down the big stairs. This house had so many sounds. When the coal man dropped his load down the shoot, a thousand horses ran to the basement. When the morning winds came from the sea, the rafters and the upper floors sagged, as if they were men standing on a street corner drinking and swaying together in the one song they all knew. Even the silver bell beneath the front, stone archway had a story, its own urgent tale of packages and letters from the postman. Senora Helena thanked him, then she stepped onto the street, the opening of her parasol like the whoosh of a giant wing.

I stayed in my cot, coiled around my thoughts the way a shell coiled around its center. At the heart of a sea shell there was always a grain of sand, a point from which the shell began. I felt inside my dress and found the papers. I sat up.

I took my black shawl from the wall peg behind my door, and spread it on the cot. I put the papers in the middle. They had been folded many times to a size half that of my hand. They were square, yet they were round, like a cup, from the pressing of a heel. I turned them over. They

reminded me of a pillow. I pushed them down with my finger, and they popped back up.

I unfolded them once. The impression of many steps stayed in the paper, in the same way the impression of Senora Helena's body stayed in her bed, before I beat the mattress and pulled the sheets across it. I unfolded the papers all the way, and in the center of them I found a curled feather. I didn't touch it; I just sighed. This was not the treasure I'd expected.

My breath caught the feather and it swirled off the brown papers, twisted around in the air, and landed on my black shawl. It rested there, the stem of its quill like the mast of a ship, its streams bent back and full white, like the billow of a sail. He was gone, the young man from the hillside. He was on the ocean.

I stood up and backed away from my cot. It was as if I had walked into someone else's magic. I didn't know where the knowledge came from, but it came. *He was on the ocean.* I had taken someone's fortune, his talisman, and he was on the sea without it, with no protection. The round ache below my stomach swelled.

I should have recognized when I saw his tongue, that such curiosities were the results of spells.

### *Salvatori*

I forgot my heart. I worked steady, like a machine. I watched the needle eye go in and out. The rhythm of the up and down, down and up, that rhythm became my life. Not a drum, not a gallop, but the turning of a crooked wheel plopping steadily along a rutted road. There were many like me already in New York. They showed me what to do. They liked what I did. They wanted me to do more.

Ever since the sailors had cut my tongue, I knew the world was different. They stayed away from me on the ocean. They left me wine and bread in my hammock—and rolled cigarettes. I didn't look at them on the decks. I didn't play cards with them between the watches. I didn't glance up from my bowl, when the cook gave me eggs and *ditalini*. I spent my days in the dark hold of the ship, between the stacked wheels of cheese, the giant rope coils, and the sloshing kegs of oil. I spent my

nights on the deck, sleeping behind a box of staves. I didn't look up at the stars. I watched the end of the sky, the place where I was headed. I could see what a fool I'd been, how I'd thought the only thing that separated me from other people was a quantity of words.

New York grew on the horizon the way a fire grows on a hillside. You see a smoldering glow, then the hairs of flames, then the fire tall and walking. When it's dancing all around you, it's too late.

I looked at people again when I got off the boat. I had to. I looked at men, and I looked at women. I didn't feel anything in my chest, no ringing in my ears. I rented a room from a woman with a mole near her lip. Her words did not toll inside me. I heard them the way I heard the clacking of horse hooves, the bells in shop doors, the crinkling of paper bags and the thuds of flour sacks. I worked for a man with a cigar in his mouth and suit of shiny, striped fabric. I looked in the green eyes of a priest and kissed his ring. I did what everyone else did and went where they went, but I didn't spend what they spent. I sewed an envelope from a scrap of wool, and strapped it to my leg. It felt like dog fur in the winter. It itched in the summer. I liked it that way. I knew where my money was.

I used to hide things in my shoes. Somewhere on the boat, I lost something important. One night on deck, after the swelling of my tongue had gone down and I could stand again without falling over, I wrapped a blanket around myself and took off my shoes. Josephina's papers were gone. No marriage certificate, no baptismal blessing, no prayer of rest. One of the sailors probably stole them. I spat on the deck.

The papers were gone and I didn't think of Josephina for a long time. If I tried to see the veil of steam and her face behind it looking down, the way the Madonna looked down on the children of the earth, the steam rose up too heavy and her eyes disappeared. After a while, I didn't even think of steam.

It wasn't hard to be a machine. So many men stood behind machines, pulled machine levers, or fed the machines as they ran. Like feeding trash to a pig. They just kept eating and eating.

I sewed. Not in a big factory, but in a little room over a bakery, for a cousin of Don Cimino's. I sewed lapels and I sewed cuffs. I sewed besom pockets and I sewed waist vents. I measured wide shoulders and marked

the dark fabric with white soap. The bakery oven sent white trails into the sky from a stack outside the window, as I sat at my machine making seams, turning hems.

One day, while I ate my lunch and watched the pigeons fight for a warm spot near the smoke stack, the woman with the mole near her lip came running up the stairs. Her breasts heaved as she held out an envelope, "Salvatori, you have a telegram."

### *Josephina*

In addition to words, Senora Helena taught me many things. She taught me to make her breakfast. She taught me to make her lunch. She taught me the novenas, and the Angelus.

She taught me to iron pillowcases, to always turn down her bed in the evenings. After nine months with Senora Helena, I even knew how to buy pork from the butcher, and she didn't have to go with me to explain my accent was Spanish. I went out and did the shopping, and I knew where to buy the vegetables cheaper than Senora Helena. After nine months, I'd sewed many coins inside my dress, and I needed a new place to hide them. I thought about this, as I walked through Palermo with my slat basket on my arm. I gave the man in the tobacco store a brown coin for Senora Helena's weekly paper, which had news in it of all the tragedies at sea. I knew this because after nine months, I could read Senora Helena's language.

Every day, I thought of my father and my brothers. Every night I slept in the little room behind the kitchen, with the picture of the Madonna on the wall. Her heart burned with love. I dug out the soft plaster behind the picture with a spoon. I saved an anchovy tin, and put it in the wall. I rinsed the smell from the tin with white vinegar, then vanilla. Senora Helena was glad I was a clean girl, and that I made the kitchen smell nice.

I put the papers from the hillside in the can, but not the coins. I took the extra coins from my skirt, and I buried them in a blue jar, in the spice garden behind the house. If anyone went out there, I could see them from the kitchen window, but no one went out there, because after nine months, Senora Helena put me in charge of her garden, so she could sit

on her balcony and read her *Sea News*.

I took the papers out of the can when I was alone and I read the words I knew. After nine months, I knew a lot. I knew the man from the hillside was named Salvatori Cavallo. I knew his wife had died. I knew they were from the village of Campobasso, although I wasn't sure how to pronounce that name, because after nine months, there were still many things I wasn't sure about. I wasn't sure if I'd ever see my brothers again. I wasn't sure if my father was coming back.

Sometimes, when I put Senora Helena's rugs over the balcony rails and I beat them with a switch, I watched the dust fly around in swirls, like the swirls in the pattern of the sea captain's favorite chair. He spent months on the ocean, navigating by the stars, and Senora Helena spent months on her balcony looking up at the night sky, telling the stars to guide him home. While she did this, I wiped the leather spines of his books and looked through their pages.

I wanted to know the names of the constellations. I found a book of diagrams and sky maps. The book said there were more stars than there were people on earth, and I thought about that for a while, about how my father and my brothers were just tiny stars amongst many stars, and how in the vast river of stars, even if we were in the same river, it might be impossible to find them.

After lunch, I finished the wash and hung the sheets on the line which stretched over the spice garden. I sat on the stones that marked the plots, and I wiped my sweaty face with my hands. My cool fingers smelled of bleach. Wind filled my sleeves and chilled my underarms. The same breeze billowed the sheets behind me and shoved them against my back. Since the hillside, it was as if a tidal force pushed and pulled me through my chores. I knew it was the spell.

I kept the feather bound in the papers, in the can, in the wall, behind the Madonna's burning heart. When I was small, we never had a painting of the Madonna, because it was wrong to conjure a human image for a saint. I didn't mind the Madonna on the wall though, because I knew the fire of her burning heart had the power to protect me from the water spell. Mysterious currents leaked around the scrolled wood of the picture frame and sent an undertow of temperatures tugging at my body. Four times in nine months, I'd walked through the house as if I were

wading through basmati fields, knee-deep in water. Four times, the water spell had swollen and burst inside me. I'd bled, but I hadn't died. I'd prayed to the Madonna, and she'd sent fire through me to boil the water away. The spell was strong though. It pooled in my breasts and stayed there.

Salvatori's spell was strong, and it wanted to pull me toward him?

Beneath my bodice, my breasts ached with a swelling heat. My body had become a tapestry of temperatures I had no control over.

When the sea captain came home, he brought the force of water and stars with him. These were dark, magnetic forces, very much akin to sadness. Sadness on a man's face drew a woman to him, and once she brought comfort to that face, she was forever bound. He walked into the sitting room with this dark power about him, as if his navy blue suit were cut from midnight sky. Senora Helena looked up from her embroidery, and when she saw him in the middle of the room, his dark coat around him and the dark longing in his face, she came as swiftly to his arms as iron sucked to a magnet.

The next morning, I washed the stars from their sheets. I sat on the garden stones, waiting for the linens to dry, and the water spell filled the sheets, pressed them against my back as if they were a wave pushing me off a beach boulder. I couldn't tell whose magic this was, Salvatori's, or the sea captain's.

I kept the papers in the wall, behind the burning heart of the Madonna, because the flame of her heart protected me from the sadness of this Salvatori Cavallo, this "cavallo," this "horse." I knew from reading the sea captain's books, about the horse constellation of the autumn sky, Pegasus, the winged stallion who roamed the horizon between two hemispheres. And the sea captain was home, and I couldn't read his books anymore, and he'd brought his sadness spell with him.

After lunch, I made Senora Helena's and the sea captain's bed, then I sat in my room, on my little cot, and I looked at the Madonna's burning heart. I looked at it, and I looked at it, as if it were a hearth fire. I fell asleep.

The sleep didn't want to leave me. The floor creaked above, as if someone were dancing. I imagined the sea captain swirling Senora Hel-

ena in his arms, and sweat leaked down the back of my neck, from my armpits, and between my legs. I felt a drum beating in my belly.

I woke with a strange rhythm in my hips, as if I were riding a stallion up and down a beach. I listened for the coal man, but he wasn't there. All that was in the room was darkness, the cold air on my arms and face as if I'd been in a strong wind, and the heat between my thighs, as if they'd been pressed against hot flanks. The floor above creaked again. It was a strong spell.

To be caught in someone else's sadness was a powerful thing. For a long time I wanted my father not to be sad, but our whole village had been trapped by the famine sadness. Everyone should have laughed and made a great wind, to blow that spell's shadow away. For a long time I wanted the shadows on my father's face not to grow, and when they did, it made me sad. The few times he smiled, the shadows left.

Senora Helena and the sea captain stopped dancing above, and soon their bed creaked with a different, faltering rhythm. I listened. It grew faster, like the beat of a galloping horse.

I found the oil lamp and lit it. One way to frighten a spell away was to deny it its shadow. I held the lantern up to the ceiling.

Gnats shook loose from the rafters and fluttered around the lamp. Another way to frighten a spell was to laugh. I looked up at the beams and let out a loud, "Ha, ha!" One of the bed posts struck the floor like the hoof of a stallion.

Sweat beaded on my lip. The burning heart of the Madonna seemed smaller, as if it were going to go out, as if water encroached upon its fire circle. I looked up. My forehead went cold. Were the rafters bending? It was as if a flood from above was about to break the ceiling and drown me.

I ran to the picture and took the can from the wall. I stuffed the papers inside my bodice and I gathered all of my coins from the garden. I wrapped my black shawl around me, grabbed my slat basket, and I went down the back alleys, to the docks. When I saw the ocean, I looked at the constellations above it. "Ha, ha!" I said. "Do you want your magic back?"

It made sense then, how he'd been yelling at the stars. It also made sense, when the man in the black, pie-shaped hat at the ticket office looked

at the first two papers and not the third. He stamped my ticket for steerage, and it made sense when he held up the second paper and asked, "Is this your husband?" and I pointed my chin at the sky with another, *Ha!* He turned to the clerk next to him and mumbled, "Hill country," beneath his mustache, "don't mess with her."

That night, I looked for Pegasus galloping the horizon. As I watched from the ship's deck, I waited for the bobbing end of the ocean to dip down far enough, so that I could see the square of stars that made up the front flanks of the winged horse, and every time it did, I pulled my shawl from my chin and yelled, "Ha, ha!"

### *Salvatori*

Here's the thing. I thought I knew what sorrow was. I thought, "Well, loosing a wife. That is sorrow," but I was wrong. There is a simplicity to that type of sorrow, an explainability, which makes it almost not sorrowful. It's as if you are sitting at your sewing machine, eating a piece of bread and a bit of red *salamini*, and someone runs up to you and says, "You have a telegraph," and the telegraph tells you, "You must come," and you go directly to that place. That is not sorrow. Sorrow is getting up and going to that place, and along the way a rickety truck screeches its tires, or you walk down the wrong street and never find the place you are going to, so you give up and you go back to your one room with the one bed and the one chair, and you never arrive at that place the telegram told you about. That is sorrow. When people shake their heads at you the next day because you didn't go, because you are still the same tongue-tied man and you have not changed the way you sit at your machine or chew your bit of sausage, that is sorrow.

I did get up and go. I got up and left the window and the pigeons and my landlady huffing, and the mole on her face, and I walked onto the street, toward the small docks, and I felt the water swell beneath the planks as I stood on deck. I felt the bump of the shore and the pull of the ropes drawing the ferry into a long embrace. I went to Ellis Island. I knew the message was wrong, but I went anyway. How could she be here?

I almost didn't go. That was the crazy thing. After months and months of knowing my own feet so well that I could see the street be-

neath them before I even left my machine, to see them in the middle of the day, to see that they were not in the right place at the right time, struck me with wonder. Here I was, walking toward the ferries, and the shadow of my feet was the round shadow of the sun overhead, not the spear shadow of the sun slanting, the shadow that mixed with all the other walking shadows like a stand of trees blended together in a forest. How I missed the hill country!

That is when I knew the sorrow. I had kept it folded neatly like a handkerchief in my pant's pocket, but somewhere on the ferry, it slipped out and clung to my hip, riding the inside of my shirt until it sat just above my navel like a bowl of undigested oats. It had been with me daily, heavy, like a stone strapped to me, and daily I had ignored it, gone about my work, and when I'd tried to be sad for Josephina, the sorrow had told me I was a liar. It told me I was nothing. I was in a land of machine men, with no stone house, with no trees and no valleys. I was like every other machine. I thought I was sad because I had no wife, but the truth is, it was more than that.

And then, the wonder. To be on the street in the middle of the day, to finally see this thing I had become part of, this city, this place with no ending—that is what finally made me see what sorrow really was. As I stood on the deck of the ferry, my navel pressed to the railing, sorrow trailed behind me like an anchor, and I was stuck in all the lonely months I'd spent in New York, and it was as if I was watching somebody else, somebody far in front of me, who had a telegram to come meet his wife at Ellis Island.

New, American words were easier for my tongue, the words it had never tried, instead of the words it had always made wrong. When I got to the island I said clearly to the official, "I'm here for my life." I meant to say, "I'm here for my wife," but I clearly said, "I'm here for my life." The clerk heard "wife" anyway, probably because that was what he expected to hear, and he pointed down a hallway to another desk at the far end.

My words may have been clear, but my mind was not. I licked my lips. I gritted my teeth. My mouth went dry when I reached the room. In front of me was a door, and I was going to have to walk through it.

*Josephina*

I didn't know what I should say, so I said little. In America there was another language, and my "Ha, ha" had become less confident. I didn't know what I was saying "ha" to. I did have my wits more about me than the night I left Palermo, so I kept the death paper in the bottom of my slat basket, and the others I showed to the woman who looked at my eyes, my ears, my knees. She listened to my lungs and I said, "Ha!" to frighten away the water.

I sat at the shaky table in the room with the peeling paint, and I waited. The radiator near the wall was silent. Above it, bubbles of previously steamed paint flaked like a sunburn. I wondered if Salvatori Cavallo had come through this room. The walls looked as if they'd been in a flood. I put the papers on the table and unfolded them.

When the door creaked open and he entered the room, I saw the face of a sad man, and the water spell in my heart swelled. I wanted to use my loud *ha*, but the sound had been drowned out of my throat. The drum in my belly beat in loud thumps. I didn't know what to say, so I took the feather from the middle of the papers and I held it out, in my hand.

He stared at it for a long moment. He could have slapped my hand away. He could have slapped me, called me a whore and a thief. He didn't. I don't think he knew what to do, and that is why he did the most unexpected thing. He took the feather from my hand and he put it in his mouth. He swirled it around on his tongue with some spit. He chewed it between his right teeth, then he chewed it between his left. He threw his head back and looked at the ceiling, then he made a big swallow. His Adam's apple went up, then down. Then he looked at me and opened his mouth, and he stuck out his tongue. He closed his mouth and said, "My heart is back where it belongs," and he pointed to his chest.

The spell was broken, and we looked at each other as if we were people who'd just survived a shipwreck, but we'd never been introduced. I didn't know what to do, where to go, or what to say.

*Salvatori*

I was muddled, like a man who'd nearly drowned. I was in a daze, and

I did things as if I watched myself do them. I was glad the sailors didn't have my papers. Even with this gladness, the sorrow still clung to my withers like a bruise. I think she could see through my shirt front. I think she could see the sorrow on me, and that is why she handed me the feather.

I left the room first, and she followed. My body was moving, but I didn't know how. In my head I could hear echoes of iron and the thrum of many machines. My lips, my fingertips, and the end of my nose, all tingled with a buzz.

When the ferry bumped the shore, I paid for her ticket and she stood beside me on the deck. This young woman from the hillside knew more about me than any of the machine men. I was a little afraid of what she knew, but I still wanted her to know it, in the same way I was afraid of facing the priest in the confessional, but I still wanted to sit in that dark place and be forgiven. We both held the railing and I raised my arm to point at the sky scrapers and tell her who owned them, even the unfinished ones. I didn't know if she would stay with me or not. My finger trembled as I aimed it toward Manhattan. When we landed, a tide of people nearly swept her away, and I had to grab her arm and pull her back.

### *Josephina*

"No, this way," he said, and from that moment on, I knew he wanted me to follow.

The spell was broken and I could have gone, although I didn't know where to go. I had some money in my petticoat. It was the wrong money, but still, it was worth something. I watched his face as he pointed to things and told me what they were, a "battery," a "ferry," a "park," a "street car."

### *Salvatori*

By the time I caught up with myself, we were standing on a bridge looking at the people coming home from the factories and offices. So many people. In the months I'd been in America, I'd learned to use my

tongue, but still, I could count on one hand the number of people I talked to each day. No one knew me, not the way Josephina had known me. My hands started to chill and I shoved them in my pockets. Josephina's papers crinkled against my fist. Since I'd come to America, I'd had words to give, and no one to give them to. All my thoughts were inside me, wadded up like unfinished letters.

### *Josephina*

He bought a bag of warm chestnuts from a man with a smoking cart. We stood side by side on a bridge, and watched rivers of people walking through the streets. He looked out, across these faces, as if he were a man on a mountain surveying a valley below. So many faces. Thousands of people, all moving back and forth, and this was only an island, not even the mainland of America. How would I go about finding my father? I was a comet—no, I was smaller than a comet, an asteroid—in a galaxy of a myriad eyes.

Perhaps, as he looked at these people, he thought too about the immense number of faces. Whatever that distant thought was, he kept his gaze on it. He took the papers, which the Madonna's burning heart had protected me from for so long, out of his pocket and passed them to me. "I want you to keep these," he said.

I said nothing. Since he'd taken the feather from my hand, the spell had been lifted from my body. I felt light, almost weightless, like a speck of dust floating on the surface of a lake. I let him take my elbow and steer me through the streets, but I was no longer being pushed and pulled by water. I had a choice.

But what was the choice? The woman who'd listened to my heart at Ellis Island, had found Salvatori Cavallo in the room of big registers, but my father and my brothers were not three of the one hundred lucky Arabs listed there. Who were they? If I were to go about finding them, I would have to dive into this river of people, and then which way would I go? What star could I steer by? This man with the pink cheeks and the eyebrows like little fish was the only familiar thing, and even he was strange. He was bound by spells. And his lips were so sad. He needed someone to put her lips to his and feed him a smile, the way Senora Helena fed

smiles to the sea captain. He was soaked through with sadness like a sponge, and I was standing next to him.

All these thoughts flashed around me in the same way the beacon from a lighthouse flashed around the sky, quick and sharp. My thoughts ended in the same place they began, standing on a bridge, watching wave after wave of rushing people. I took the papers from his hand. I said nothing.

*Salvatori*

What we did, we did without words.

When we reached the boarding house, she climbed the steps behind me. I showed her the floor I lived on, and when I unlocked the door, she walked through it without hesitation.

At one time in my life, I was afraid of the rocking motion of the sea, of the deep cavern I could fall into between the boat and the dock, the moving abyss that could crush me. When we were alone for the first time though, I wanted to be crushed, to have the stone of sorrow in my stomach ground to silt. I touched her body and found it a confusion of temperatures, the coolness of her upper arms, the warmth of her neck, the cold press of her toes on my calves, the fire of her navel against mine. The ice brick of sorrow rubbed against her burning belly, and when the last shreds of an old memory rose suddenly like steam, there was only her face in that mist.

We made the motion of men in a forest sawing logs for a house. I felt the din of Sunday morning, the peeling out of the hour, cast iron swinging back and forth. I felt the flesh sack between my legs clap against her buttocks. I heard the ringing of a ship's bell and someone announcing our destination, "Port of New York."

I was dizzy from the heat shooting through my neck veins. When I pulled away, I saw her hair spread in all directions, and tiny flashes of white from the pillowcase, shining in that oiled darkness like distant stars. My head vibrated with a hum and the room spun. For a moment the world seemed to tumble, end over end, and I thought she was above me, falling from the sky.