Falling Through the New World

by Cynthia Reeves

I. Before

Let's start from the Piazza Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, whose name is longer than the piazza is wide, just a patch of earnest green, a stone bench where the gossips debate our village Roccamaro's unfolding history, and three spiny blackthorn trees profuse this time of year with small white flowers. Let's start here, in front of the church of San Ponziano. Let's greet the toothless gatekeeper who tolls the bell at noon each day, and dusts the Virgin's shrine, and pockets the wedding coins rained down upon each happy couple to safeguard their future. Let's look across the empty square to the Del Sartos' home, where Vincenzo del Sarto, my own Vincenzo, grew up. It's the pale-bronze stucco house, just there, the one with purple bougainvillea framing the arched and cloistered doorway.

When Vincenzo's mother was alive, she'd sit inside that arched doorway and read. *The Inferno of Dante, The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus,* all manner of hell. This caused a scandal

in our little village, even though she found the books in the convent library. She'd read after the midday meal, and then in the late afternoon take her *passeggiata* to the convent down the hill. There, she'd trade that day's book for another. She had a girl come in two days a week to take her laundry and clean the house, for she was a frail woman. No one knew quite what was wrong. She didn't even breathe in the normal way.

At least that's what the gossips said. In the morning, she'd kiss her husband good-bye outside their home and kiss hello when he returned at night—two more scandals, for no one but he worked during the long, hot afternoon, and no other married couple kissed so passionately hello and good-bye. Signor del Sarto owned the *Grande Magazzino,* as he called it, a store that sold a little of everything—bolts of cloth from as far away as England, tablecloths and antimacassars, hand-tailored suits and ready-made shirts, Milanese ties and Florentine belts, men's felt hats and ladies' straw ones, ornate church veils that I wove for him on bobbins and pins, and even an exquisite French dress that no one could afford but stood on a dressmaker's dummy in the display window for years, just to lure people into the shop.

Signor del Sarto's four sons, Michele and Ettore, Vincenzo and Arturo, helped run the shop. Michele even traveled abroad to bring back wonderful oddities. And then all four brothers volunteered together for the Great War. Michele was killed at Isonzo, and the other three—we didn't know yet what had become of them.

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But I'm speaking of before.

For my sister Ernestina and me, the Del Sartos had their

allure, the strange family with the four handsome brothers who were always quick with a wink, a *ciao, belissima Ernestina, belissima Francesca.* It was poor Michele who set his heart on Ernestina before he shipped out. A blessing he'd never know that she, too, died as a result of the war, of the Spanish influenza and not a bullet or the strange gas that seared and sealed a soldier's lungs. How my mind wanders! Let me speak of before.

Before everything changed, we'd go to the *Grande Magazzino* together, Ernestina and I. The shop wasn't far from our small home and olive grove at the bottom of the hill. Sometimes I'd bring Signor del Sarto a new white veil to sell in his shop, but always we'd bring him bottles of fresh-pressed virgin oil during the months of pressing. Papà would click his tongue at us, shameless girls, but would nevertheless offer us the dozens he made daily during harvest season. We took six bottles each day, only six. We'd arrive at the shop, breathless, fanning ourselves with our little black lace fans, even in December. Michele and Vincenzo would give each of us a piece of Ernestina's favorite, vanilla *torrone,* or my favorite, almond *crocanti,* from two tall glass jars that held only these candies, the only two they stocked. They had a third jar, always empty, from which they'd pull nothing and hand the bit of nothing to us. And every time we'd ask, "What is this air?" And they'd say, "They're not air! They're *baci,* the finest *baci* in all the world," and they'd hold their hearts where we'd wounded them, and while we were apologizing, every day the same sugar-sweetened apology for our ignorance, they'd bend quickly to touch our hair and steal from each of us a small, chaste kiss.

I didn't know then that my life had already moved into its after.

Mamma approved of the boys. The Del Sartos had the nicest

home in the village, save for the priests' home, and her girls were not destined for holy orders. She envisioned herself someday in that house. She'd trade the smoke and ash and flies and shadows of our olive grove at the base of the hill for their green shutters and purple bougainvillea, their terrazzo roof and the merciful cool of the cloistered archway, their proximity to San Ponziano and its flickering votive candles, to the Virgin and God. She imagined a time when Papà might retire from his life as an olive grower and become an artisan making the finest men's clothes. People—not only from Roccamaro, but also from the neighboring villages—would come and buy their clothes from him. She imagined a time in the not-too-distant future when Signora del Sarto would no longer read her books in the doorway.

When she looked across the piazza each day after Holy Mass, she could see Papà where Signora del Sarto sat reading her hellish books, propped in his favorite ladder-backed chair, his baskets primed with notions. My Vincenzo was also a fine tailor—his father had taught him—yes, Mamma could almost see Papà and Vincenzo sitting side by side, making suits to go with the felt hats Signor del Sarto sold.

It was in this same archway that I first saw Vincenzo, a boy of six, making castles out of gray thread-cones and wooden spools on the cobblestones near his father's feet. I loved the way he examined each spool and cone and sized up his building to determine how best to lay out the day's castle. On this day of before, one of the spools rolled away from him and began its long journey down the cobbled hill. Without thinking, I chased after it, picking up speed as I ran downhill, until I tripped and fell on top of it. The very next minute, Vincenzo was bending over me, offering his hand and laughing.

Indignantly, I shook my head and cried. My nose ran and my

hair fell across my face in a black and tangled veil and he *laughed* at me. I must admit I hated him right then.

He took the spool from my hands and pressed his white handkerchief hard on my bloody knee. I remember the pain of his care, and the small scandal of that bare knee.

II. Dreczenca Is Burning

I, Vincenzo del Sarto, am a tailor. A *tailor,* not a soldier.

While the mountains burn, I make perfect seams in fine wool, as my father taught me. The thrum of the machine under my fingers draws me toward him. My Austrian captors tell me he's probably dead. But, as I sew, I choose to imagine myself as a boy sitting on my father's lap, bent low over a stretch of black gabardine. The machine's needle drills the fabric we guide along an etched line in the needle plate. A solitary fly carves circles just above the machine, mimicking the spin of the spool of linen thread impaled on its metal spike. My father sucks on the stub of an unfiltered cigarette, stretching the smoke sideways from crooked Os that rise into blue air and fade away.

The mountains are on fire.

I make perfect seams in winter-weight wool, cassimere and gabardine, the finest cloth, manufactured here by the Viennese. There's an officers' ball this Saturday. The commandant tells me it'll boost morale.

Someday I'll have to tell Francesca and our children that I made a black evening coat and a white-pleated shirt with ivory buttons while Dreczenca burned. Someday I'll tell them that I was warm and well-fed. Someday I'll explain that Caporetto was a bad dream—that we hadn't meant to surrender but only retreat.

How could it be that handfuls of Austrian soldiers kept hundreds of thousands of Italian prisoners marching meekly two-by-two? True, some of us were *cowards*. Some but not all, as our General Cadorna claimed. We were surrounded, the hills to the south cut off by fire, Dreczenca throwing off red sparks, the bridges blown. So we laid down our rifles and marched.

We marched past an Italian farmer plowing under the golden chaff of winter wheat, his wife hanging sheets in the wind, a chimney puffing smoke. Only after we passed did we see that half of the house was blown away. We crossed the border into Austria. There, the same farmers plowed the same fields, the same smoke curled from the same chimneys, wives hung the same white sheets.

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I thought I'd feel myself passing over the dark line separating one country from another, like a finger running over the edge of the *Grande Carta Topographica,* over the raised border to the place where the vineyards and stone cottages dissolved into a haze of indistinct gray. But I felt only snow caking inside my boots, the same hunger and the same cold, day after day.

I didn't hate the Austrian guards who marched with us. They were children, no more than eighteen. Prisoners' clothing or guards' shoes—I repaired them equally with my smuggled needles, and thread torn from the uniforms of the dead. I made clothing to keep the living alive. And then the commandant offered me this warm hut, hot food, beautiful fabric with which to make him fine clothes. I enclose air with thread. Is there something wrong in that?

Francesca weaves lace from air. I had a ribbon of it tucked into my helmet. At night, before I fall asleep on my cot, I remember its scent—sweet and pure—like bougainvillea.

The lace is gone, and Francesca is a dream.

We're on the hill behind her home. We tumble toward the olive grove and come to rest at the bottom of the hill. We're young, and the burning between us is like the fire on the mountains. Was Dreczenca burning even then?

She says, "Wait."

III. Fever

"*Ha sette,* Mamma. I'm thirsty."

No one here to care for me? Ernestina's bed is empty. Has my sister risen from the dead? Surely she'll come back with water from the well.

Somewhere, the click of rosary beads . . .

"Ernestina? Can it be you?"

Two spokes of the same star, my sister and I. I touch her hair, I touch my hair, our little girls' bodies returned to us.

And here's Mamma by our bed as we lay down to sleep.

—*C'era una volta,* Mamma begins. —Once upon a time, a mother had two daughters. One was bad, and the other was very, very good. The mother tells the bad daughter, Go! Draw a bucket of water from the well.

"But I'm too weak and can't draw the water."

—And so the good daughter goes to the well instead. She doesn't return for the longest time. We despair, the bad daughter and I.

"Is that you, Mamma?"

But Mamma is gone. Faraway, rosary beads click, click, click. Spare my bad daughter, they say.

A wet cloth on my brow to cool this Spanish fever. It's my brother, Antonio, or no, it's Papà. It's Ernestina next to me, laughing, her head propped up on our pillow. She speaks to me in her crystal voice.

—The good daughter goes to the well to draw the bucket of cool spring water. But she's clumsy, this good daughter, her hands always shake, and the bucket falls down, down, down into the well. She's afraid to return to Mamma empty-handed. Her sister is dying, and she needs cool water for the washcloths and the thirst.

"That's not in the story."

—It's my story to tell.

Her voice is a dream of bells.

—And so, the good daughter climbs down the well and finds a long passage with three doors. At the first door, she knocks, and a saint answers. She knows it's a saint because of the bright golden halo in his hands. He polishes his halo and puts it on his head and says, Good daughter, I haven't seen your bucket. So she knocks on the second door, and the devil answers. She knows it's the devil because he has two knobby horns. She asks if he's seen her bucket and the devil replies, If you only help me with these horns, you see, they're very painful . . . But the good daughter knows better than to bargain with the devil.

I touch her, and she breaks in two. I remove my hand slowly and watch as her body knits itself whole.

Ernestina throws back her head and laughs. How is it possible for someone dead to be so beautiful? I touch her, and she breaks in two. I remove my hand slowly and watch as her body knits itself whole.

—And so, the good daughter arrives at the third door. She knocks, though she's given up ever finding her bucket, and she fears she'll be lost forever in this passageway of doors. Lo and behold, who should answer but the Virgin herself? She knows it's the Virgin from her halo, even brighter than the saint's, and the Christ-child himself sleeping in the corner. The good daughter is so astonished that she forgets all about her missing bucket. The Madonna looks weary, so the good daughter asks, Is there anything I can do to help? The Madonna replies, Can you stay with my boy while I visit my cousin Elizabeth? Her son John is quite ill, and I must take some fresh water and this chicken soup to her.

"Mamma's chicken soup? With the tiny bits of carrots and onions?"

—The very thing!

Is that Mamma in the corner? Ernestina wrings a fresh washcloth and wipes my body head to toe, moving slowly as her words move through the air.

—The good daughter agrees to watch over Jesus. She reads to the child and when he cries, she feeds him the soup but eats none herself. When the Madonna returns, she says, For your kindness, I will reward you. Here's your bucket filled with fresh water. When you reach the end of this passage, go out into the darkness and look up into the sky. So the good daughter takes the bucket and makes her way down the long passageway and into the night. She looks up at the sky and just at that moment, the single bright star falls upon her brow. As she nears home, her mother runs down the road to meet her, saying, Good daughter, where have you been, and who put that star on your forehead? Her mother tries to wash the star away, for it's something she doesn't understand. But the star shines even brighter.

Starlight burns my eyes, and then Ernestina is gone, her bed empty, and here's Antonio, there's Papà.

"Where's Mamma?" I ask.

"In the kitchen, praying," Papà says.

Nearby and far away, the shuffle of her rosary beads . . .

Mamma, I confess, I'm the bad daughter who wished for the same things as her sister. I went to the well for water to cool Ernestina's fever. I went to the well but didn't know saint from devil. I left the bucket and ran up into the night and there were no stars, only blackness, and a piece of that blackness fell onto my forehead.

"*Ha sette,*" I whisper, but no one hears me. Mamma won't come, she's afraid of the fever, and now Ernestina has gone to the well, and we don't know when she'll return.

There's Antonio, here's Papà, pressing cool cloths to my brow. Papà opens his mouth to speak, but it's Mamma's voice I hear, low and far away, like funeral bells tolling softly, whispering, "Oh, Madonna! I have loved the wrong daughter."

IV. Vienna

Look at Herr del Sarto, they say, in his black tails and starched white shirt, black silk tie and cummerbund, peering through the tall palace windows. Are we not civilized men? Does he not have a suit that compares to the finest clothing of the *Feldzeugmeister* and *Oberkommandants?* Does he not have permission to mingle freely among our beautiful wives and daughters with their crowns of precious pearls? Does he not drink the same champagne as we do, from the same fluted crystal? Does he not dine on smuggled French foie gras and Russian caviar in the

Hofburg instead of starving in the camp? Why then does he peer through the window rather than join us at the ball?

Does the Italian think he's better than us? It's he who shouldn't be allowed to look upon our daughters. See how he watches the women dancing to the cries of *Walzer! Walzer! Walzer!* Does the dance not take his mind from the troubles of the war for one evening? Does the dance not make him forget his frail mother, worrying rosary after rosary over the fate of her four sons, and the gaping hole in the pale bronze stucco of his mountain home left by the *Jagdgeschwaders,* and San Ponziano blasted open, the statue of the Madonna and child lying on its side amidst fallen stone? Does the dance not instead recall his parents' kisses, fodder for the gossips' gossip, and his Francesca brining olives under the Italian sun?

We celebrate even as our Empire falls in tatters. You see, they say, we're civilized men.

They know he won't run. Where is there to go? And even if he goes there, wherever this "there" is, who'd welcome him? He sees a little boy playing with empty spools of thread, building castles out of air. Is that the same boy now begging in St. Stephansplatz? He sees a young woman, barely twenty, weaving fabric from air, weaving air into kisses, the finest *baci* in the world. Is that the same woman on the steps of St. Stephen's who now tugs at the legs of passersby, crying for news of her missing husband, reconciling herself to the fate of all widows?

Would the widow dance with me? Would she forget her dead husband if I explained how her fair city seduced me with its private places, its shimmering palaces and jeweled churches? Francesca, *carissima,* I was bewitched by the bead of sweat trickling down the nape of her neck. I can see it there, through the tall palace window, a single bead of sweat, just below her diamond hairpins.

V. After

I've kept my hair as it was before Vincenzo left. How many brides honor the memory of before? There's a spot on my shoulder blade, a black mole the size of a bobbin-head. My hair touched this mole the day he left. When Ernestina was alive, she'd pin up my hair in ten layers and cut each one separately, exactly to this spot on my back. She said it was like taming the ocean. When she was done, she'd kiss the top of my head.

"*Belissima,*" she'd say, "there's not enough beauty in the world."

We'd talk while she cut, about Vincenzo, or about her dead Michele. "Michele," she'd say, "was far too gentle for the world. That's why he died."

Ernestina, too, was too gentle for the world. And so she left to be with Michele. This is what I tell myself as I wait for Vincenzo at the dock in Pescara where the soldiers return from the war. Vincenzo isn't gentle. He makes his demands, takes what he wants. I know this, and still I love him. Or perhaps because of this I love him. He survived precisely because he's not gentle. I, too, survived because I'm not gentle or generous or kind.

Yes, he took what he wanted, but my wants had edges—the place where his body crossed over into mine. I said, "Wait." I wanted our union to be more than the hasty civil marriage Mamma arranged the day before Vincenzo shipped out. I wanted our union to be blessed by the Church.

I've imagined many times the moment when he reaches me, standing at the dock. He'll gather my hair along the ends and wrap it three times around his fist. Then he'll pull my head back and

kiss my neck, just here, in the center. The pressure of his lips will stop my breath. This is something I haven't forgotten lying alone in my dark bed for three years—three twists and a kiss, that pause in time.

After Ernestina died, Mamma couldn't be bothered with my hair. If I'd given her the scissors, she'd have cut it straight across my back.

"Vanity," she told me when I once asked for this small favor, "is a bruise you wear inside."

To which I responded by wrapping my hair three times around my fist and pulling so hard a hank tore from its roots. Antonio found me crying. He stood behind me, pinned up my hair in exactly ten layers, and cut each layer so that the curls fell just so.

All this because I promised myself I wouldn't change. But how do you create memories that never existed? Three years Vincenzo has been gone, two years fighting in the mountains, the past year languishing in a cell. I haven't had even a telegram since Caporetto. I picture him counting days with strokes of a sharp stone against concrete. I've spent those same three years making black lace for mourning veils. These are the memories of our "unconsecrated" (Mamma's word) marriage.

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There he is. Vincenzo. Just another Italian soldier descending the ramp from the boat that disgorges the living and the half-dead and the dead.

You're not thin, you're not pale, you're just the same, I say to myself, denying what I can plainly see.

He doesn't come stoop-shouldered or maimed like so many of

the men. Grasping their canes, those men pretend their legs are still there. I can hear their wives' gasps. Each husband's short walk from the gangplank to where his wife stands is enough time for her to summon the other woman, the woman who will dust the prosthetic leg and set it in the corner each night, as if it were a piece of furniture or a holy relic, and then make love to her husband while pretending his ghost limb is real.

The soldiers with two arms crush their wives to their chests. Those with one arm cling lopsidedly to the women who have already begun to drown. The men without arms depend on their wives to hold them. Petty as I am, I'll wonder for the rest of my life what it would be like to make love to one of these half-men.

Vincenzo squeezes me with his good arms until I can't breathe.

"You look well," I gasp, but he says nothing. I try again. "*Carissimo,* my Vincenzo."

"*Indimenticabile,* Francesca," he replies. Unforgettable.

These words will do. He imagines, already, my flesh against his.

I've brought my bicycle to the dock. Mamma has told me that a lady in a skirt does not ride a bicycle, so I've worn a pair of Antonio's pants under my dress.

"Would you like a ride, soldier?" I say, and sweep my hand over the bicycle at our feet.

He smiles at me—same teeth, same lips, same dimple in his chin—then wraps my hair into his fist and presses his fist against my back until I wince. He does this, and this alone, and then releases me. I'm foolish enough to believe there's still the promise of stop-time.

Righting the bicycle, I straddle the crossbar. He lets his pack slide from his shoulders to the ground, mounts the bicycle behind

me, and wraps my body between his thighs. I put my right foot on one pedal and push hard, then lift my left foot and begin a slow circling. The bicycle wobbles as I steer around couples holding onto each other, children wiping runny noses, birds scavenging in the dirt. We're on the verge of falling, always on the verge of falling through the new world. And then we're free of the crowds, and the bicycle gathers speed down the little slope that leads away from the dock. The air lifts my hair into his face. I can feel his breath on the nape of my neck.

Soon, I think, in six hours or six months or six years, we'll be home. ■ ■ ■