THE MOON AND THE BONFIRES

CESARE PAVESE

TRANSLATED BY
R. W. FLINT

INTRODUCTION BY
MARK RUDMAN

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CESARE PAVESE (1908–1950) was born on his family's vacation farm in the country outside of Turin in northern Italy. He graduated from the University of Turin, where he wrote a thesis on Walt Whitman, beginning a continuing engagement with English-language literature that was to lead to his influential translations of *Moby-Dick*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Three Lives*, and *Moll Flanders*, among other works. Briefly exiled by the Fascist regime to Calabria in 1935, Pavese returned to Turin to work for the new publishing house of Giulio Einaudi, where he eventually became the editorial director. In 1936 he published a book of poems, *Lavorare stanca* (*Hard Labor*), and then turned to writing novels and short stories. Pavese won the Strega Prize for fiction, Italy's most prestigious award, for *The Moon and the Bonfires* in 1950. Later the same year, after a brief affair with an American actress, he committed suicide. Pavese's posthumous publications include his celebrated diaries, essays on American literature, and a second collection of poems, entitled *Verrà la morte e avrà i tuoi occhi* (Death Will Come and Will Have Your Eyes). *The Selected Works of Cesare Pavese*, including the novels *The Beach*, *The House on the Hill*, *Among Women Only*, and *The Devil in the Hills*, is also published by NYRB Classics.

MARK RUDMAN is the author of seven books of poetry and three books of prose. His poetic trilogy *The Millennium Hotel*, *Provoked in Venice*, and *Rider* received the National Book Critics Circle Award. *The Couple* is his most recent collection of poems.

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INTRODUCTION

Each one of Pavese's novels revolves around a hidden theme, something unsaid which is the real thing he wants to say and which can be expressed only by not mentioning it.

—ITALO CALVINO

1.

Cesare Pavese's *The Moon and the Bonfires* may be the most American novel ever written in a foreign language.

Pavese, one of the finest Italian writers of the twentieth century, was born in 1908 in Santo Stefano Belbo in the Langhe hills of Lower Piedmont, which is the setting of this novel. No one has better conveyed the pleasures of walking in the hills, alone, or with a dog, or a friend, or a lover. Raised in Turin, he spent his vacations on his parents' farm.

When Pavese was six, his father died from an incurable brain tumor. His mother, who had lost three children, assumed a harsh authoritarian role. His father's absence and his mother's coldness made him withdraw. The curious thing about Pavese, with his intense sense of inner solitude, is that he never became a recluse:

> In the days when Italian prose was "an extended conversation with itself" and poetry was "a suffered silence," I was conversing, in both poetry and prose, with peasants, working men and women, sand-diggers, prostitutes, convicts, and kids. I say this with no idea of

> boasting. I liked those people then, I like them now. They were like me.

But he was often unreachable in the presence of his friends and the people who loved him, as his friend Natalia Ginzburg attests:

> Sometimes, during the evening, he would come in search of us; then he just sat, pale, with his scarf about his neck, twisting strands of hair around his fingers or crumpling a piece of paper; throughout the whole evening he would not say a single word, or answer any of our questions. Suddenly, at last, he would snatch up his overcoat and leave.

What Pavese and the narrator of *The Moon and the Bonfires* have in common is a sense of exclusion, a sense of internal exile that finds its counterpoint in physical exile: in the 1930s Pavese was briefly exiled to Calabria for anti-Fascist activities; in the book the narrator goes into self-imposed exile to America to escape the Fascists who are hot on his heels.

Pavese discovered his affinity with America and American literature at the University of Turin, where he wrote a thesis on Walt Whitman. For most of his adult life he worked for the Turin publisher Einaudi as an editor and translator, bringing established classics like *Moll Flanders* and *David Copperfield* into Italian. His masterful translation of *Moby-Dick* became his touchstone, and he found his niche as the preeminent Italian translator of American literature.

The contemporary authors Pavese translated—Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, and John Dos Passos—helped him to throw out the apparatus of the naturalistic novel (with its reliance on furniture and cause and effect), and to develop a style of his own that was both plainspoken and lyrical. He became an Americanist, a student of idioms and slang. I noticed

a connection between the barn-burning section of *The Moon and the Bonfires* and William Faulkner's *The Hamlet* before I discovered that this was the final novel that Pavese translated; Faulkner's backwater know-nothings and operators are an American counterpoint to the have-nots of the impoverished, rural Italian setting in *Moon*.

There is a disquieting European postwar ambiance to *Moon* that is reminiscent of another key work written in 1949: *Waiting for Godot*. American readers not familiar with Pavese's fiction are probably acquainted with the Pavesian mood through Antonioni's films, such as *Il Grido* and *L'Avventura*. Curiously, one of Antonioni's best (and least-shown films), *Le Amiche*, was adapted from Pavese's penultimate novel, known in English as *Among Women Only*.

During his short life, Pavese produced a diverse body of work and distinguished himself brilliantly in many genres: poetry (*Hard Labor*), fiction (short stories, novellas, and novels), dialogues (*Dialogues with Leucò*), and the diary (*The Burning Brand*, published posthumously). For every book he wrote—even the diary—he had a program, a defined intention. He was always the visionary realist. "A true revelation," he claims in his foreword to *Dialogues with Leucò*, "can only emerge from stubborn concentration on a single problem. I have nothing in common with experimentalists, adventurers, with those who travel in strange regions. The surest, and the quickest, way for us to arouse the sense of wonder is to stare, unafraid, at a single object." He was never an aficionado of spontaneity and appeared to exhaust every genre he undertook. There is something inherently dark about a writer going to the end of an idea; because the end of that idea is usually death. This sense of exhausting a form is nowhere more evident than in *The Moon and the Bonfires*.

Knowing that Pavese committed suicide by an overdose of sleeping pills in August of 1950, four months after the novel was published, interferes with our ability to read both this

and his other books simply as works of literature. It's hard not to keep an eye peeled and an ear to the ground for signs that predict his demise. There was a systematic quality to his self-destruction. He was as lucid about his passion for suicide as he was about the strategy he devised for every book. He wasn't addicted to any substance; he was addicted to love. Neil Young captures this malaise in a few lines: "I fell in love with the actress / She was playing a part that I could understand"; and these lyrics are like an epitaph to Pavese's doomed love affair with the blond American film actress Constance Dowling, which sent him into his final deadly tailspin. He sought to control his own future at every turn and ultimately his destiny. It's said that he was always playing at, if not threatening, suicide, like someone who keeps a revolver with one bullet in the chamber on his desk to remind himself that he can end it at any time. Playing—even deadly playfulness—demands letting go of the past and the future and attending fully to the present. I think he knew he couldn't keep from killing himself much longer when he began *The Moon and the Bonfires* and that this knowledge helped him exorcise his fear of failure and allowed him to write with the abandon of one who has nothing to lose. And *Moon*, with its awesome transformations of American sources, its barn burnings, soccer games, horse races, and distinctive eccentrics, is Pavese's most demonically playful book.

2.

Pavese's poetics of exclusion reached a culmination in *The Moon and the Bonfires*. The novel takes place after the Second World War, when the narrator returns from America, where he has made a fortune, to Santo Stefano Belbo, the village where he grew up, in a quest to reunite himself with the landscape of his childhood and peasant roots. A foundling, a bastard, who owes his existence to a family that took him in

out of desperation for a government stipend, he is like a displaced person who has little reason to be sentimental about his past. And yet he registers horror at the loss of familiar landmarks: houses burned down, the hills leveled, the rows of hazel cut, the rye fields gone, the pine tree by the gate at the Mora cut down by the nefarious efficiency expert Nicoletto because "beggars used to stand in its shadows and beg . . . He wasn't satisfied with eating up half the property. He didn't even want a poor man to stop in its shade." Sentence after sentence registers absence: what was no longer is. Presence exists mainly in memory. The only absolute is sadness.

The plot of *The Moon and the Bonfires* turns on a devastating sequence: a brutal murder/suicide and the burning of the barn where the narrator lived as a child. This incident ignites early memories. When Padrino, his adoptive father, sold his farm, the narrator, who was thirteen, went to live and work at the Mora, a larger farm across the river. There he met another farmhand, Nuto, whom he came to idolize, and Irene, Silvia, and Santina, the beautiful daughters of his master, Sor Matteo.

The foundling is a kind of minus man. He does not receive a salary for his labor, only his board; his room is among the animals in the barn. He has no status; he doesn't even merit a name. But his childhood nickname, "Eel" (given to him affectionately by Sor Matteo's wife, Emilia), gives us a sense of his fertility, toughness, resilience, and ability to home from far away. As in Eugenio Montale's poem "The Eel," written at the same time as *Moon*, the image of the eel signifies a fusion of matter and spirit and embodies what is necessary to survive in a dark time: to remain a "green soul seeking / life where there's nothing but stinging / drought, desolation" (translation by William Arrowsmith).

In any case, what first strikes the reader of *The Moon and the Bonfires* is not the narrator but his old friend Nuto, who is now regarded as an exemplary figure. Nuto is full of re-

solve: "Nuto is Nuto, and knows better than I do what is right." For a while, he dominates the book oppressively. He is the introvert's nightmare. The first time I tried to read *Moon* years ago, I threw it down midway because I couldn't bear to have the narrator defer to him one more time. I found him migrainously rigid, stolid, retrograde, cowardly, bullying. Nuto is one of those people whom everybody likes, or so you're told when you move to a small town. If your house is burning down he'll come with a bucket. He plays the clarinet in the local band. He knows how things are done. If you're having a problem with your well or a more delicate decision, ask Nuto. He'll set you straight. You exchange waves at soccer games. It's a sign—he accepts you.

Nuto, a partisan during the war, now the village Marxist, retains a luster of heroism. He can know his own mind because he has never questioned the basic tenets of his existence and has always been rooted in a place. The narrator idealizes his stolidity: "Something has also happened to the one who never moved, a destiny—that idea of his that things must be understood, made better, that the world is badly made and it's in everyone's interest to change it."

There is an artful mendacity in the presentation of Nuto. He is a false center, a conjurer's trick, a marker to throw you off the path. As *The Moon and the Bonfires* proceeds, Nuto is increasingly exposed, his limitations defined. He is enormously tight-lipped; the narrator finds it difficult to pry the truth out of him, but it becomes evident that his reticence is a defense that enables him to go on. His moral stance turns out to be far less convincing or exhilarating than the electric personality of Santina—the problematic heroine. And though he may take up a lot of space, he is not as vivid, or rounded, to use E. M. Forster's term, as some of the more minor characters.

Nuto was modeled on Pavese's friend Pino Scaglione, whom Pavese had known all his life, had kept in touch with, and used as his regional informant for the book. He is a

demonstration of a universal principle, a familiar pattern, of what I call the "everything-nothing syndrome"—the human tendency to project one's fantasy of wholeness onto others. And what's annoying is not Nuto but the *I*'s idealization of him. The narrator's relentless search for the truth about his past leads not to a solution to his deracinated condition, but to an old crime: the brutal murder of Santina, the youngest daughter of Sor Matteo, by the partisans toward the end of the war. The crime of this ostensibly positive hero was one of omission: Nuto's attitude about women's roles tragically overrode the exigencies of the moment—never mind that Santina fought all night with the partisans in the hills, yelling to the Fascists that she knew every one of them and that they didn't scare her! Or that she put herself at risk to save Nuto's life several times. Judgment was not Santina's strong point; everyone knew she needed guidance. Had he offered it, she might have become a hero.

Nuto has his roots in the nineteenth century; the narrator has his roots in the twenty-first. Nuto may be an exemplary character, but the example he sets is the wrong one. And maybe that's why he's so exasperating—exasperating enough to cause several of Pavese's most astute critics, including R. W. Flint, to have doubts about this novel, celebrated though it is. Critics for whom Pavese often can do no wrong have been quick to find flaws in *The Moon and the Bonfires*. I don't agree with their caviling, but even if they were right, what could be more fitting than if *Moon* were the foundling, the unwanted child, among Pavese's mature works?

3.

What makes Pavese particularly wonderful is that the difficulty of his work has nothing to do with any stylistic idiosyncrasy. Although a few of the events take place in the present (the barn burning, the discovery of the corpses on

the hillside), the main action of the book comes from the narrator's drawing out of Nuto the terrible details of what happened to Santina.

Pavese, self-described man alone, *l'uomo solo*, was always on the outside looking out. The *I* is like one of Ovid's hunters spying on women when they're literally letting their hair down. Pavese is the most shocking of erotic writers. His erotic touches are telescoped, precise, evocative, like Thomas Wyatt's description of his mistress "with naked foote, stalking in my chamber." When the narrator falls into a reverie over Sor Matteo's older daughters, Silvia and Irene, Pavese doesn't give you naked breasts and sex, but glances, glimpses that take you out of yourself to a place where desire and fear are wonderfully and horribly mingled:

> I didn't say anything, and sometimes on summer days, sitting by the Belbo, I thought about Silvia. Irene was so blond that I didn't dare think about her. But one day, when Irene had come to let Santina play in the sand and no one else was there, I watched them run and stop by the water. I was hiding behind an alder bush. Santina shouted and pointed to something on the opposite bank. And then Irene put down her book, bent over, took off her shoes and stockings, and, blond as she was with her white legs, lifted her skirt up to her knees and waded in.

What is remarkable here is not only the charged, delicate eroticism of the description, but also the way that Pavese gives us, in a phrase, and with extraordinary tenderness and sensitivity, Santina's willfulness. What is that something on the opposite bank if not a foreshadowing of Santina's desire to know what's on the other side? The magnetic girl is like a blond Holly Golightly who gets in over her head in the tense political situation during the war. She grows up to be a knock-

out who thrives on men's attention. Sex is her métier. It's not in her nature to register that acts have repercussions—there's danger in being a courier, a go-between. The narrator gradually elicits from Nuto that she felt confined at the Mora, disgusted with her uncle Nicoletto, and escaped to Canelli ("the world") where she becomes a schoolteacher, "but being the kind of girl she was . . . found work at Fascist headquarters. . . ." It's her chance to live the high life, ride in open cars with the wind in her hair, and dine in the villas of the rich. "What drove her," Italo Calvino wrote in his essay "Pavese and Human Sacrifice," "was an obscure desire to surrender herself to the abyss of war." But in wartime Italy nothing is neutral, everyone must be hunted down.

The sudden reversal at the end, when Nuto at last reveals that Baracca, the local leader of the partisans, suspected Santina of being a spy, and ordered her execution, is shocking and should cause the reader to cry out, like the chorus of a Greek tragedy. We are the victims of false clues and a deceptively desultory style. We are thrown abruptly into a world of intrigue—forced to confront an atavistic, primitive, irremediable reality—and we aren't prepared for anything so intense. Pavese was steeped in folklore, with a special interest in the Aztecs, and the burning of Santina's body, which leaves a scar on the hillside like the bed of a bonfire, is like a ritual sacrifice. The reason she is burned rather than buried after her execution is unspeakably horrible: she cast such a spell over men while alive that too many would want to possess her; someone would dig up her body if she were merely covered with dirt.

4.

Pavese's *I* is the *not-I*. This *not-I* persisted until there was nothing left. *The Moon and the Bonfires* is a book about a man who is utterly trapped in the past—a past that never

held any interest or possibility for him. He gets away, spending twenty years in America, but can't stay away; he comes back, hoping to find someone who will give him a template for a viable existence in his native land. He's a fluid personage—the bastard has few boundaries—capable of interacting with people no matter where they stand in the world, even if their footing is less solid than his own. Eel is the only one who can identify with the plight of the lame boy Cinto, who was orphaned when his father set fire to the barn. The narrator thinks the past holds a secret that will unlock the mystery of his identity. He acts like he's trying to put together the pieces of a puzzle. "I've always noticed that if you give them enough time people will come clean," he says of Nuto. In the end he is led almost inexorably to witness the scar of a terrible primal scene.

Pavese found a style he could live with by pretending to himself that he was an American writer. In this way he introduced a new vernacular pitch into his native language. *The Moon and the Bonfires* is spare and exquisitely lyrical by turns—especially when the narrator moves backward in time:

> But how often I'd seen the noisy carts go by, crammed full of women and boys on their way to the fair, to the merry-go-rounds of Castiglione, Cossano, Campetto, everywhere, and I was staying behind with Giulia and Angiolina under the hazel trees or the fig tree or by the side of the bridge, those long summer evenings, looking always at the same vineyards and sky. And then at night you could hear them coming home along the road, singing, laughing, shouting to each other across the Belbo. On evenings like that, a light, a bonfire seen on a distant hill, would make me cry out and roll on the ground because I was poor, because I was a boy, because I was nothing. I was almost happy when a thunder-

> storm, a real summer disaster, blew up and drenched their party. But now, just thinking about them, I was missing those times and wanting them back.

The narrator is both afflicted with nostalgia for, and suspicious of, a life shorn of the burden of self-consciousness.

In Pavese's seamless narrative, every sentence stands in isolation from the one that precedes it and the one that will follow. The pause between each sentence is weighted. He comes as close as possible, without disjointedness, to having each sentence be a seminal and terminal act:

> It was cold, a dry, dusty cold, and the country was empty. Country was saying too much. As far as you could see, a gray stretch of thorny sand and little mounds that weren't hills, and the power line. . . .
>
> There was time to study every stone in the gravel along the tracks, every tie, the down of a dry thistle, the fat stems of two cacti in the hollow below the road.

The resistance to flow is what gives Pavese's determinedly stark prose its acute impact. The book is studded with arresting images: young men "told stories as big as houses"; "walking the streets you see papers in people's hands as black with headlines as a thunderstorm."

The lyrical passages in *Moon* that engage nature take place when the *I* is alone, as if alone on stage, soliloquizing. (Pavese claimed that Shakespeare was an even greater influence on his work than *Moby-Dick*.) These bursts of pure poetry are mournful and elegiac. The foundling, who left the village out of a "rage at being nobody . . . to come home after everyone had given me up for dead," notices everything. He is empathetic where others are contemptuous, but there is always something separating him from the world he sees so clearly. The narrator's quest to connect with his origins is futile. "It

looked like a destiny. Several times I wondered why, out of so many people once alive, only Nuto and I should be left, why exactly us." If the foundling is not at home in either the city or the country, he can contemplate sheer existence:

> Before returning to Oakland that night I went to smoke a cigarette on the grass of the empty embankment, far from the road and the cars. There was no moon but an ocean of stars, as many as the voices of the tree-frogs and crickets. That night, even if Nora had let herself be tumbled on the grass, it wouldn't have satisfied me. The tree frogs wouldn't have stopped their screeching and the cars wouldn't have slowed in their race down the hill and America wouldn't have ended in that highway, in those cities sparkling along the coast. . . . Bacon and eggs, good pay, oranges as big as watermelons, these were nothing, were like those crickets and tree frogs. Was it worth it to have come? Where could I go now? Throw myself off the breakwater?

The prolonged *frisson* the American reader experiences while reading Pavese's work derives from encountering exotic, unfamiliar landscapes, characters, and situations in a downbeat, colloquial style that is eerily familiar. His impersonations of such hard-boiled American writers as Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Chandler, and James M. Cain are matched here by R. W. Flint's relaxed but precise impersonation of Pavese's impersonations. The dialogue between cultures, and the reluctant eloquence of Flint's English as it details the dry, hilly landscapes of Northern Italy and Northern California, make the book deepen upon each reading:

> Well, it was a big country, there was some of it for everyone. There were women, there was land, there was money. But nobody had enough, nobody stopped

> no matter how much he had, and the fields, even the vineyards, looked like public gardens, fake flower beds like those at railway stations, or else wilderness, burned-over land, mountains of slag. It wasn't a country where you could resign yourself, rest your head and say to others: "For better or worse, you know me. For better or worse, let me live." That was the frightening part. Even among themselves they didn't know each other; you crossed those mountains and saw at every turn in the road that no one had ever stopped there, no one had ever touched them with his hands. So they beat up drunks, threw them in jail, left them for dead. And it wasn't only liquor that made them ugly, it was also bad-tempered women. A day would come when just to touch something, to make himself known, a man would strangle a woman, shoot her in her sleep, crack her head open with a monkey wrench.

All of Pavese's writing, notably *Hard Labor* and *The Devil in the Hills*, is a taut conversation between the city and the country. Pavese never went to America and his rendition of the West in *The Moon and the Bonfires* is a somewhat fantastical, yet believable, concoction derived in large part from movies and the books he translated. The bleak California desert we encounter here seems a deliberate pastiche of his American sources, but Pavese's desultory style creates a delectable tension: the more low-key the tone, the greater the capacity to shock. The master stroke is that the emptiness and unreality of the American scenes correspond to Eel's displaced psyche—almost a projection of his lack of identity, his permanently displaced *I*.

The tone of *The Moon and the Bonfires* is both epic and intimate. The truths are uncovered as the story is told; Pavese's narrative form antedates the psychological novel and looks beyond it; he is more interested in action than introspection.

And his connection to ancient and archaic energies gives his quiet, dry, uninflected style its power to shake us to the root. In *The Moon and the Bonfires* as in *Hard Labor*, Pavese is the poet of the disenfranchised, whom Malcolm Lowry called "those who have nobody them with." Yet this chronicle of violence and loss has a purity of art, an objectivity, that turns our attention to something beyond the human predicament. The images of moon and bonfire bring to mind the pattern of the seasons, repetition, and ritual, but the novel is symbolic only on the surface. It is permeated by a desire for a conflagration that will wipe the slate clean "for people to begin again." Pavese didn't write in deference to any preexisting concept as to what constituted a poem or a novel. The moon and the bonfires, the seasons, the animals, the laborers: what he deferred to was the world.

—MARK RUDMAN

THE MOON AND THE BONFIRES

1

I HAD A reason for coming back to this town, here instead of to Canelli, Barbaresco or Alba. I'm almost sure I wasn't born here. I don't know where I was born. There isn't a house or a piece of land or any bones in this part of the world about which I could say, "This is what I was before I was born." I don't know if I come from the hill or the valley, from the woods or from a house with balconies. The girl who left me on the cathedral steps at Alba, maybe she wasn't a country girl at all, maybe her parents owned a big city house, or I might have been brought there in a grape basket by two poor women from Monticello, from Neive or—why not?—from Cravanzana. Who can say from what flesh I was made? I've traveled the world enough to know that all flesh is good and all of it worth the same, but this is why a man gets tired and wants to put down roots, wants to have some land and a town, so his flesh will mean something and last a little longer than the common round of seasons.

If I grew up in this town, I owe it to Virgilia and Padrino, both of them gone now, even if they took me in and raised me only because the foundling hospital at Alessandria paid them for it by the month. Forty years ago there were people on these hills wretched enough to saddle themselves with a bastard from the hospital, in addition to the children they already had, just to lay eyes on a piece of silver. Someone might take a little girl to make a servant out of her later and order her around more easily. Virgilia wanted me because she already had two girls, and when I'd grown a little they hoped to

set themselves up on a big farm where we all would work and be well-off. In those days Padrino had his hut at Gaminella—two rooms and a barn—the goat, and that bank of hazel trees. I grew up with the girls, we stole each other's polenta, we slept together on the same straw mattress. Angiolina, the biggest, was a year older than me and it was only by chance, when I was ten, the winter Virgilia died, that I learned I wasn't her brother. After that winter wise little Angiolina had to stop running with us along the bank and through the woods. She took care of the house, made the bread and goat cheese, went to the town hall herself to collect my piece of silver. I used to brag to Giulia about being worth five lire; I told her that she brought us nothing and I asked Padrino why we didn't take in more bastards.

I knew that we were miserably poor, because only the very poor took in bastards from the hospital. At first, when I ran to school and the others called me bastard, I used to think it was a word like coward or tramp, and I gave them as good as I got. But I was already a big boy and the town hall wasn't paying the five lire anymore and I still hadn't understood that not being Padrino and Virgilia's son meant that I hadn't been born in Gaminella, that I hadn't popped out from under the hazel trees or out of our goat's ear like the girls.

When I first came back to town last year, I went to see the hazel trees again, half ashamed of myself for doing it. The hill of Gaminella, a long unbroken slope of vineyards and terraces, so gentle a rise that you can't see the top when you look up—and on top, wherever it is, are more vineyards, more woods, more paths—Gaminella looked skinned by the winter, the earth and trees scraped naked. I could see it plainly in the dry light, its gigantic mass falling off toward Canelli where our valley ends. Taking the dirt road along the Belbo river I came to the railing of the little bridge and the canebrake. Up on the bank I could see the heavy blackened stones of the hut wall, the twisted fig tree and the empty little win-

dow, and I thought of those terrible winters. But around the house the land and the trees had changed; the clump of hazels was gone, turned into corn stubble. An ox was lowing from the barn, and I could smell manure in the evening cold.

Whoever was living there now couldn't be as beggarly poor as we had been. I'd always expected something like that, or else that the hut had fallen to ruin. How often I'd imagined myself leaning on the railing of the bridge and wondering how it had been possible to spend so many years in that hole, on those few paths, pasturing the goat and hunting for apples down the riverbank, sure that the world ended at the turn of the road where it hung steeply over the Belbo. But I never expected to find the hazel trees gone. That meant that everything was finished. The change disappointed me so much that I didn't call out, didn't go into the yard. I saw in a flash what it meant not to have been born in a place, not to have it in your blood, not to have lived there with the old people, already half buried, not to care about any change in the planting. There were still some clusters of hazel trees on the hills, of course; I could still go and recover myself in them. If I'd owned this piece of riverbank I might well have cleared it and planted grain; but now it affected me like those rooms you rent in the city and live in for a day or for years and then when you move they stay behind, empty, dead, disposable shells.

When I turned my back on Gaminella that evening I was lucky to have the hill of Salto in front of me, across the Belbo, with its ridges and broad meadows disappearing over the top. And the lower slopes of this hill were also bare vineyards, cut through by terraces and bushy borders, clumps of trees, paths, scattered farmhouses, looking the same as I'd seen them, day after day, year after year, when I sat on the beam behind the hut or on the railing of the bridge.

Then, all those years before I was drafted into the army, when I was a farmhand at the Mora in the rich bottomland beyond the Belbo, and Padrino had sold out and gone to live

with his daughters at Cossano, all those years I only had to look up from the fields to see the vineyards of Salto under the sky, and these, too, sloped down to Canelli in the direction of the railway line and the train that ran along the Belbo, morning and evening, making me think of wonders, of railway stations and cities.

That's how it was: for a long time I'd thought that this place, where I hadn't been born, was the whole world. Now that I've really seen the world and know that it's made up of many little villages and towns, I'm not sure that I was so wrong as a boy. A man travels by sea and land as the older boys of my day went to nearby village fairs and danced, drank, and brawled, carrying home the banner and bloody knuckles. They grow grapes and sell them at Canelli, they dig truffles and take them to Alba. There is Nuto, my friend from Salto, who supplies the whole valley as far as Camo with wine tubs and presses. What does it mean? One needs a town, if only for the pleasure of leaving it. A town means not being alone, knowing that in the people, the trees, the soil, there is something of yourself, that even when you're not there it stays and waits for you. But it isn't easy to live there and not be restless. I've kept an eye on the place for a year now and go up there from Genoa whenever I can, but it escapes me. With time and experience you understand these things. Is it possible that at forty, and with all I've seen of the world, that I still don't know what my native town is?

There's something I don't understand. Everyone here seems to think that I've come back to buy myself a house; they call me "the American" and show me their daughters. For a man who left without owning so much as a surname I ought to be pleased, and in fact I am. But it's not enough. I like Genoa, I like to know that the world is round and to have one foot always on the gangplank. Ever since I was a boy, leaning on a shovel at the Mora gate and listening to the talk of loafers along the road, the little hills of Canelli have been my door to

the world. Nuto, unlike me, has never gone far from Salto; he says that to live a real life in this valley you should never leave it. He says this, he who from the time he could play a clarinet used to follow the band beyond Canelli, as far as Spigno, as far as Ovada, far to the east. We talk about it every so often, and he laughs.

2

THIS SUMMER I stayed at the Angelo Hotel on the town piazza. Nobody recognized me, I've grown so big and fat. Nor did I recognize anyone in town. In my day we seldom went up there. We used to live on the road, along the paths, on the threshing floors. The town is far up the valley, and the water of the Belbo flows in front of the church a good half hour before it widens below my hills.

I'd come there to rest for a couple of weeks, and it happened to be mid-August, the Feast of the Madonna. So much the better: even a negro would have passed unnoticed in the coming and going of strangers, the confusion and racket of the piazza. I'd listened to howling, singing, soccer playing; with darkness came fireworks and firecrackers; they drank, raised the devil, had a procession. All night long for three nights there was dancing in the piazza and you could hear the carnival cars, the tin horns, the crack of air rifles. The same noises, same wine, same faces of long before. Small boys running between your legs, big boys in their red neckerchiefs, yokes of oxen, perfume, sweat, thick stockings on women's sunburned legs—everything was the same. And the pleasures, the tragedies, the promises made along the banks of the Belbo. Once—and this much had changed—with a handful of coins from my first pay I'd thrown myself into the fair, into the shooting galleries and swings. We'd pulled the girls' pigtails and made them cry. But none of us knew yet why men and women, adolescents with slicked-down hair and proud young girls, would bait each other, wrestle, laugh in each

other's faces, and dance together. What had happened was that now I knew: those other times were over. I'd left the valley when I was just beginning to know. Nuto, who'd stayed behind, Nuto the carpenter of Salto, my accomplice on our first flights to Canelli, had played the clarinet for the next ten years at all the festivals, at all the dances in the valley. For him the world had been one long ten-year festival. He knew all the great drinkers, acrobats, and country pleasures.

This last year every time I've come to town I've gone to see him. His house is halfway up the Salto hill, just off the open highway. There's a smell of fresh-sawn wood, of flowers and shavings. To me, raised in a hut and a barnyard, Nuto's house was another world. I was working at the Mora then and the Salto was the smell of the road, of the players in the band, of the villas of Canelli where I'd never been.

Nuto is married now, a grown man who works and gives work. His house is still the same and smells of geraniums and oleanders in the sun; he has pots of them in the windows and out in front. His clarinet hangs outside the clothes closet; you walk on shavings; they throw basketsfull of them into the wooded bank below the Salto—a bank of acacias, ferns, and alders, always dry in summer.

Nuto told me he had to make up his mind—either a carpenter or a musician—and so, after ten years of festivals, he put his clarinet away when his father died. When I told him where I'd been, he said he already knew something about it from people in Genoa, and now they were saying in town that before I left I'd found a pot of gold under one of the piers of the bridge.

We joked about it. "Maybe now," I said, "even my father will show up."

"Your father," he said, "is you."

"In America," I told him, "the beauty of it is, they're all bastards."

"That's something, too, that ought to be fixed," Nuto said.

"Why should there be people with no name or home? Aren't we all men?"

"Leave things alone. I came through, even without a name."

"You came through," Nuto said, "and now nobody dares say the word to your face—but the ones who haven't? You don't know how many hopeless cases there still are in these hills. When I went around with the band, everywhere we'd see idiots, halfwits, fortune-telling bastards begging at the kitchen doors. Drunkards' children and ignorant serving girls forced to live on crusts and cabbage stalks. There were even people who made fun of them. You came through," Nuto said, "because for good or evil you found a home. Padrino half starved you, but you ate. I don't need to tell you that the others need help if they're going to make it."

I like talking to Nuto, now that we're men and know each other; but before, when I was living at the Mora and doing farm work, he was three years older and could already whistle and play the guitar. People came to see and hear him, he argued with the grown-ups, with us boys, winked at the women. I was already following him around, and sometimes I'd run away from the farm to walk along the bank with him or into the Belbo, to hunt for nests. He'd tell me how to act if I wanted to be respected at the Mora; then, in the evening, he'd come into the yard to sit up late with the rest of us on the farm.

And now he was telling me about his life in the band. The towns and villages where he'd played were all around us, clear to see and wooded in the daytime, like nests of stars in a black sky at night. He and the other players, whom he used to train himself under an open shed by the railway station on Saturday night, would arrive at the fair, fresh and eager, then for the next two or three days they'd never close an eye or a mouth—down the clarinet up the wineglass, down the glass up the fork, then the clarinet again, the cornet, the trumpet; another snack, another drink and a solo, then lunch, a big dinner and awake until morning. There were fairs, processions,

weddings, there were contests with rival bands. The morning of the second or third day they'd stumble wild-eyed off the platform, then the pleasure of splashing their faces in a pail of water and maybe dropping on the grass of those fields, among the carts and wagons and the ox and horse manure.

"Who used to pay?" I asked him. The town councils, the families, the big shots—everybody. And it was always the same crowd, he said, who came to eat.

What they ate you had to hear to believe. I remembered the dinners they told us about at the Mora, dinners of other places and other times. But the dishes were always the same; to hear them again was like being back in the Mora kitchen, watching the women grate cheese and make stuffing and pasta, lift lids off pots and blow up the fire. That flavor came back in my mouth and I heard the crack of split dry vine branches.

"You had a passion for it," I said. "Why did you stop? Because your father died?"

And Nuto said that, first of all, a musician's life brings in little money, and then there's all that waste and never knowing exactly who was going to pay, and finally disgust.

"Then there was the war," he said. "Maybe the girls still had itchy legs, but who'd take them dancing? People had other pleasures during the war.

"Still, I like music," Nuto went on, thinking it over. "The only trouble is, it's a bad master . . . Becomes a vice, you have to stop. My father used to say that women were the better vice . . . "

"True," I said. "How were you with the women? You used to like them once. They all came to the dances."

Nuto has a way of laughing and whistling at the same time, even when he's serious.

"Didn't you supply the foundling hospital at Alessandria?"

"I hope not," he said. "For every one that's like you, how many pathetic cases."

Then he said that of the two, women and music, he preferred music. To make up a group, the way it sometimes happened, on nights when they came home late, and to play and play, he and the cornet and the mandolin, down the dark road, far from the houses, far from women and the dogs that answer you like madmen—to play like that.

"I never did any serenading," he said. "If a girl's good-looking, it's not music she wants. She wants to cut a figure with her friends, wants her man. I never met a girl who knew what playing is . . . "

Nuto saw that I was laughing and said quickly, "I do remember one. I had a musician, Arboreto, who played the oboe. He serenaded so often that we used to say: 'Those two don't even talk, they play . . . ' "

We had these discussions along the highway or drinking a glass of wine at his window, and below us was the Belbo plain, the aspens marking that thread of water and, in front, the big hill of Gaminella, all vineyards and overgrown terraces. How long had it been since I'd drunk that wine?

"Have I told you yet," I said to Nuto, "that Cola wants to sell?"

"Only his land?" he said. "Watch out or he'll sell you his bed, too."

"Straw or feathers?" I said through my teeth. "I'm an old man."

"All feathers turn into straw," Nuto said. Then he asked, "Have you gone to have a look at the Mora yet?"

As a matter of fact, I hadn't gone. It was only a few steps from the house on Salto and I hadn't gone. I knew that the old man, his daughters, the boys, the servants were all scattered, gone, some dead, some far away. Only Nicoletto was still there, that dim-witted nephew who used to shout bastard at me so often and stamp his feet, and half the property was sold.

I said, "Someday I'll go. I've come home."

3

EVEN IN America I'd had fresh news of Nuto the musician—how many years ago?—before I'd had any idea of coming back, when I'd quit the railroad gang and going from station to station had reached California, and, seeing those long hills under the sun, had said: "I'm at home." Even America ended in the sea, and this time there was no sense in shipping out again, so I stayed there among the pine trees and the vineyards. "Me, with a hoe in my hands," I thought, "how they'd laugh at home." But you don't hoe in California. It's more like being a gardener with us. I met some Piedmontese there and was bored; it wasn't worth coming all that distance to see people like me, who gave me dirty looks besides. I quit the farm country and took a job as a milkman in Oakland. At night, after you'd crossed the saltwater bay, you could see the streetlights of San Francisco. I went over there, starved for a month, and when they let me out of jail I was about ready to envy the Chinese. Now I wondered if it was worth the trouble to cross the world to see anybody at all. I went back to the hills.

I'd been living there for a while and had found myself a girl; I stopped liking her as soon as we'd begun working together in a diner on the Cerrito road. She came so often to pick me up at the door that they made her the cashier, and now she was watching me all day across the counter while I fried the bacon and filled glasses. When I left in the evening she'd catch up with me, her high heels rapping the asphalt, would grab my arm and want to stop a car and hitch a ride to

the sea or the movies. Just beyond the diner's lights we'd be alone together under the stars in an uproar of crickets and tree frogs. I'd have liked to take her into the fields among the apple trees or bushes or just on the short grass of the hillside, to push her down on that earth and make some sense of all the noise under the stars. She wouldn't hear of it. She screamed the way women do and wanted to go to another restaurant. Before you could touch her—we had a room together on a side street in Oakland—she had to be drunk.

It was on one of those nights that I heard about Nuto. From a man who came from Bubbio. I placed him from his height and walk before he ever opened his mouth. He was driving a truckload of wood and, while they were giving him a fill of gas outside, he asked me for a beer.

"A bottle of wine would be better," I said in dialect, keeping a straight face.

His eyes laughed and he looked me over. We talked all evening until the horn outside grew winded and hoarse. From behind the cash register Nora was bending both ears, getting worked up, but Nora had never been to Alessandria and didn't understand. I even poured my friend a glass of bootleg whiskey. He told me he'd been a truck driver back home, told me the towns he'd been to, why he came to America.

"But if I'd known they drank stuff like this . . . Not that it doesn't warm you, of course, but a good table wine they don't have . . ."

"They don't have anything," I said. "It's like the moon."

Nora was annoyed and began fixing her hair. She swiveled around and tuned in dance music on the radio. My friend hunched up and leaned over the counter, waving a hand behind him. "You like these women?"

I wiped the counter with a rag. "Our fault," I said. "This country is home for them."

He kept quiet, listening to the radio. I could hear the voice

of the tree frogs under the music, just as loud. Nora sat up straight and fired black looks at his back.

"It's like this so-called music," he said. "Any comparison? Would you call that playing?"

And he told me about last year's contest at Nizza, when bands had come from all the towns and villages, from Cortemilia, from San Marzano, from Canelli, from Neive, and they'd kept on playing, nonstop; people wouldn't leave, they had to postpone the horse race, even the priest was listening to the dance tunes, and they only drank to keep going. At midnight they were still playing, and Tiberio, the band from Neive, had won. But arguments broke out, fights, bottles hit heads, and according to him it was that Nuto from Salto who deserved the prize.

"Nuto? But I know him."

And then my friend told me who Nuto was and what he was doing. That same night, he said, to show the fools how the thing was done, Nuto had walked out on the highway and they played without a break all the way to Calamandrana. My friend had followed them on a bicycle, in the moonlight, and they were playing so well that women in the houses were jumping out of bed and clapping, and then the band would stand still and begin another tune. Nuto, in the middle, carried them all with his clarinet.

Nora shouted at me to make them stop blowing the horn. I poured my friend another glass and asked him if he was going back to Bubbio.

"Tomorrow," he said, "if I could."

Before returning to Oakland that night I went to smoke a cigarette on the grass of the empty embankment, far from the road and the cars. There was no moon but an ocean of stars, as many as the voices of the tree frogs and crickets. That night, even if Nora had let herself be tumbled on the grass, it wouldn't have satisfied me. The tree frogs wouldn't have stopped their screeching and the cars wouldn't have

slowed in their race down the hill and America wouldn't have ended in that highway, in those cities sparkling along the coast. I knew in the darkness, in that smell of gardens and pines, that those stars weren't mine, that like Nora and our customers in the diner, they scared me. Bacon and eggs, good pay, oranges as big as watermelons, these were nothing, were like those crickets and tree frogs. Was it worth it to have come? Where could I go now? Throw myself off the breakwater?

Now I knew why every so often a girl was found strangled in a car on the highway, or in a room at the end of an ally. Maybe they, too, these people, would have liked to drop on the grass, to agree with the tree frogs, to be masters of a piece of earth the length of a woman, and really sleep without fear. Well, it was a big country, there was some of it for everyone. There were women, there was land, there was money. But nobody had enough, nobody stopped no matter how much he had, and the fields, even the vineyards, looked like public gardens, fake flower beds like those at railway stations, or else wilderness, burned-over land, mountains of slag. It wasn't a country where you could resign yourself, rest your head and say to others: "For better or worse, you know me. For better or worse, let me live." That was the frightening part. Even among themselves they didn't know each other; you crossed those mountains and saw at every turn in the road that no one had ever stopped there, no one had ever touched them with his hands. So they beat up drunks, threw them in jail, left them for dead. And it wasn't only liquor that made them ugly, it was also bad-tempered women. A day would come when just to touch something, to make himself known, a man would strangle a woman, shoot her in her sleep, crack her head open with a monkey wrench.

Nora called me from the road, to go back to town. Her voice in the distance was as sharp as the crickets'. I burst out laughing at the idea of her knowing what I was thinking. But

you don't say these things out loud, it's pointless. One fine morning she wouldn't see me again, that's all. But where could I go? I'd reached the end of the world, the last coast, and I'd had enough. Then I began to think that I could go back across the mountains.

4

NOT EVEN for the mid-August Feast of the Madonna was Nuto willing to take up the clarinet again—he says it's like smoking, when you stop you have to stop for good. He used to come to the Angelo in the evening and we enjoyed the coolness on the little balcony of my room. The balcony faces the piazza and the piazza was a madhouse, but from there we looked out over the rooftops to the white vineyards under the moon.

Nuto, who wants to figure everything out, was talking to me about what I'd seen of the world, wanted me to tell him what people did and what they said. He would lean his chin on the railing and listen.

"If I'd known how to play like you, I'd never have gone to America," I said. "You know how it is, at that age. All you need is to see a girl, get in a fight, come home at dawn. You want to do things, be somebody, make up your mind. Not to give up and go on living the same way. Going seems easier. You hear so much talk. At that age a piazza like this seems to be the world. You think the world is like this . . ."

Nuto was silent and stared at the rooftops.

". . . Who knows how many of the boys down here," I said, "would like to take the road to Canelli . . ."

"But they don't take it," Nuto said. "But you took it. Why?"

Does one know these things? Because they called me "Eel" at the Mora? Or because one morning on the Canelli bridge I saw a car smash into that ox? Or because I couldn't even play a guitar?

I said, "I was too well-off at the Mora. I thought the whole world was like the Mora."

"No," Nuto said, "people live badly here, but nobody goes. It's because there's a destiny. It's obvious that in Genoa and America you had something you had to do, had to understand something that would happen to you."

"Really, to me? But I didn't need to go that far."

"Perhaps it's something good," Nuto said. "Haven't you made money? Maybe it's something you weren't even conscious of. But something happens to everyone."

He was looking down as he talked, his voice was muffled against the railing. He ran his teeth along the railing. He seemed to be playing a game. Suddenly he looked up.

"One of these days I'll tell you what happened here," he said. "Something touches everybody. You're looking at some boys, from families who don't amount to much, harmless people, but the day comes when they, too . . ."

I could hear the trouble he was having. He swallowed hard.

Since our reunion I hadn't got used to thinking of him as different from that daredevil Nuto, so quick on his feet, who'd had something to teach everybody and had an answer for everything. I could never remember that I'd caught up with him now, that we'd been through the same things. He didn't even look different, just a little heavier, a little less fanciful; that cat's face of his was calmer and shrewder. I waited for him to cheer up and get the weight off his chest. I've always noticed that if you give them enough time people will come clean.

But that night Nuto didn't open up. He changed the subject.

He said, "Listen to them, how they jump and how they swear. To make them come and pray the Madonna the priest has to let them sound off. And before they sound off they have to light candles to the Madonna. Who's cheating whom?"

"They take turns," I said.

"No," Nuto said. "The priest wins. Who pays for the lights and the fireworks, the parish house and the music? And who laughs up his sleeve the next day? Fools, they break their backs for ten square feet of ground, and then let themselves be eaten out of it."

"Wouldn't you say that the biggest expense goes to the ambitious families?"

"And where do the ambitious families get the money? They make their servants work, their maids, their peasants. And their land, where did they get it? Why should it be that some have everything and some nothing?"

"What are you? a Communist?"

Nuto looked at me, half bitter, half gay. He waited for the band to let off steam, then muttered, still squinting at me, "We're too ignorant in this town. You're not a Communist just by wanting to be. Take the man they used to call the Grin: he gave himself out as a Communist and used to sell peppers on the piazza. He used to drink and yell all night. Such people do more harm than good. We need Communists who aren't stupid, who don't disgrace the name. They fixed the Grin soon enough, nobody bought his peppers anymore. He had to leave last winter."

I told him he was right, but they should have moved in '45 when the iron was hot. Then even the Grin would have been a help. "When I came back to Italy, I thought I'd find something accomplished. You had the knife by the handle . . ."

"All I had was a plane and a chisel," Nuto said.

"I've seen misery everywhere," I said. "There are countries where the flies live better than the people. But that's not enough to make them revolt. They need a push. Back then you had the power and the push . . . Were you in the hills yourself?"

I'd never asked him. I'd known of several men in the region —young men born when we weren't yet twenty—who'd died on these roads, in these woods. I knew a lot, things I'd asked

him about, but not if he'd worn the red bandanna himself or handled a gun. I knew these woods had been full of strangers, draft dodgers, refugees from the city, hotheads—and Nuto was none of these. But Nuto is Nuto and knows better than I do what is right.

"No," Nuto said, "if I'd gone they'd have set fire to my house."

Nuto had hidden a wounded partisan in a cave in the Salto woods and brought him food at night. His mother had told me. I believed her. It was Nuto. Only yesterday when he met two boys on the road, tormenting a lizard, he'd taken the lizard away from them. Twenty years pass for everyone.

"Suppose Sor Matteo had done it to us when we went to the riverbank," I said, "what would you have said? How many nests did you wreck in those days?"

"Stupid tricks," he said. "We both did wrong. Let the animals live. They suffer enough in winter on their own account."

"I'm not saying anything. You're right."

"And when you start like that you end up having your throat cut and burning towns."

5

THERE'S a sun on these hills, a reflection from the dry soil and volcanic stone, that I'd forgotten. Instead of coming down from the sky our heat rises from below—from the ground, from the ditch between the vines where every trace of green seems to have been eaten up and turned to dry twigs. I like this heat, I like its smell: there's something of me in the smell, too, many grape harvests and haymakings and cornhuskings in the autumn, many tastes and desires I didn't know I still had. So I like to leave the Angelo and keep an eye on the fields; I wish—almost—that my life was still ahead, that I could change it, could justify the gossip of those people who see me go by and wonder if I've come to buy grapes, or what. Here in town nobody still remembers me, nobody cares that I was once a farmhand and a bastard. They know I have money in Genoa. Maybe there's a boy, a farmhand as I was, some woman boring herself behind closed shutters, who thinks about me the way I used to think about the little hills of Canelli, about the people down there, men of the world who make money, enjoy it, and take long ocean voyages.

Half serious and half as a joke, several men have already offered me farms. I stand there listening with my hands behind my back; not all of them know that I'm wise to these things. They boast about the great harvests of recent years, but now they need ditches, a new wall, some transplants, and they can't afford it.

"Where are these crops," I say, "these profits? Why don't you spend them on your land?"

"Fertilizer . . ."

Having sold fertilizer myself wholesale, I cut them short. But I enjoy the talk. Inspecting the farms is better still, when we cross a threshing floor, visit a barn, drink a glass of wine.

The day I went back to the hut at Gaminella I'd already met old Valino. Nuto and I were on the piazza together and Nuto stopped him and asked him if he recognized me. A dry man burned black in the fields, with the eyes of a mole, he looked at me warily, and when Nuto laughed and told him that I was someone who'd eaten his bread and drunk his wine, he just stood there doing nothing, confused. Then I asked him if he was the one who cut down the hazel trees and if that trellis of raisin grapes was still there over the barn. We told him who I was and where I came from; Valino never lost his dark glare, saying only that the soil along the bank was poor and every year the rain washed a piece of it away. Before leaving he looked at me, looked at Nuto, and said, "Come up there some day. I want to show you that leaking vat."

Then Nuto said to me, "You didn't eat every day at Gaminella, did you?" He wasn't fooling now. "Still, you didn't need to share what you had. Now the Madame of the Villa has bought the hut and comes with a scale to divide the crop . . . A woman who already has two farms and a store. Then they say that the peasants rob us, that the peasants are malicious . . ."

I went back along the road alone, thinking of the life that Valino must have led all those years—was it sixty? perhaps not even that—working as a sharecropper. How many houses, how many fields had he left after sleeping, eating and digging the earth there in sun and cold, loading his furniture on a borrowed cart, along roads he'd never travel again? I knew he was a widower—his wife had died on the farm before this one—and his oldest sons had been killed in the war. All he had now were a boy and some women. What else could he do in this world?

He'd never left the Belbo valley. Without meaning to, I stopped on the path and thought that if I hadn't escaped twenty years before, this would have been my fate. And yet we both were wanderers, I through the world, he across these hills, and neither of us could ever say: "These lands are mine. I'll grow old sitting on this beam. I'll die in this room."

I reached the fig tree in front of the barnyard and again saw the path running up between two grassy ridges. Now they'd put some stones there for steps. The slope from the field to the road was the same as ever—dead grass under a heap of dry branches, a broken basket, squashed rotten apples. Up above I could hear the dog running the length of his wire.

When I showed my head above the steps, the dog went wild. He jumped up and down, howled, nearly choked. I went on and saw the open shed, the trunk of the fig tree, a rake leaning against the door—the same knotted rope hanging from the latch. The same stain of copper sulfate around the trellis on the wall. The same rosemary bush at the corner of the house. And the smell, the smell of the house, of the bank, of rotten apples, of dry grass and rosemary.

A boy was sitting on a wheel that lay flat on the ground; he was wearing an undershirt and torn pants with only one suspender and held one of his legs out at a queer angle. Was this a game? He looked at me in the sunlight, holding a dried rabbit skin in one hand, closing his thin eyelids to gain time.

I stood still, he went on blinking his eyes; the dog howled and yanked on the wire. The boy was barefoot, he had a scab under one eye and bony shoulders, and he didn't move his leg. Suddenly I remembered how often I'd had chilblains, scabs on my knees and cracked lips. I remembered how I'd worn my wooden-soled shoes only in winter. I remembered how mother Virgilia used to skin her rabbits after cleaning them out. I waved my hand and nodded.

A woman had appeared at the door, two women, two black skirts, one old and crooked, the other younger and very thin.

They looked at me. I called out that I wanted to see Valino. He wasn't there, he'd gone up the bank.

The younger woman shouted at the dog, took the wire and pulled it to make it rattle. The boy stood up from the wheel, did it clumsily, throwing his bad leg out sideways until he was upright and then limping over to the dog. He was lame, rickety; I saw that his knee was as thin as his arm; he was dragging his foot behind him like a deadweight. He must have been ten years old, and seeing him on that threshing floor was like seeing myself. So much so that I glanced under the shed, behind the fig tree, up at the cornfield, expecting Angiolina and Giulia to appear. Who knows where they were. If they were still alive somewhere, they'd have been as old as that woman.

When the dog had been quieted down, they looked at me and said nothing.

6

THEN I said that if Valino was coming back, I'd wait for him. They answered together that sometimes he was late.

The one who tied up the dog—she was barefoot and sun-baked and even had a small mustache—watched me with Valino's dark and suspicious eyes. She was his sister-in-law, the one who slept with him now; living together had made them look alike.

I went on into the yard (the dog lunged at me again) and said that I'd been a child in that yard. I asked if the well was still there, out back. The old woman, sitting now on the doorstep, muttered uneasily; the other bent over to pick up the rake that had fallen in front of the door, then called to the boy to go look by the bank, if he could see his pa. Then I said not to trouble themselves, I was just passing by and thought I might take another look at the house where I grew up, but I knew the whole place, the riverbank as far as the walnut tree, and I could walk around and find anyone myself.

Then I asked, "What's wrong with this boy? Did he fall on a hoe?"

The two women looked from me to him, and he began to laugh—laughed with no sound and right away shut his eyes. I knew this game myself.

I said, "What's the matter with you? What's your name?"

The bony sister-in-law answered. She said that the doctor had looked at Cinto's leg the same year Mentina died, when they were still living at Orto—Mentina was in bed, crying with pain, and the day before she died the doctor had told her

that this one here had bad bones, that it was her fault. Mentina answered that her other boys who died soldiers had been all right, but this one was born that way—she knew the rabid dog that tried to bite her would also make her lose her milk. The doctor raved at her, told her the milk had nothing to do with it, that it was those bundles of firewood, going barefoot in the rain, eating chickpeas and polenta, carrying heavy baskets. She should have thought of this before, the doctor said, but now it was too late. And Mentina said that anyhow the others had been born healthy, and the next day she was dead.

The boy was leaning on the wall and listening, and I saw that he wasn't really laughing—his jaw stuck out, some teeth were missing and he had that scab under one eye—he seemed to be laughing when all he was doing was listening.

I said to the women, "Now I'll go and find Valino." I wanted to be alone. But the women shouted to the boy, "Get a move on. Go and help him look."

So I started across the field beside the vineyard that now was only a scorched grain stubble between the rows of vines. Although the dark shadow of the hazel trees that used to frame the vineyard had changed into a low cornfield that opened up the view, it was a very small piece of land, a handkerchief. Cinto was limping behind me, and in a second we were at the walnut tree. I couldn't believe I'd run around and played so much between here and the road, had gone down the bank looking for nuts and fallen apples, had spent whole afternoons on the grass with the goat and the girls, had waited on winter days for a little good weather so I could go back there—I couldn't believe it, even if this had been an entire country, the world itself. If I hadn't left here by chance at thirteen, when Padrino went to live at Cossano, I'd still be living Valino's life, or Cinto's.

How we could have scratched up enough to eat was a mystery. We used to nibble apples, squash, and chickpeas to

kill our hunger. Somehow Virgilia kept us alive. But now I understood Valino's scowl; a man who worked like a slave and still had to share what he had. You could see the fruits—these ferocious women, this crippled boy.

I asked Cinto if he'd ever known the hazel trees. Balanced on his good foot, he gave me a puzzled look and told me there still were a few of them at the bottom of the bank. When I turned around to speak, I caught sight of the dark woman above the vines, watching us from the yard. I felt ashamed of my clothes, my shirt, my shoes. How long had it been since I'd gone barefoot? To convince Cinto that I'd once been like him I had to do more than just talk like this about Gaminella. For him Gaminella was the world and everybody talked to him about it like this. In my time what would I have said if a big hunk of man like me had shown up and I'd followed him around the farm? For an instant it seemed as if the girls and the goat were waiting for me at home, that I in my glory was about to describe the great event.

Now Cinto was following me with interest. I took him to the end of the vineyard. I didn't recognize the way the vines ran now and asked him who'd done the transplanting. He was chattering and puffing himself up and told me that the Madame of the Villa had come only yesterday to pick her tomatoes.

"Did she leave you any?" I asked.

"We'd already picked them," he said.

Where we were now, behind the vineyard, there was still some grass in the cool hollow where the goat used to graze, and the hill went on up above our heads. I made him tell me who lived in the distant houses; I told him who lived there once, what dogs they had; I told him that all of us had been boys then. He listened and said that some of those people were still there. Then I asked him if that finch's nest was still in the tree that stuck up out of the gully just below. I asked him if he ever went fishing in the Belbo with a basket.

It was strange how everything was different and still the same. Not one of the old vines was left, not a single animal. The hay fields were stubble now and the stubble fields were vines; the people had left, grown up, died; roots had been torn loose, dragged away by the Belbo—yet, when you looked around at the huge flank of Gaminella, at the little roads far up on the Salto hills, the threshing floors, wells, hoes, everything was the same, everything had that smell, that taste, that color of earlier times.

I asked him if he knew the nearby villages, if he'd ever been to Canelli. He'd been there on the cart when Pa had gone to Gancia to sell grapes. And some days they'd cross the Belbo with Piola's boys and walk the tracks to see the train go by.

In my time, I said, this valley was bigger, there were people who used to drive around it in carriages, and the men wore gold chains across their vests, and the women of the region, of the Station, used to carry parasols. I told him about the festivals they had—weddings, baptisms, feasts of the Madonna—how they came from far away, from the tops of the hills—musicians, hunters, mayors of towns. There were houses—little palaces like the Nido palace on the hill of Canelli—which had rooms big enough for fifteen people, for twenty, like the Angelo Hotel, and they ate and played music all day. Then we boys had our own celebrations in the barnyards, played hopscotch in summer and spun tops on the ice in winter. You played hopscotch by jumping on one leg, the way Cinto was standing now, jumping over rows of pebbles without touching the pebbles. After the grape harvest hunters would roam the woods and hills, going up from Gaminella, from San Grato, from Camo, and come home dead tired, plastered with mud but loaded down with partridges, hares, and other game. We used to watch them go by the hut, then until late at night we listened to them carousing in the village houses, and down at the Nido—you could

see it then, those trees weren't there—all the windows were lit up, it was like a fire, and you could watch the shadows of the guests crossing the windows until morning.

Cinto was listening openmouthed, with that scab under his eye, sitting against the upper bank.

"I was a boy like you," I said. "I lived here with Padrino and we had a goat. I used to take it to pasture. It was rough in the winter after the hunters stopped coming, you couldn't even go down the bank because of all the water and muddy ice, and once—they're gone now—wolves came down from Gaminella because they couldn't find any food in the woods. In the morning we'd see their tracks in the snow, like dog tracks but deeper. I used to sleep in the room in back with the girls, and at night we'd hear the wolf howling from cold in the woods along the bank . . ."

"There was a dead man in the woods last year," Cinto said.

I stopped. I asked him what dead man.

"A German," he said. "The partisans had buried him at Gaminella. His skin was all gone . . ."

"So close to the road?" I said.

"No, he came from up there, from the gully. The water carried him down and Pa found him under the mud and stones . . ."

7

MEANWHILE from the bank we heard the crack of a pruning hook against wood, and Cinto blinked at every stroke.

"It's Pa," he said. "He's down there."

I asked him why he'd kept his eyes closed before, when I was looking at him and the women were talking. He closed them right away, by instinct, then said he hadn't. I gave a laugh and told him I used to play this game myself when I was a boy—that way I saw only what I wanted to see, and when I opened my eyes again I laughed at finding everything the same as before.

Then he showed his teeth in a smile and said that the rabbits did the same thing.

"That German," I said, "must have been all eaten up by ants."

A scream from the woman in the barnyard, calling Cinto, wanting Cinto, cursing Cinto, made us both smile. You often hear this voice on the hills.

"You couldn't tell anymore how they'd killed him," he said. "He'd been underground two winters."

Then we dropped down among the thick leaves, brambles, and mint at the bottom of the bank. Valino barely looked up. He was busy pruning the top red branches of a willow with his hook. As always it was hot August outside, but cool down here, almost dark. Here the water that sometimes ran up the bank left pools in summer.

I asked him where he was putting the willow branches to season this very dry year. He bent over to make a bundle of

sticks, then changed his mind. He stood there looking at me, kicking the branches with one foot and fastening the hook to the back of his trousers. He wore those spattered trousers and cap, almost sky blue, that people wear for spraying vines.

"The grapes look good this year," I said. "All you need is a little rain."

"Something is always missing," Valino said. "I was waiting for Nuto to fix that vat. Isn't he coming?"

Then I explained that I happened by from Gaminella and had wanted to see the farm again. I didn't recognize it anymore, so much had been done. The vineyard was only three years old, wasn't it? And in the house—I asked him—hadn't they even done some work inside? When I used to live there the chimney wouldn't draw—had they broken through that wall?

Valino said that the women stayed in the house. Let them think about it. He looked up the bank through the little leaves of the aspens. He said the fields here were like fields everywhere; to make them produce, you needed farmhands who weren't here any longer.

Then we talked about the war and the dead. He didn't mention his sons. He mumbled. When I spoke of the partisans and the Germans he shrugged. He said he was at Orto then and had seen Ciora's house burning down. For a year nobody had done any farm work, and if all those men had gone home instead—the Germans to Germany and the boys to their farms—it would have been a gain. What faces, what people! Nobody ever saw so many strangers, not even at the fairs when he was a boy.

Cinto stood there listening to us with his mouth open. "Who knows," I said, "how many are still buried in the woods."

Valino's dark face looked me over, his eyes dim and hard. "Some," he said, "there are some. Takes time to find them." There was no disgust or pity in his voice. He seemed to be

talking about going after mushrooms or firewood. He brightened a moment, then said, "They produced nothing alive. They'll produce nothing dead."

There you are, I thought; Nuto would call him an ignoramus, a fool. He'd ask him if the world must always be the same as it was once. Nuto who'd seen so many villages and towns and knew all the miseries of the region, Nuto would never have asked if that war had been good for anything. It had to be fought, was fated to be just what it was. Nuto says this often: something that has to happen involves everybody, the world is badly made and you have to remake it.

Valino didn't ask me to come with him and drink a glass. He picked up his bundle of willows and asked Cinto if he'd cut the grass. Cinto, moving away, looked down and didn't answer. Then Valino took a step and with his free hand whipped the air with a willow branch and Cinto jumped aside and Valino stumbled and pulled himself straight. Now Cinto was watching him from the bottom of the bank.

Saying nothing, the old man walked up the slope, holding his willow branches under his arm. He didn't turn around even when he reached the top. I felt like a boy who'd come to play with Cinto, and the old man had swiped at him because he couldn't get at me. Cinto and I looked at each other, laughing and silent.

We went up the bank under the cool archway of trees, but it was enough to pass the open pools in the sunlight to feel the dampness and heat. I was studying the wall of tufa, the one opposite our field, which held up Morone's vineyard. Over the brambles at the top you could see the first bright green leaves shooting up and a handsome peach tree, some of its leaves already as red as those on the tree that was there in my time when a few peaches would fall to the ground and look much better than ours. These peach and apple trees whose summer leaves are red or yellow make my mouth water even now, because the leaf looks like ripe fruit and it

makes you happy just to stand underneath them. I wish all plants bore fruit; it's like that in a vineyard.

Cinto and I were talking about the soccer players, then the cardplayers; we came to the road under the low embankment wall where the acacias were. Cinto had already seen a pack of cards in the hands of a man who kept bank in the piazza. He told me he had a two of spades and a king of hearts that someone had lost on the highway. They were a bit dirty, but good, and if he could find the others they'd be all right. I told him there were men who gambled for a living and gambled away their houses and lands.

I've been in a country, I said, where they played with a stack of gold coins on the table and pistols stuck in their waistcoats. And once here at home, too, when I was a boy, the owners of the big farms, after they'd sold their grapes or their grain, would hitch up the horse in the cool of the evening and set out for Nizza or Acqui with little bags of napoleons and gamble all night, first their napoleons, then their woods, then their fields, then the farmhouse, and the next morning they'd be found dead upstairs at the inn under the olive branch and the Madonna's picture. Or they'd leave in the buggy and never be seen again. Some even gambled away their wives and left their children motherless and drove them from home—those are the ones they call bastards.

"Maurino's son is a bastard," Cinto said.

"Some people take them in," I said. "It's always the poor people who take in bastards. Maurino must have needed a boy."

"If you call him that, he gets mad," Cinto said.

"You shouldn't. What fault is it of yours if your father gives you away? It's enough if you want to work. I've known bastards who bought themselves farms."

We'd come out of the woods and Cinto, loping ahead of me, sat down on the low wall. Behind the aspens across the road was the Belbo. It was here we used to come out to

play after we'd spent the whole afternoon following the goat over the hillsides and gullies. The little stones of the road were still the same and the trunks of the aspens smelled of running water.

"Aren't you going to cut grass for the rabbits?" I asked him.

Cinto said yes, he was. Then I started walking, and up to the turn in the road I could feel those eyes from the cane-brake on my back.

8

I DECIDED to go back to the hut at Gaminella only with Nuto, so Valino would let me into the house. But this road is out of Nuto's way. On the other hand, I often passed by, and somehow Cinto was always waiting for me on the path or coming out of the canebrake. He'd lean on the low wall with one leg out at an angle and let me talk.

But after those first days, when the celebration and the soccer games were over, the Hotel Angelo grew quiet again, and when I took my coffee to the window in a buzz of flies and watched the empty piazza, I felt like a mayor looking over his town from the balcony of the town hall. As a boy I'd never have thought of that. Far from home you work because you have to, you make a fortune by accident—making a fortune means exactly that, to have gone a great distance and come back like this: rich, big, fat, and free. As a boy I still didn't know this, but my eye was always on the road, on people going by, on the villas of Canelli, on the hills of the last horizon. It's a destiny to be like that, according to Nuto—who, compared to me, has never moved. He never traveled the world, never made a fortune. What happens to so many men in this valley might have happened to him—to grow up like a tree, to age like a woman or a billy goat without knowing what goes on beyond the Bormida, without ever leaving the realm of house, grape harvest and fair. But something has also happened to the one who never moved, a destiny—that idea of his that things must be understood, made better, that the world is badly made and it's in everyone's interest to change it.

I knew now that when I was a boy, even when I chased the goat, when in the winter I put my foot on dry branches we used for kindling and snapped them in a rage, or when I played the game of closing my eyes to see if the hills would have disappeared when I opened them—even then I was preparing myself for my destiny, for living without a home, for hoping that beyond the hills there was a richer, more beautiful town. This room in the Angelo—in those days I'd never been here—seemed to have always known that a signore, a man with pockets full of napoleons, an owner of farms, when he set out in a carriage to see the world would find himself, one fine morning, in a room like this, would wash his hands in the white basin, write a letter on the old polished table, a letter that would go to the city, would go a long way and be read by hunters and mayors and ladies with parasols. Well, now it was happening. In the morning I'd drink my coffee and write letters to Genoa, to America, I handled money, took care of people on my payroll. Perhaps in a month I'd be at sea again, following my letters.

One day I took my coffee with the Cavaliere, down below, facing the broiling piazza. The Cavaliere was the son of the old Cavaliere, who in my day had owned all the Castle lands and several mills and had even thrown a breakwater into the Belbo before I was born. Sometimes he'd pass on the highway in his carriage and pair with a coachman driving. Their little villa in town had a walled garden and strange plants whose names nobody knew. The villa's blinds were always closed when I used to run to school in winter and stop in front of the gate.

Now the Old Man was dead, and the Cavaliere was a little bald-headed lawyer who didn't practice law. His lands, horses, mills, he'd squandered them all as a bachelor in the city; the great family of the Castle had disappeared; all he had now was a small vineyard, some shabby suits of clothes, and he walked around town with a silver-headed cane. He began a

polite conversation with me. He knew where I came from, asked me if I'd been to France as well, and drank his coffee holding out his little finger and bending forward.

Each day he'd stop in front of the hotel to talk to the other customers. He knew a great deal, more than the younger men, more than the doctor or myself, but they were things that didn't square with the life he was leading now—you only had to let him talk to see that the Old Man had died in good time. It seemed to me that he was a little like the villa garden, full of palm trees, exotic canes and flowers with labels. The Cavaliere, too, had skipped town in his own fashion, had explored the world, but he hadn't been lucky. His relatives had deserted him, his wife (a countess from Turin) was dead, his son, his only son, the future Cavaliere, had got himself killed in a fight over women and cards even before he was drafted. And yet this old man, this sad creature who slept in a kitchen with the peasants who worked his last vineyard, was always polite, always in good order, always the gentleman, and each time he met me he'd tip his hat.

From the piazza you could see the little hill where his property lay, behind the town hall roof, a badly kept vineyard full of weeds, and above, against the sky, a tuft of pines and canes. In the afternoon the bunch of loafers drinking coffee often made fun of him and those tenant farmers of his who owned half of San Grato and lived in his house only for the convenience of being near town, but who somehow always forgot to hoe his vineyard. He was positive that they, the peasants, knew what a vineyard needed and that, furthermore, there had been a time when the gentry, the great landlords, had let part of their lands grow wild for hunting, or just for the hell of it.

Everybody laughed at the idea of the Cavaliere going hunting, and someone told him he'd do better planting chickpeas.

"I planted trees," he burst out with surprising warmth,

and his voice shook. As polite as he was, he couldn't defend himself, so I put in a word to change the subject. The subject changed, but you could see that the Old Man wasn't entirely dead, because this poor fool had understood me. When I stood up he begged a word with me and we walked across the piazza under the eyes of the others. He said he was old and too much alone, his house was not a place to receive anyone, not at all, but if I'd come up and pay him a visit, at my convenience, it would make him very happy. He knew I'd been looking at other pieces of land, therefore, if I had a free moment . . . I'd been wrong again: wait and see, I said to myself, even this one wants to sell you something. I told him I wasn't in town to do business. "No, no," he said quickly, "I don't mean that. A simple visit . . . I'd like, if you allow me, to show you those trees . . ."

I went right then, to save him the trouble of making preparations, and along the lane above the dark roofs and the house yards he told me he couldn't sell his vineyard for many reasons—because it was the last piece of land to bear his name, because otherwise he'd have to end his life in someone else's house, because the peasants liked it that way, because he was so much alone . . .

"You," he said, "don't know what it is to live in this part of the world without a piece of land. Where do you keep your dead?"

I told him I didn't know. He was silent a moment, grew interested, then amazed, shook his head.

"I understand," he said quietly. "That's life."

He, unfortunately, had just buried someone in the town cemetery. Twelve years ago and it seemed yesterday. Not such a death as is human to have, a death one resigns oneself to, that one can remember confidently. "I've made many stupid mistakes," he said, "the kind everyone makes. The real disease of old age is remorse. But one thing I don't forgive myself, that boy . . ."

We'd reached a turn in the road, under the canes. He stopped and stammered, "Do you know how he died?"

I nodded yes. He was talking with his hands gripped on the knob of his walking stick. "I planted those trees," he said. Behind the canes you could see a pine tree. "I wanted the land on top of the hill to be his own, as he used to like it, as free and wild as the park where he'd been a boy . . ."

It was an idea. That clump of canes, and behind it the reddish pines with rich grass underneath, reminded me of the hollow at the top of the Gaminella vineyard. But the beauty here was that it crowned the hill and everything ended in empty sky.

"In every landscape," I said, "there should be a piece of land like this, something left wild . . . But work the vineyard."

Below us you could see those four miserable rows of vines. The Cavaliere made a wry face and shook his head.

"I'm old," he said. "Boors!"

9

NOW I'D have to go down to the courtyard of his house and give him that pleasure. But I knew he'd feel obliged to open a bottle for me, and then he'd have to pay the peasants for it. I said it was late, that I was expected in town, that I never took anything so early in the day. I left him in the woods, under the pine trees.

I remembered his story whenever I took the Gaminella road, at the canebrake by the bridge. Here, too, I'd played with Angiolina and Giulia and cut greens for the rabbits. I often found Cinto by the bridge because I'd given him some fishhooks and line and told him how they fished far out at sea and shot at seagulls. From here you could see neither San Grato nor the town. But on the broad backbones of Gaminella and Salto, on the farthest hills beyond Canelli, there were dark tufts of trees and canes and scrub—always the same—like the Cavaliere's. As a boy I could never climb that high; as a young man I worked and was satisfied with the fairs and dances. Now I couldn't be sure if there might not be something up there, on the high tablelands behind the canes and the last stray farmhouses. What could there be? It must be wild up there and scorched by the sun.

"Did they make the bonfires this year?" I asked Cinto. "We always made them. On St. John's Eve the whole valley was lit up."

"Not much," he said. "They have a big one at the Station, but you can't see it from here. Piola says that once they burned brushwood."

Piola was his Nuto, an older boy, tall and quick. I'd seen Cinto following him into the Belbo, limping.

"I wonder why they make these fires?" I said.

Cinto stood and listened. "In my time," I said, "the old people used to say they brought rain . . . Your father, did he have a bonfire? We need rain this year . . . People light bonfires everywhere."

"You can see it does good to the fields," Cinto said. "Fattens them up."

He seemed to be someone else. I was talking to him the way Nuto had talked to me.

"But then, why is it that they always light them where nothing is planted?" I said. "Next day you find the bed of the bonfire on the roads, along the borders, in the rough . . ."

"You certainly can't burn the vineyards," he said with a laugh.

"Yes, but you put manure on the good land . . ."

These talks never got anywhere because that furious voice would call him, or Piola or one of the Morone boys came by, and Cinto would stand up and say, like his father, "All right, let's go and see," and he'd leave. I could never find out if he stayed with me out of politeness or because he wanted to. Certainly, whenever I told him about the port of Genoa, how the ships are loaded, how their sirens sound, about the sailors' tattoos, how long they stay at sea, his eyes sharpened and he listened. This boy, I thought, with his gimpy leg, will always starve in the country. He'll never be able to hoe or carry a grape basket. He won't even be drafted and therefore won't see the city. If I could only make him want to go.

"This ship's siren," he said, the day I was describing it, "is it like the siren they had at Canelli during the war?"

"You heard it?"

"I guess I did. They say it was louder than the train whistle. Everybody heard it. They used to go out at night to see

if Canelli was being bombed. I heard it, too, and saw the planes . . ."

"Come on, you weren't old enough to walk . . ."

"I swear I remember."

Nuto, when I told him what I'd been saying to the boy, pushed out his lips as if to put a clarinet in his mouth and shook his head hard. "You're doing wrong," he said. "You're doing wrong. Why fill him up with ideas? You know he'll always be miserable if things don't change . . ."

"Let him at least know what he's missing."

"What do you expect him to do about it? Once he's seen that some people in the world are better off and some worse, what good will it do him? If he's able to understand he only has to look at his father. It's enough for him to go to the piazza on Sunday—there's always a cripple like him, begging on the church steps. And inside are benches for the rich, with their names on brass plates . . ."

"The more you wake him up," I said, "the more he'll understand."

"But it's useless to send him to America. America's already here. We have our millionaires and people half dead with hunger."

I said that Cinto should be learning a trade, and to do so he'd have to get away from his father. "Better if he'd been born a bastard," I said, "forced to succeed on his own. Unless he mixes with people, he'll grow up like his father."

"There are things to change," Nuto said.

Then I told him that Cinto was bright and needed a farm that would be for him what the Mora had been for us. "The Mora was like the world," I said. "An America, a seaport. People came and went, we worked and talked . . . Cinto's a child now, but children grow up. There'll be girls . . . Would you like to guess what it means to know some wide-awake women? Girls like Irene and Silvia?"

Nuto had nothing to say. I'd already discovered that he

didn't like to talk about the Mora. As much as he'd told me about the years in the band, he always dropped the older subject of when we were boys. Or else when the subject came up he handled it to suit himself. This time he kept quiet, pushing out his lips, and only looked up when I told him the story of the bonfires in the stubble fields.

"Of course they do good," he burst out. "They wake up the earth."

"But Nuto," I said, "not even Cinto believes that."

Well, he said, he didn't know what it was, if the heat or the flames started the sap flowing, but the fact was that wherever you lit a bonfire on the edge, the cultivated land always grew a juicier, livelier crop.

"This is new," I said. "Then you also believe in the moon?"

"The moon," Nuto said, "you have to believe in whether you want to or not. Try to cut a pine during the full moon, the worms will eat it for you. You have to wash a vat when the moon is new. Even graftings won't take unless you set them on the moon's first days."

Then I told him that I'd heard many stories in the world but these were the wildest. Why have so much to say about the government and what the priests said if he was going to believe these superstitions like his grandmother's parents? It was then that Nuto, very calmly, told me that superstition is only what does harm, and if someone should use the moon and the bonfires to rob the peasants and keep them in the dark, then that man would be an ignoramus and ought to be shot in the piazza. But before I spoke I should become a peasant again. An old man like Valino might know nothing else, but he did know the land.

We argued like mad dogs for some time, but they called him to the sawmill and I went down the highway, laughing. I was half tempted to pass by the Mora, but then it was hot. Facing Canelli (the day was clear and full of color) with a single glance I could take in the plain of the Belbo, Gaminella in

front, Salto to one side, and the little Nido palace, red among its plane trees, outlined against the side of the farthest hill. So many vineyards, so many scrubby borders, so many burned slopes almost white in the sun tempted me to be back again in that vineyard of the Mora at harvest time, to see Sor Matteo's daughters come up with their baskets. The Mora was behind those trees toward Canelli, below the hillside where the Nido was.

Instead I crossed the Belbo on the footbridge and kept thinking as I walked that there's nothing more beautiful than a well-hoed, well-tended vineyard, with the right leaves and that smell of the earth baked by an August sun. A well-worked vineyard is like a healthy body, a living body that breathes and sweats. And again, as I looked around, I was thinking of those tufts of trees and canes, those little woods, those bushy borders—all the names of towns and places in the region—that are useless and grow no crops yet have their own beauty—each vineyard with its patch of scrub—and what a pleasure to look at them and know where the nests are. Women, I thought, aren't much different.

I'm a fool, I thought, I've been away twenty years and these places wait for me. I remembered the disappointment of walking the streets of Genoa for the first time—I walked in the middle of the road and looked for a little grass. There was the harbor, to be sure, there were the faces of girls, stores and banks, but a canebrake, a smell of dry branches, a patch of vineyard, where were they? I even knew the legend of the moon and the bonfires—except, I realize now, I no longer knew enough to know.

10

WHENEVER I started thinking about these things I never stopped, because so many events, so many desires and old failures came back, and the times I thought I'd reached solid ground, had made friends and found a house where I could post my name for good and plant a garden. I'd believed it, had even told myself: "If I can just make this extra money I'll marry a woman and send my wife and son home. I want them to grow up down there the way I did." But I had no son—let's say nothing about a wife—and what is this valley for a family that comes from the sea, who know nothing about the moon and the bonfires? You must have made your bones here, must have the place in your bones like the wine and polenta. Then you know it without needing to talk about it, and all you've carried inside you for many years without knowing wakes up now at the squeak of a cart going downhill, at the swish of an ox's tail, at the taste of a thick soup, at a voice heard on the piazza at night.

The fact is that Cinto—like me at the same age—didn't know these things; no one in the region knew them, except possibly someone who'd left. To reach an understanding with Cinto, with anyone in the region, I had to talk to him about the world outside, speak my piece. Or better still, not tell him: act as if nothing had happened, and carry America, Genoa, my money, written on my face and tight in my pocket. People liked this—except, of course, Nuto, who was trying to understand me.

I kept meeting people in the Angelo, at the market, in

courtyards. A few came to see me, began again to call me "the one from the Mora." They wanted to know what deals I was making, if I meant to buy the Angelo, if I was buying the mail bus. On the piazza they introduced me to the parish priest, who talked about a little chapel that needed repairs; to the town clerk, who took me aside and said that my record must still be in the files if I wanted to look for it. I told him I'd already been to the hospital at Alessandria. The least troublesome was always the Cavaliere, who knew the history of all the local real estate as well as the shady dealings of the most recent mayor.

I was better off along the highway and among the farms, but even here they wouldn't believe me. Could I make anyone understand that what I wanted was only to see something I'd seen before? To see carts, to see haylofts, to see a wine tub, an iron fence, a chicory flower, a checked blue handkerchief, a drinking gourd, the handle of a hoe? People's faces pleased me the same way; I liked them to be the same as I'd always seen them: wrinkled old women, cautious oxen, girls in flowered dresses, roofs with dovecotes. For me seasons, not years, had passed. The more things and conversations were the same as before—dog days, fairs, harvests of before, before the world—the more I liked them. And it was the same with the thick country soups, wine bottles, pruning hooks, and beams across the threshing floor.

Nuto said that I was wrong about this: I should rebel, because the life still lived on these hills was animal-like, inhuman, because the war had accomplished nothing, because everything was the same, except for the dead.

We also talked about Valino and his sister-in-law. That he was sleeping with his sister-in-law now was the least of it—what else could he do?—but dark things were going on in that house. Nuto said that you could hear the women screaming from as far away as the Belbo plain when Valino took off his belt and whipped them like cattle; Cinto, too. It

wasn't wine—they didn't have much of that—it was poverty, the madness of that life without relief.

I'd also learned of the death of Padrino and his family. Cola's daughter-in-law had told me, Cola who wanted to sell me his house. A few years before, Padrino had died in great old age at Cossano, where they'd gone to spend their last years with the handful of coins they got from selling the hut, had died on the road where his daughters' husbands had thrown him. The younger one married when she was still a girl; the other, Angiolina, a year afterward. They'd married two brothers from the Madonna della Rovere, in a farm beyond the woods. They lived up there with the old man and their children; they grew grapes and made polenta, nothing else; once a month they came down to bake their bread—that's how far out of the way they were. The two men worked hard, wore out their oxen and their women: the younger girl died in a field, hit by a lightning bolt; the other, Angiolina, had seven children and took to her bed with a tumor in her ribs, suffered and cried out for three months—the doctor used to climb up there once a year—and died without even seeing the priest. When his daughters were gone, the old man had no one in the house to feed him and took to walking the countryside and visiting fairs; Cola had seen him with a long white beard full of straw, the year before the war broke out. Finally he, too, had died on the threshing floor of a farmhouse where he'd gone to beg.

So there was no sense in going to Cossano to look for my stepsisters, to find out if they still remembered me. I kept seeing Angiolina in my mind, stretched out with her mouth open, like her mother the winter she died.

Instead I went to Canelli one morning, along the tracks, by the road I'd taken so often in the Mora days. I went under Salto, I passed under the Nido and saw the Mora with its lime trees touching the roof, the girls' terrace, the glassed-in veranda, and the low wing with its outside archway where

the rest of us used to sleep. I heard voices I didn't know and went on by.

I came into Canelli by a long avenue that didn't exist in my day, but I caught the smell at once—that faint mixture of wine lees, vermouth and the breath of the Belbo. The side roads were the same—those flowers in the windows, those faces, tintype makers, villas. There was more action on the piazza than I remembered—a new bar, a filling station, the dusty roar of motorcycles coming and going. But the big plane tree was there. You could see that money was flowing as always.

I spent the morning in the bank and post office. A small city—who knows how many other villas and estates are on the hills nearby? As a boy I hadn't been wrong: being from Canelli counted for something in the world, a wide window opened out from here. I looked down the valley from the Belbo bridge to the low hills toward Nizza. Nothing had changed. Only last year a boy had come on a cart with his father to sell grapes. Perhaps Canelli would also be Cinto's door to the world.

Then I realized that everything had changed. I liked Canelli for itself, for the valleys and hills and wooded borders that ran together here. I liked it because everything came to an end, because it was the last place where the seasons followed each other and not the years. The manufacturers of Canelli could make all the sparkling wine they wanted, set up offices, machines, freight cars, warehouses—I'd done it all myself. The Genoa road began here and went everywhere. I'd covered all of it, starting from Gaminella. If I found myself a boy again, I'd travel it all again. Well, what of it? Nuto, who'd never really left, wanted to understand the world even so, to change things, to break the cycle of the seasons. Or maybe not; he still believed in the moon. But I, who didn't believe in the moon, knew that in the end only the seasons mattered, and the seasons are what have made your bones, what you fed on when you were a boy. Canelli is the whole

world—Canelli and the Belbo valley—and on the hills time doesn't pass.

Toward evening I came back on the highway, beside the tracks, past the avenue, under the Nido, past the Mora. Nuto I found in his leather apron in his house on Salto, planing and whistling, scowling.

"What's the trouble?"

The trouble was that someone had been clearing some uncultivated land and had found two more corpses on the tableland of Gaminella, two spies of the Fascist Republic, heads broken and shoes missing. The doctor and the town judge had run up with the mayor to identify them, but after three years what was there to identify? They had to be Fascists because the partisans died in the valley, were shot on the piazzas and hung on the balconies, or were sent to Germany.

"Why work yourself up?" I said. "It's one of those things."

But Nuto went on brooding and whistling with a dark face.

11

SEVERAL years before—here at home the war had already begun—I spent a night that comes back to me every time I walk the tracks. I'd started to get a whiff of what was coming—war, internment, confiscation—and I was trying to sell out and escape to Mexico. It was the nearest border and I'd seen enough miserable Mexicans at Fresno to know where I was going. Then I dropped the idea because the Mexicans wouldn't have known what to do with my cases of liquor, and then the war came. I let it catch up with me—I was sick of looking ahead and running around and starting over the next day. As it turned out, I had to start over again last year in Genoa.

The truth is, I knew the war wouldn't last forever and the will to act, work, and expose myself was dying in my hands. The life and the people I'd grown used to over ten years had begun to scare me and rub me the wrong way again. I drove my pickup truck up and down the state roads until I reached the desert, Yuma and the cactus land. I was crazy to see something that wasn't the San Joaquin valley or the same faces. I already knew that when the war was over I couldn't help crossing the ocean again, that the life I was leading now was makeshift and ugly.

Then I even stopped doing business along that southern highway. It was too big a country, I wasn't getting anywhere. I wasn't any longer the young man who'd reached California in eight months with the railroad gang. Many places means no place.

That evening my truck broke down in open country. I'd

meant to reach Route 37 by dark and find somewhere to sleep. It was cold, a dry, dusty cold, and the country was empty. Country is saying too much. As far as you could see, a gray stretch of thorny sand and little mounds that weren't hills, and the power line. I fooled with the motor—no luck, and I had no extra spark plugs.

Then I began to get scared. I'd met only two cars all day: they were going to the coast. In my direction, nothing. I wasn't on the state road, I'd wanted to go cross-country. I said to myself: "I'll wait, someone will come." Nobody came. Luckily I had some blankets to wrap up in. "And tomorrow?" I said.

There was time to study every stone in the gravel along the tracks, every tie, the down of a dry thistle, the fat stems of two cacti in the hollow below the road. The roadbed had that burnt look of railway gravel the world over. A low wind was sizzling over the road, bringing me a smell of salt. It was as cold as winter. The sun had already set and the plain was disappearing.

I knew that poisonous lizards and centipedes ran around in the hollows of that plain; this was the kingdom of the snake. Wild dogs began howling. They weren't the danger, but they made me think that here I was at the bottom of America, in the middle of a desert, three hours by car from the nearest gas station. And night was coming. The only signs of civilization were the tracks and the poles. At least a train might have passed. Like a boy I'd already leaned several times against one of the poles to hear the humming of the wires. That current was flowing from the north toward the coast. I went back to studying my maps.

The dogs kept howling in that gray ocean of the plain—a sound that broke the air like a cockcrow—blood-chilling, disgusting. A good thing I'd brought the bottle of whiskey. I was chain-smoking to keep calm. When it was dark, really dark, I lit the dashboard light, not daring to use the headlights. If only a train would pass.

Many old stories I'd heard ran through my mind, stories of people who started out on these roads when there were still no roads and later were found sprawled in a gully, bones and clothes, nothing else. Bandits, thirst, sunstroke, snakes. Here it was easy to picture a time when people murdered each other, when you only touched ground to stay there for good. That thin thread of highway and tracks was all the work anyone had done. To leave the road, to go in among the gullies and cactus under the stars—was it possible?

The sneeze of a dog closer by and a rattle of stones made me jump. I turned off the dash light, then turned it on again almost at once. To calm myself I remembered that toward evening I'd passed a wagonload of Mexicans pulled by a mule, piled to overflowing with bundles, mountains of stuff, saucepans and human faces. It must have been a migrant worker's family on their way to San Bernardino or somewhere above. I'd noticed the children's thin feet and the mule's iron shoes knocking sparks from the road. Those dirty white cotton pants flapped in the wind, the mule strained his neck, pulling. As I passed I'd thought that these wretched people would have to camp in a hollow—they certainly weren't going to reach Route 37 that night.

These, too, I thought, where did they live? Was it possible to grow up and live in a country like this? Yet they adapted themselves, they went looking for seasonal work wherever the land could give them any, they made a life that left them no peace, half the year in the mines, the other half in the fields. These people had no need to pass through the foundling hospital at Alessandria—the world had come to drive them from home with hunger, with the railroad, with their own revolutions and oil wells, and now they were rolling back and forth across the country behind their mule. Lucky those who had a mule. Some had to leave home barefoot, without so much as a woman.

I stepped down from the cabin and stamped my feet on the

road to warm them. The plain was dim, blotched with vague shadows; you could barely make out the road in the darkness. The wind kept up its cold whistling over the sand and now the dogs were quiet; you could hear sighs, shadows of voices. I'd drunk enough not to care any longer. I breathed that smell of dry grass and salty wind and thought of the hills above Fresno.

Then the train came. At first it was like a horse, a horse rattling a cart over stones, and you could already make out the headlight. At first I'd hoped it was a car or that wagonload of Mexicans. Then it filled the whole plain with its noise and shot out sparks. What must the snakes and scorpions think, I wondered. It plunged down on me, throwing light from its narrow windows on my truck, on the cactus, on a scared little animal that hopped to safety; and it snaked by, banging, sucking up air, cuffing me with its backwash. I'd waited for it so long, but when the darkness came back and the only sound was the whistle of wind over sand, I said to myself that not even in a desert do these people leave you in peace. What if I had to light out tomorrow and hide to escape internment? Already I could feel the cop's hand on my back, like the shock of the train. This was America.

I climbed back inside the cabin, wrapped myself in a blanket and tried to doze as if I were on a corner of the Bellavista road. Now I was thinking that, smart as the Californians might be, not one of them could do what these four ragged Mexicans were doing. To camp and sleep in that desert with women and children—in that desert that was their home, where perhaps they had an understanding with the snakes. I'll have to go to Mexico, I thought, I'll bet it's a country made for me.

Later that night a great barking woke me with a start. The whole plain seemed like a battlefield, or a courtyard at home. Cramped and stiff, I climbed down in the harsh red light; a slip of moon had broken out of the low clouds and looked like a knife wound bloodying the plain. I stood watching a long time. It gave me a good scare.

12

NUTO WASN'T mistaken. Those two dead men of Gaminella were bad business. The doctor, the bank cashier, the three or four young sports who drank vermouth at the bar were scandalized and wondered out loud how many poor Italians who'd done their duty had been barbarously assassinated by the Reds. Because, they said in low voices around the piazza, it's the Reds who shoot you in the back of the neck without a trial. Then the schoolmistress came by—a little woman with glasses, sister of the town secretary, an owner of vineyards—and began to shout that she felt like going to the woods herself to look for other dead men, all the dead, to take a mattock and dig up all those poor boys if this would succeed in jailing, or maybe hanging, a few filthy Communists, that Valerio, that Pajetta, that party secretary from Canelli. There was one man who said, "It's hard to blame the Communists. The partisan bands were autonomous here." "What difference does that make?" another said. "Don't you remember the cripple with the scarf, who requisitioned the blankets?" "And when the warehouse was burned..." "Autonomous, hell—everybody belonged..." "Remember the German?" "Autonomous or not," the son of the Madame of the Villa screamed, "has nothing to do with it. All the partisans were assassins."

"As I see it," the doctor said, looking slowly around at us, "it wasn't the fault of this or that individual. The whole thing was guerrilla war, illegality, bloodshed. Probably those two were really spies... But," he went on, squelching the

argument that was beginning again, "who organized the first bands? Who wanted civil war? Who stirred up the Germans and those others? The Communists. Always them. They're the ones responsible. They're the assassins. That's an honor we Italians are glad to grant them . . ."

His conclusion pleased everyone. Then I said that I didn't agree. They asked me why. That year, I said, I was still in America. (Silence.) And in America I was interned. (Silence.) In the America that *is* America, I said, the newspapers printed a proclamation of the King and Marshal Badoglio that ordered the Italians to join the underground, to make guerrilla war, to hound the Germans and the Fascists. (Smirks.) Nobody seemed to remember it. They began arguing again.

I left as the schoolmistress was shouting, "They're all bastards." And she added, "It's our money they want. Our land and money, like Russia. And murder anyone who protests."

Nuto also came to town to listen, as nervous as a colt. "Is it possible," I asked him, "that not one of these boys was a partisan and can admit it? The partisans at Genoa even had a newspaper . . ."

"None of these," Nuto said. "All these people put on the tricolor scarf the next day. Some stayed at Nizza, working in offices . . . The man who really risked his neck won't talk about it."

The two corpses couldn't be identified. They'd been taken on a cart to the old hospital and several people went to see them and came out twisting their mouths. "Oh well," the women said, "it happens once to everybody. But it's ugly like that." From the shortness of the bodies and a little medal of St. Januarius that one of them wore around his neck, the judge decided they must be southerners. He declared them "unknown," and the case was closed.

The one who didn't close it but swung into action was the parish priest. Wasting no time, he called the mayor, the chief of police and a committee of householders and prioresses.

The Cavaliere kept me up to date because he was angry at the priest for removing the brass plate from his seat in church without even telling him. "The place where my mother used to kneel," he said, "my mother who did the church more good than ten louts like him . . ."

The Cavaliere passed no judgment on the partisans. "Boys," he said, "boys who found themselves in a war . . . When I think how many . . ."

In short, the priest was working his side of the street and hadn't yet swallowed the dedication of a memorial stone to the partisans who'd been hanged in front of the Ca' Nere; the ceremony had been performed without him, two years before, by a Socialist deputy down from Asti just for this. The priest had spit poison at the meeting in the parish house. All of them relieved their feelings and agreed on one thing. Since too long a time had passed for them to denounce any ex-partisans, and there were no more subversives in the district, they decided at least to fight a political battle that would be heard as far as Alba, to stage a splendid ceremony—a solemn burial of the two victims, an assembly and public anathema of the Reds. To pray and make amends. Everyone mobilized.

"I'm not one to congratulate myself on those times," the Cavaliere said. "War, according to the French, is a *sale métier*. But this priest trades on the dead. He'd exploit his own mother if he had one . . ."

I stopped at Nuto's to tell him the latest. He scratched behind an ear, looked at the ground and chewed his lips bitterly. "I knew it," he said after a while, "he's already tried the same thing with the gypsies."

"What gypsies?"

In 1945, he told me, a gang of boys had captured two gypsies who had been coming and going for months, playing a double game, informing on the partisan detachments. "You know how it was, a little of everything in the bands. People from all over Italy and abroad. Fools, too. You never saw such

confusion. All right, instead of bringing them to headquarters, they go and put them down a well and make them confess how many times they'd been to the army barracks. Then one of the two, a man with a beautiful voice, they order to sing for his salvation. He sings, trussed up, sitting on top of the well, sings like mad, gives it all he has. While he's singing, a shovel blade on the head for both of them. They lay them out . . . Two years ago we dug them up and the priest right off delivered a sermon in church . . . As far as I know he hasn't yet preached on the men of the Ca' Nere."

"In your place," I said, "I'd go and ask him for a mass for the men who were hanged. If he refuses, make his name stink in the land."

Nuto sneered joylessly. "He's capable of agreeing," he said, "and having his assembly, too."

And so on Sunday the funeral took place. Town authorities, carabinieri, veiled women, the Daughters of Mary. That devil even produced the Flagellants in their yellow cassocks, an outrage. Flowers from all over. The schoolmistress, owner of vineyards, had sent little girls to plunder the gardens. In his festival outfit, his spectacles gleaming, the priest delivered his speech on the church steps. Mighty matters. He said that the times were from the devil, that souls were in grave danger. Too much blood had been shed and too many young people were still listening to the voice of hate. The fatherland, the family and religion were threatened every minute of the day. Red, the lovely color of the martyrs, had become the badge of Antichrist—many a crime had been committed and still was being committed in its name. We, too, must repent, purify ourselves, make amends—give Christian burial to these two young men, barbarously slaughtered—done away with, God knows, without the comfort of the sacraments—and atone, pray for them, raise a barricade of hearts. He even said a few words in Latin. Open the eyes of the traitors, the violent, the godless. Let them not suppose that their enemy

was defeated. They were flaunting their red banners in too many Italian towns . . .

I found this speech not unpleasing. How long had it been since I'd heard a priest hold forth like that, in the sun on the church steps? And to think that when I was a boy and Virgilia brought us to mass I used to think that the priest's voice was something like thunder, like the sky, like the seasons—that it helped the land, the crops, the health of the living and the dead. Now I saw that the dead were helping him. One shouldn't grow up or know the world.

The one who didn't appreciate the speech was Nuto. One of his cronies on the piazza winked at him, muttered something in passing. And Nuto was pawing the ground, suffering. When the dead were in question, even mere blackshirt dead, dead a long time, he couldn't do otherwise. The priests are always right about the dead. I knew it, and he knew it, too.

13

THEY HAD a lot more to say about this in town. That priest was clever. The next day he kept the pot boiling by saying a mass for the poor dead, for the living still in danger, for those yet to be born. He advised not joining subversive parties, not reading the obscene and anti-Christian press, not going to Canelli except on business, not stopping at taverns, and the girls should lower their hemlines. According to salesgirls and storekeepers in town these days, blood had flowed in the hills like juice from the winepress. All of them had been robbed and burned out, all the women made pregnant. It went so far that the ex-mayor said flatly over the tables at the Angelo that before the war such things had never happened. Then a truck driver jumped up—a hard-faced man from Calosso—and asked him where, before the war, that sulfur for the Consortium had ended up.

I went to see Nuto and found him measuring boards, still simmering. His wife was nursing the baby indoors. She shouted from the window that he was crazy to take it so hard, that nobody ever made a cent out of politics. I'd been worrying these things all the way from town to Salto, but I didn't know what to say to him. Now Nuto glanced at me, slapped his ruler and asked me sharply if I hadn't had enough. What was I finding here in these miserable villages?

"You should have acted then," I said. "It's no good stirring up the hornets now."

Then he shouted into the window, "Comina, I'm going." He picked up his jacket and said, "Want a drink?" While I

waited he gave some orders to his apprentices under the shed, then turned to me and said, "I'm fed up. Let's get out here."

We climbed Salto. At first we didn't talk, or said only "The grapes look good this year." We walked between the terrace and Nuto's vineyard. We left the lane and took the path—so steep you had to walk sideways. At the corner of a row of vines we ran into Berta, old Berta who never left his land anymore. I stopped to say a word, to introduce myself—I never expected to find him still alive and so toothless—but Nuto kept on ahead, just saying "Good day." Berta certainly didn't recognize me.

I'd climbed this far once before, as far as Spirita's barnyard. We used to come in November to steal his medlars. I began to look down—dry vineyards and sheer drops, the red roof of Nuto's house, the Belbo and the woods. Now Nuto also slowed down and we walked doggedly, steadily.

"The worst of it," Nuto said, "is our ignorance. That priest has the whole region in the palm of his hand."

"You think so? Why not answer him?"

"You mean answer in church? This is a place where you only make speeches in church. If not, they won't believe you . . . Obscene and anti-Christian press, he says. And they don't even read the almanac!"

"You've got to leave town," I said. "Listen to new bells, take the air. It's different in Canelli. You heard—even he says that Canelli is hell."

"If that were enough!"

"It's a beginning. Canelli's the road to the world. After Canelli comes Nizza. After Nizza, Alessandria. You'll never do anything on your own."

Nuto sighed heavily and stood still. I stopped, too, and looked down the valley.

"If you want to accomplish something," I said, "you should keep up your contacts with the world. Don't you have parties working for you, deputies, interested people? Speak,

hold meetings. That's how they do it in America. The power of their parties is made up of many little towns like this. The priests certainly don't work alone, they've got a whole army of other priests behind them . . . Why doesn't that deputy who spoke at the Ca' Nere come back?"

We sat down on the hard grass in the shade of a few canes, and Nuto explained why the deputy didn't come back. Since the day of liberation—that longed-for twenty-fifth of April—things had gone from bad to worse. In those days, yes, something was done. If the sharecroppers and the poor of the region never left home themselves, during the year of guerrilla war, the world had come to wake them up. People from all over Italy—southerners, Tuscans, city people, students, refugees, workers—even the Germans, even the Fascists were good for something, opened the eyes of the most pigheaded, forced each man to show himself for what he was, the worst and the best; you for exploiting the peasants, me for wanting even you to have a future. And the draft dodgers, the deserters, forced the government of the rich to see that just wanting a war wasn't enough. Of course, in all that crazy swarm some evil was done, looting and killing without a motive, but not so much: always less, Nuto said, than the number of people the men in power before had thrown out on the streets or murdered.

And after that? How had it gone? People lost their caution, trusted the Allies, believed their earlier masters, who now—after the hailstorm had passed—crawled out of their cellars, down from their country houses, out of the sacristies and convents.

"And we've come to this," Nuto said, "that a priest who still rings his bells owes it to the partisans who saved them for him, and then he defends the Republic and the Republic's two spies. Even if they were shot for nothing," he said, "is it any of his business to crucify the partisans who died like flies to save the country?"

While he talked I was looking over at Gaminella; from that high it looked even bigger, a hill like a planet, and from up here you could make out level places, little trees, little roads I'd never seen. Someday, I thought, we'll have to climb up there. This, too, is part of the world. I asked Nuto, "Were there partisans up there?"

"The partisans were everywhere," he said. "They were hunted down like animals. They died everywhere. One day you heard shooting on the bridge, the next day they were beyond the Bormida. They could never close an eye in peace, no hole was safe . . . Spies were everywhere . . ."

"And you, were you a partisan? Were you there?"

Nuto swallowed and shook his head. "Everybody did something. Too little . . . but there was the danger that a spy might send someone to burn down your house . . ."

From up there I studied the Belbo plain, and the lime trees, the low farmyard of the Mora, those fields—all of it dwarfed and strange. I'd never seen it from here, looking so small.

"The other day I passed below the Mora," I said. "The pine tree by the gate is gone . . ."

"The accountant, Nicoletto, had it cut down. That fool . . . He cut it down because beggars used to stand in its shadow and beg. Understand? He wasn't satisfied with eating up half the property. He didn't even want a poor man to stop in its shade and call his bluff . . ."

"But how could the place have gone to the devil like that? People who had a carriage. It wouldn't have happened when the old man was alive . . ."

Nuto said nothing and pulled up tufts of dry grass.

"Nicoletto wasn't the only one," I said. "What about the girls? When I think about them, my head spins. Maybe all that either of them wanted was to have a good time, maybe Silvia was a fool who slept with anybody, but while the old man was alive they always seemed to come out even . . .

At least the stepmother shouldn't have died . . . And the little one, Santina, how did she end up?"

Nuto was still thinking about his priest and the spies; he twisted his mouth again and swallowed hard.

"She lived at Canelli," he said. "She and Nicoletto couldn't stand each other. She kept the blackshirts happy. Everybody knows it. Then one day she disappeared."

"Is it possible?" I said. "But what did she do? Santa Santina? To think how pretty she was at six . . ."

"You never saw her at twenty," Nuto said. "The other two were nothing. Everyone spoiled her, Sor Matteo wouldn't look at anyone else . . . Remember when Irene and Silvia wouldn't go out with their stepmother for fear of looking homely beside her? Well, Santina was better looking than those two and her mother put together."

"But what's this—she disappeared? Doesn't anyone know what she did?"

Nuto said, "They know. The little bitch."

"What happened that's so terrible?"

"A bitch and a spy."

"They killed her?"

"Let's go home," Nuto said. "I wanted to relax, but I can't, not even with you."

14

IT LOOKED like a destiny. Several times I wondered why, out of so many people once alive, only Nuto and I should be left, why exactly us. The craving I once had (one morning in a San Diego bar it almost drove me mad) to come out on that highway, to swing through the gate between the pine and the canopy of lime trees, to hear the voices, the laughter, the chickens, and say "Here I am. I'm back" in front of each astonished face—the farmhands, the women, the dog, the old man—and the light and dark eyes of the daughters would have recognized me from the terrace: this craving had come to nothing. I'd come back, I'd walked down the road, I'd made my fortune—I was sleeping at the Angelo and talking to the Cavaliere—but the faces, the voices, and the hands that should have touched and recognized me were no longer there. They hadn't been there for a long time. What remained was like a piazza after a carnival, a vineyard after the harvest, going back alone to a restaurant after someone has stood you up. Nuto, the only one still here, had changed, was a man like me. To sum it all up, I was a man myself, was someone else—even if I'd found the Mora the same as I knew it the first winter, and then summer, and now summer and winter again, day and night, all those years, I might not have known what to make of it. I'd come from too far away—I no longer belonged to that house, was no longer like Cinto, the world had changed me.

On summer evenings when we used to sit out under the pine or on the beam in the yard, passing the time—people

stopped at the gate, women laughed, someone would come out of the barn—the talk always ended with the old people, head farmer Lanzone, Serafina, and sometimes, if he came down, Sor Matteo, saying: "Yes, yes, you boys, yes, yes, you girls . . . think about growing up . . . that's what our grandparents used to say . . . we'll see how it works out for you." In those days I had no idea what this growing up might be, I thought it was only doing difficult things—like buying a yoke of oxen, getting a good price for the grapes, working the threshing machine. I didn't know that growing up meant going away, growing old, seeing people die, finding the Mora the way it was now. I used to say to myself: "I'll split a gut if I don't get to Canelli. If I don't win the banner. If I don't buy myself a farm. If I don't become better than Nuto." Then I'd think of Sor Matteo's and the girls' carriage. Of the terrace. Of the piano in the parlor. I thought of the wine tubs and grain rooms. Of the Feast of San Rocco. I was a boy growing up.

The year of the hailstorm when Padrino had to sell the hut and go as a farmhand to Cossano, he'd already sent me several times to the Mora in the summer to work by the day. I was thirteen but was doing something, bringing them home some money. I'd cross the Belbo in the morning—once Giulia came, too—and help the women, the farmhands, Cirino, and Serafina pick walnuts, cut corn, gather grapes, and pasture the animals. I liked that farmyard, big as it was—you could lose yourself in the crowd—and then it was close to the highway, under the Salto. So many new faces, the carriage, the horse, the windows with their curtains. I was seeing flowers for the first time, real flowers like the ones in church. Under the lime trees beside the gate was the garden, full of zinnias, lilies, forget-me-nots, dahlias—I discovered the flowers were plants like fruit, that they made flowers instead of fruit and were picked to please the mistress and her daughters, who used to go outdoors with their parasols, and when they stayed inside they fixed the flowers in vases. Irene and Silvia were

eighteen and twenty. I'd see them sometimes. Then there was Santina, the half sister who'd just been born; Emilia would run up and rock her every time we heard her cry.

In the evening at the Gaminella hut, I'd tell all this to Angiolina, Padrino and Giulia, if Giulia hadn't come with me, and Padrino would say, "That man could buy us all out. Lanzone's lucky to be with him. Sor Matteo will never die on the road. You can be sure of that." Even the hail that stripped our own vineyard didn't fall beyond the Belbo, and all the fields of the plain and up on Salto glistened like a bull calf's back. "We're finished," Padrino said. "How will I pay the Consortium now?" He was an old man and afraid of ending without a roof or land. "Sell out," Angiolina said through her teeth. "We'll find somewhere to go." "If only your mother was still here," Padrino muttered. I understood that this autumn was the last, and when I went to the vineyard or into the woods I held my breath for fear they'd call me, that someone would come to take me away. Because I knew I was nobody.

This was when the priest took over, the priest of those days, a big old hard-knuckled man; he bought the property for someone else, talked to the Consortium, went down to Cossano himself, settled Padrino and the girls in their new house—and I, when the cart came to take the cupboard and mattresses, went to the barn to untie the goat. She wasn't there; they'd sold her, too. While I was crying about the goat, the priest arrived—with a huge gray umbrella and muddy boots—and looked at me out of the corner of his eye. Padrino was wandering around the yard, tugging at his mustache. "You," the priest said to me, "don't play the little woman. What's this house to you? You're young, you've plenty of time ahead of you. Think about growing up and paying these people back for the kindness they've done you . . ."

I already knew everything. I knew and was crying. The girls were indoors and didn't come out because of the priest.

He said, "On the farm where Padrino's going, your sisters are too many as it is. We've found you just the right place to live. Thank me. They'll give you work to do."

So, with the first cold days, I joined the Mora. The last time I crossed the Belbo I didn't look back. I crossed with my wooden shoes over my shoulders, my little bundle and four mushrooms in a handkerchief that Angiolina was sending to Serafina. Giulia and I had picked them on Gaminella.

The one who took me in at the Mora was Cirino, the farmhand, with permission from the head farmer and Serafina. First he showed me the barn where the oxen were, the cow, and the horse in its private stall. Under an open shed was the newly varnished two-seater. On the walls, many harnesses and tasseled whips. He said that for a few nights I'd still sleep in the hay; then he'd fix me a mattress in the grain room where he slept himself. This and the big room with the wine press and the kitchen had cement floors instead of beaten earth. There was a glass-doored cabinet in the kitchen full of cups and festoons of shiny red paper over the fireplace—the Lord help anyone who touches them, Emilia said. Serafina looked at my clothes, asked me if I didn't expect to do some growing and told Emilia to find me a jacket for winter. My first jobs were to break branches for the fire and grind the coffee.

The one who told me I looked like an eel was Emilia. That night we ate when it was already dark, by the light of the kerosene lamp, all of us together in the kitchen—the two women, Cirino, and farmer Lanzone, who told me that shyness at the table was all right, but work was something else; no holding back then. They asked about Virgilia and Angiolina, about Cossano. Emilia was called upstairs, the farmer went to the barn, and I was alone with Cirino at the table loaded with bread, cheese and wine. Then I began to feel braver and Cirino told me there was enough for everybody at the Mora.

So winter came and much snow fell and the Belbo froze over—we stayed in the warm kitchen or the barn. All I did was shovel out the yard and in front of the gate, or bring in another bundle of firewood—or I'd soak willow branches for Cirino, carry water, play marbles with the other boys. Christmas came, New Year's, Epiphany; we roasted chestnuts, drew the wine, ate turkey twice and goose once. The mistress, her daughters and Sor Matteo had the carriage hitched to go to Canelli; once they brought home almond cake and gave some to Emilia. Sundays I went to mass in town with the Salto boys and the women, and we brought our bread to the oven to bake. The hill of Gaminella was bare, white with snow. I could see it through the dry branches along the Belbo.

15

I DON'T know if I'll buy a piece of land, if I'll start talking to Cola's daughter—I don't think so; my days now are phone calls, shipments, city pavements—but even before coming home, many times when I was leaving a bar or boarding a train or coming back at night, the same thing would happen: I'd smell the season in the air, would remember that it was time to prune, sow, spray, wash the vats, strip the canes.

At Gaminella I'd been nothing, at the Mora I learned a trade. Here nobody mentioned those five lire from the town hall, and after a year I'd forgotten Cossano—I was the Eel and earning my keep. It wasn't easy at first because the Mora lands stretched from the Belbo plain halfway up the hill, and I, used to the vineyard at Gaminella where Padrino was enough, lost my head among so many animals and kinds of planting and so many faces. I had no idea what farmhands were supposed to do, how to make up so many cartloads of grain, so many of corn, so many of grapes. The only things we reckoned by the sackful were beans and the chickpeas below the road. Between the rest of us and the gentry we were more than ten to feed, and we sold grain, grapes, and walnuts, we sold a little of everything and the farmer was still able to put some aside for himself. Sor Matteo kept a horse, his daughters played the piano and went back and forth to the dressmakers of Canelli, and Emilia waited on them at table.

Cirino taught me how to handle the oxen, how to change their fodder as soon as they were in the barn. "Lanzone treats his oxen like brides," he said. He taught me to groom them

well, to fix their mash, to pick up the right amount of hay on the fork. At the Feast of San Rocco they took them to the fair and the farmer would pocket his napoleons.

When we spread the manure in the spring I used to drive the steaming cart myself. In good weather we had to go outside before dawn and yoke the oxen in the dark barnyard under the stars. Now I had a jacket that reached my knees and kept me warm. Then Serafina or Emilia would arrive with the sun, bringing our watered wine, or I'd make a run for the house and we'd eat breakfast, the farmer announced the day's work, they began to move around upstairs, people passed on the highway, and at eight we heard the whistle of the first train.

My day was spent cutting grass, turning the hay, drawing water, making the chemical spray, watering the vegetables. When the time came for hiring field hands, the farmer would send me out to keep an eye on them, to be sure they hoed, that they sprayed the sulfate well under the leaves and didn't stop work to talk at the bottom of the vineyard. And the hands used to tell me I was one of them, that I should let them smoke their butts in peace. "Watch how it's done," Cirino said, spitting on his hands and lifting his hoe. "Another year and you'll be working, too."

Because I wasn't really working yet; the women called me into the yard, sent me to do this or that, kept me in the kitchen while they kneaded or lit the fire, and I hung around and listened, watched who came and went. Cirino, a farmhand like me, remembered that I was only a boy and gave me chores that kept me under the women's eyes. He wouldn't stay long with the women himself; he was almost an old man, without a family, and on Sunday he'd light his cigar and tell me that he didn't even like going to town but would rather listen to passersby from behind the fence.

Sometimes I ran up the highway as far as the house on Salto, to Nuto's father's shop. Here were all those shavings

and geraniums that are still there now. Here whoever went by on his way to or from Canelli would stop and have his say. The carpenter pushed his plane, chiseled or sawed and talked to everybody about Canelli or the old times, about politics, music, and madmen, about the world. There were days when I could stay for a while because I had an errand to do, and I'd drink in those talks while I played with the other boys, as if the grown-ups were doing it especially for me. Nuto's father would read the newspaper.

Even in Nuto's house they spoke well of Sor Matteo; they told of when he'd been a soldier in Africa and everybody had given him up for dead—the priest, his fiancée, his mother and the dog who moaned day and night in the yard. One evening there was the Canelli train running behind the aspens and the dog started barking madly and his mother knew at once that Matteo was aboard, coming home. Old stories—the Mora in those days was only a farmhouse, the daughters weren't born yet, and Sor Matteo was always in Canelli, always riding around in the two-seater, always hunting. A madcap, but easy to live with. He did his business laughing and eating. Even today he'd eat a pepper for breakfast and wash it down with good wine. Years ago he'd buried the wife who bore him his two daughters and had just had another little daughter by this woman who came to live with him. He was getting old now, but it was he who always cracked jokes and gave the orders.

Sor Matteo had never worked the land himself; he was a signore, Sor Matteo was, but he had neither studied nor traveled. Except for that time in Africa he'd never gone beyond Acqui. He'd been a great ladies' man—even Cirino said so—just as his grandfather and father had had a craze for property and collected farms one after another. That was their blood, made of earth and solid appetites. They liked abundance, one of them wine, grain and meat, another women and napoleons. While the grandfather had been a man

to hoe and work his fields, the sons had already changed and preferred enjoying themselves. But even now Sor Matteo could tell at a glance how many thousands of pounds of grapes a vineyard should yield, how many sacks that field was worth, how much manure for that meadow. When the farmer brought him the accounts they shut themselves in an upstairs room and Emilia, who served them coffee, told us that Sor Matteo already knew the accounts by heart and could remember a wheelbarrow or a basket or a day's work lost the year before.

That stairway that led upstairs behind the door with the glass panels, for a long time I hadn't dared go up, it scared me too much. Emilia, who went up and down and could give me orders because she was the farmer's niece and when there were guests upstairs she waited on them in her apron, Emilia would call me through a parlor window or from the terrace to come up and do something or bring her something. I'd try to disappear under the archway. Once, when I had to go up with a pail, I left it on the tiles of the landing and ran away. And I remember the morning when there were repairs to make on the terrace gutter and they called me to hold the ladder for the man doing the work. I crossed the landing and passed through two dark rooms full of furniture, calendars, and flowers—everything was polished and delicate like the mirrors—and was walking barefoot on the red tiles when the mistress came out frowning, with a medallion around her neck and a sheet over her arm. She looked down at my feet.

Emilia was shouting from the terrace, "Eel, come here! Eel!"

"Milia's calling me," I stammered.

"Go, go," she said, "Go quickly."

On the terrace they were hanging the washed sheets out to dry, the sun was shining and way down toward Canelli was the Nido palace. And Irene was there, the blond, leaning on the railing with a towel around her shoulders, drying her hair.

And Emilia, holding the ladder herself, shouted at me, "Come on, hurry up."

Irene said something, they all laughed. The whole time I was holding the ladder I looked at the walls and down at the cement, and to feel better I thought about what we boys used to say whenever we went and hid in the canes.

16

YOU CAN go down to the Belbo more easily at the Mora than you can at Gaminella, because the Gaminella road runs high above the water through brambles and acacias. But the other bank is sand, willows, and low grassy reeds, open clumps of aspens that run up as far as the Mora's plowed fields. On some of those dog days when Cirino sent me to prune or cut willow branches I'd tell my friends and we'd meet on the riverbank, one with a broken basket, another with a sack, and we'd strip naked, fish and play. We ran in the sun on the burning sand. It was here I used to boast about my nickname, Eel, and then Nicoletto got jealous and said he'd spy on us and started calling me bastard. Nicoletto was the son of one of the mistress's aunts and lived at Alba in the winter. We threw stones at each other but I had to be careful not to hurt him so he wouldn't have bruises to show at night back at the Mora. Then there were the times when the farmer or the women working in the fields saw us and I had to run naked and hide and come out on the fields, pulling up my pants. Nobody could save me from a punch in the head and a sharp word from the farmer.

But that was nothing compared to the life that Cinto was living now. His father was always after him, watching him from the vineyard. The two women called after him, cursed him, told him to come home with his grass, with his ears of corn, with his rabbit skins or ox dung. Everything was missing in that house. They ate no bread. They drank poison. They ate polenta and chickpeas, and not many chickpeas. I

know what it's like, know what it means to have to hoe or spray sulfate in the hottest hours, hungry and thirsty. I know that the vineyard of the hut wasn't enough even for us, and we didn't have to share with anyone.

Valino talked to nobody. He hoed, pruned, tied up vines, spat, repaired; he'd kick the ox in the face, chew polenta, look around the yard, give orders with his eyes. The women rushed about, Cinto ran away. Then at night, when it was time to go to bed—Cinto had scraped up a dinner in the woods and bushes—Valino would grab him, grab the women, anyone who came near enough, by the door, on the hayloft ladder, and lash them with his belt.

To know what Gaminella had become all I needed was the little I heard from Nuto and could see in Cinto's face, always tense, always wary, whenever I found him on the road and talked to him. There was the story of the dog they kept tied up and didn't feed, and at night he'd hear the hedgehogs, bats, and weasels and leap like a crazy thing to get them, would bark, bark at the moon which he thought was polenta. Then Valino would get out of bed and half kill him with kicks and lashes.

One day I persuaded Nuto to come to Gaminella for a look at the vat. He wouldn't hear of it. He didn't want to hear of it. "I'm sure," he said, "that if I speak to him I'll tell him off, the fool—I'll tell him he lives like a beast. Can I tell him this? Any point in it? First let the government burn all the money and those who defend it . . ."

Along the road I asked him if he was really convinced that poverty was what brutalized people. "Haven't you ever read in the papers about those millionaires who drug and shoot themselves? Some vices cost money . . ."

"There you are," he said, "money, always money: having or not having it, as long as it exists there's no saving anyone."

When we reached the hut the sister-in-law, Rosina, the one with the mustache, came out and said that Valino was at

the well. This time he didn't keep us waiting. He came up and said to the woman, "Go thrash that dog." And we hadn't been in the yard a minute before he said to Nuto, "Want to see that vat?"

I knew where the vat was, knew the low cellar, the broken bricks and cobwebs. I said, "I'll wait for a while in the house," and finally set foot on the doorstep.

I hadn't had time to look around before I heard whimpering, a slow moaning, a cry as if from a throat too tired to raise its voice. The dog outside was struggling and howling. I heard a yelp, a dull blow, sharp screams—they'd thrashed him.

Meanwhile I looked around. The old woman was sitting on a straw mattress against the wall, hunched to one side, half covered by a shirt, her black feet sticking out, and she was staring at the room, at the door, making that noise. The mattress was split open and spilling its insides.

The old woman was tiny, her face no bigger than a fist—like one of those babies who mumble with closed fists while the woman hums a tune over its cradle. The room smelled sour, of stale urine and vinegar. You could tell she made that sound day and night without even knowing she was doing it. She stared at the door with fixed eyes and never changed her tune, never said anything.

I heard Rosina behind me and took a step. I tried to catch her eye and was about to say, "This woman is dying, what's the matter with her?"—but the sister-in-law didn't answer my movement. She said, "If you please," picked up a chair and set it in front of me.

The old woman kept moaning like a sparrow with a broken wing. The room was so small, so changed, when I looked around. Only the little window was the same, the buzzing flies and the crack in the stone over the fireplace. Now there was a drinking gourd on a chest against the wall, two glasses and a string of garlic.

I left almost at once, the sister-in-law following me like a

dog. Under the fig tree I asked her what was wrong with the old woman. She said that she was old and talked to herself and told her beads.

"Is that possible? Isn't she in pain?"

At her age, the woman said, everything is pain. Anything one says is complaining. She looked at me sidelong. "It happens to us all," she said.

Then she went to the edge of the field and began to yell, "Cinto, Cinto," as though someone was cutting her throat, as though she was crying, too. Cinto didn't come.

Instead Nuto and Valino came out of the barn. "That's a fine animal you have," Nuto was saying. "Does it get enough to eat around here?"

"You're crazy," Valino said. "It's the owner's business."

"The way things are," Nuto said, "an owner provides fodder for the animal but none for the man who works the land . . ."

Valino stood waiting. "Come on, let's go," Nuto said. "We're in a hurry. I'll send you that putty."

On our way down the path he muttered to me that there were people who'd even have taken a glass of wine from Valino. "With the life he leads," he said bitterly.

Then we were silent. I was thinking of the old woman. Cinto came out of the canes with his bundle of grass. He limped up to us and Nuto told me what a nerve I had in filling his head with ideas.

"Ideas, hell. Any other life would be better for him . . ."

Every time I met Cinto I thought of giving him a few lire, but then I held back. What could he do with them? He wouldn't get any pleasure from it. But this time we stopped, and it was Nuto who said, "Did you find the viper?"

Cinto sneered and said, "If I find it, I'll cut off its head."

"If you don't torment it, even a viper won't bite you," Nuto said.

Then I remembered my own times and told Cinto, "If you come to the Angelo on Sunday, I'll give you a fine jackknife."

"Yes?" Cinto said, with wide-open eyes.

"I said I would. Did you ever go and visit Nuto at Salto? You'd like it. He has workbenches, planes, screwdrivers . . . If your father will let you, I'll see that you learn some trade."

Cinto shrugged. "As for my father," he mumbled, "I won't tell him . . ."

When he'd gone, Nuto said, "I can understand everything but not a boy who comes into the world crippled like that . . . What to do?"

17

NUTO SAYS he remembers the first time he saw me at the Mora—they were slaughtering a pig and the women had all run away, except Santina, who was just starting to walk and came up when the pig was spouting blood. "Take that child away!" the farmer shouted, and Nuto and I chased and caught her, taking quite a few kicks in return. But if Santina was already walking and running, it means that I'd been at the Mora more than a year, that we'd met before. I think the first time must have been before I'd moved there, the autumn before the great hailstorm when we were husking corn. There was a long row of us in the dark barnyard, farmhands, boys, peasants from all around, women—some singing, some laughing, sitting on the long heap of corn. We were husking in that powdery dry smell of corn shucks and throwing the yellow ears against the portico wall. And Nuto was there that night, and when Cirino and Serafina came around with glasses of wine, he drank like a man. He must have been fifteen, but for me he was already a man. All of them were talking and telling stories, the older boys making the girls laugh. Nuto had brought his guitar and instead of husking he played. He played well, even then. Finally all of them danced. "Bravo Nuto!" they were saying.

But this kind of night happened every year; maybe Nuto is right and we met another time. He was already working for his father in the Salto house; I used to see him at his bench, but without the apron. He wasn't often by that bench. He was always ready to take off, and you could be sure when you

went with him that it wasn't just to play games, to kill time, that something would always happen—we talked, we met someone, we found a special bird's nest, an animal we hadn't seen before, found a new place—in other words, it was always profitable, always something to tell about. And then I liked Nuto because we got along and he treated me like a friend. He already had those deep-set cat's eyes and when he said something, he'd end with: "If I'm wrong, let me know."

That's how I began to understand that you don't talk just to talk, to say "I did this, I did that, I ate and drank," but you talk to find an idea, to learn how the world works. I'd never thought of it before. And Nuto knew what was going on, was like a grown man. Some evenings in summer he'd come to sit up late under the pine—Irene, Silvia, and their stepmother were on the terrace—and he'd joke with everybody, had an answer for the silliest people, told stories of farms, of smart men and fools, of musicians and bargains struck with the priests—he seemed like his own father.

Sor Matteo would say to him, "You, I want to see you in the army; that will be something. They'll clean the crickets out of your head in the regiment," and Nuto would answer, "It's hard to get rid of them all. Don't you hear how many there are in these vineyards?"

Just listening to these talks and being Nuto's friend, knowing him so well, was like drinking wine and hearing music played. I was ashamed of being only a boy and a farmhand, of not knowing how to gossip like him—alone it didn't seem as if I'd ever accomplish anything. But he was friendly, said he meant to teach me to play the trumpet, to bring me to the fair at Canelli, to give me ten shots at the target. He said you couldn't possibly tell an ignoramus from the work he did, but from how he did it, and that sometimes he'd wake up in the morning and want to run to his bench and start making a beautiful little table.

"What are you scared of?" he'd say. "You learn something

by doing it. All you need is to want to . . . If I'm wrong, let me know."

In later years I learned many things from Nuto—or maybe it was only that I grew up and began to understand on my own. But he was the one who told me why Nicoletto was so nasty. "He's an ignoramus," he told me. "He thinks that because he lives at Alba and wears shoes all day and nobody makes him work, he's better than peasants like us. And his family sends him to school. It's you who support him by working his parents' land. He can't even understand it."

It was Nuto who told me that you can go anywhere on a train, and when the tracks end the seaports begin; the whole world is a web of roads and ports, a timetable for travelers, for people who make and unmake, and everywhere you find fools and competent men. He also told me the names of many countries, that you only had to read the papers to learn all about them. So some days in the fields, in the vineyards above the road when I was hoeing in the sun, when I heard the train coming through the peach trees, filling the plain on its way to or from Canelli, I'd stop and lean on my hoe, watch the smoke and the cars, would look up at Gaminella, at the little Nido palace, down to Canelli and Calamandrana, to Calosso, and I seemed to have drunk wine and become someone else, seemed like Nuto, as good as he was, and one fine day I'd take that train myself and go wherever I liked.

I'd already been to Canelli several times on my bicycle and used to stop on the Belbo bridge—but the time I met Nuto there seemed like the first. He'd come to find a tool for his father and saw me in front of the tobacco store looking at postcards. "So, they're giving you these cigarettes now?" he said over my shoulder, out of the blue. I was trying to figure out how many marbles I could buy for two pennies, was ashamed of myself, and after that day left marbles alone. Then we walked around together and watched people going in and out of cafés. The cafés of Canelli aren't wineshops, you

drink soft drinks there. We listened to the young men discussing their affairs, and they told stories as big as houses, as cool as you please. In the window was a printed poster of a ship and white birds, and without even asking Nuto I knew it was for people who wanted to travel, to see the world. Then we talked about it and he said that one of those young men—a blond, wearing a necktie and pressed pants—worked in the bank where people who wanted to ship out went to make arrangements. Another thing I heard that day was that there was a carriage at Canelli that drove out every so often with three women in it, sometimes four, and these women made a tour of the streets, as far as the Station, as far as Sant'Anna, up and down the highway, buying soft drinks in various places—all this to make a show, to attract clients. Their owner had worked it out, and then whoever had the money and was old enough went into that house at Villanova and slept with one of them.

"Do all the Canelli women do that?" I asked Nuto, when I'd understood.

"Better if they did, but no," he said. "Not all of them ride in carriages."

A time came with Nuto, when I was sixteen or seventeen and he was just going into the army, when one of us would steal a bottle from the cellar and bring it up to Salto. We'd hide in the canes if it was daytime, at the edge of the vineyard if the moon was out, and we'd drink from the bottle and talk about girls. What I couldn't understand in those days was that all women are made alike, they're all looking for a man. That's how it should be, I said when I thought it over; but that all of them, even the most beautiful, even the most aristocratic, should enjoy something like that astounded me. I was more wide-awake in those days, I'd heard a lot, and I knew, I saw how even Silvia and Irene would run after this man or that one. Still, it amazed me. And Nuto said, "What do you think? The moon's for everyone, so is the rain and

diseases. You can live well in a hole or in a palace, blood's red everywhere."

"But then, what does the priest mean, that it's a sin?"

"It's a sin on Friday," Nuto said, wiping his mouth, "but there are six other days."

18

BUT I WAS doing my share of the work and now Cirino sometimes stopped to listen to what I said about another farm and agreed with me. It was he who spoke to Sor Matteo and told him he ought to clear things up; if they wanted to keep me at farm work, tending the crops and not running after nests with the boys, he should pay me by the day. Now I was hoeing, spraying vines, could handle the animals and plow. I could put my back into it. I'd taught myself to graft, and the apricot tree that's still in the garden I'd grafted onto the plum myself. One day Sor Matteo called me up to the terrace—Silvia and the mistress were also up there—and asked me how my Padrino had died. Silvia was lying in a deck chair and looking at the top of the lime trees; the mistress was knitting. Silvia had black hair, was dressed in red, was not as tall as Irene, but both of them were better looking than their stepmother. They must have been at least twenty. When they went out with their parasols I used to watch them from the vineyard the way you look at two peaches too high on the tree. When they came with us to pick grapes, I'd run to Emilia's row and whistle to myself.

I told him I hadn't seen Padrino again, and asked him why he'd called me. My pants, stained blue-green with spray, embarrassed me, as did the stains on my face: I hadn't expected the women to be there. When I think of it now I'm sure that Sor Matteo did it on purpose, to confuse me, but right then I worked up my courage by thinking only one thing that Emilia

had told us about Silvia: "As for that one, she sleeps without a nightgown."

"You work so hard," Sor Matteo told me that day, "but you let Padrino wreck his vineyard. Aren't you ashamed?"

"They're still boys," the mistress said, "and they already expect to be paid by the day."

I felt like dropping dead. Silvia looked around from her chair and said something to her father. "Did anyone go to get those seeds from Canelli?" she said. "The carnations are already out at the Nido."

Nobody told her: "Go yourself." Instead, Sor Matteo looked at me a moment and grumbled, "Are the white grapes finished yet?"

"We'll finish tonight."

"There's that load to make up tomorrow . . ."

"The farmer said he'd take care of that."

Sor Matteo looked at me again and said that my food and board made up a day's pay and I ought to be satisfied. "The horse is satisfied," he said, "and he works more than you do. Even the oxen are satisfied. Elvira, remember when this boy came here, looking like a sparrow? Now he's filling out, growing as fat as a monk. If you don't watch out," he said, "we'll slaughter you at Christmas along with that other . . ."

Silvia said, "Isn't anybody going to Canelli?"

"Send him," the stepmother said.

Santina and Emilia came out on the terrace. Santina had little red shoes on and her hair was fine, almost white. She wouldn't eat her gruel and Emilia was trying to catch her and take her back inside.

"Santa Santina," Sor Matteo said, standing up. "Come here and I'll eat you up."

While they were fussing over the child I didn't know whether to leave or not. The windows of the parlor were gleaming, and I looked way down beyond the Belbo and saw

Gaminella, the canes and the riverbank of my old house. I remembered the five lire from the town hall.

So I said to Sor Matteo, who was bouncing the little girl, "Should I go to Canelli tomorrow?"

"Ask her."

But Silvia was calling over the railing for someone to wait for her. Irene was passing by under the pine tree with another girl in a carriage that a young man from the Station was driving. "Will you take me to Canelli?" Silvia shouted.

In a minute all the women had gone, Signora Elvira was back indoors with the baby and the others were laughing on the road. I said to Sor Matteo, "Once the hospital paid five lire for me. It's been a long time since I've seen them; who knows who gets them now? But my work is worth more than five lire . . . I have to buy some shoes."

That night I was happy and said so to Cirino, to Nuto, Emilia, and the horse. Sor Matteo had promised me fifty lire a month, all for me. Serafina asked if I wanted to make her my bank—I'd lose them if I kept them in my pocket. She asked me when Nuto was there. Nuto started whistling and said that four coins in the hand were worth a million in the bank. Then Emilia began to talk about wanting a present from me, and all night we talked about my money.

But, as Cirino said, now that I'd been hired I had to work like a man. I hadn't changed that I could see—same arms, same back, they still called me Eel, I couldn't see the difference. Nuto advised me to take it easy; probably if they were paying me fifty, he said, I must already be worth a hundred, and why didn't I buy an ocarina? "I'll never learn to play it," I said. "It's useless. I was made that way." "But it's so easy," he said. I had a different idea. I was already thinking that with that money one fine day I'd be able to leave.

Instead I wasted all my summer's pay at the fair, at the shooting gallery and other nonsense. That was when I bought myself a jackknife, the one I used to scare the boys from

Canelli the night they were waiting for me on the road to Sant'Antonino. In those days if you cut across the square once too often to see the sights, it ended with them waiting for you with handkerchiefs tied around their fists. And once, the old men said, things had been worse—once they used to kill, they flashed knives. On the Camo road, just above a cliff, there was still a cross where they'd pushed over a buggy with two people inside. But now politics had forced the government to make peace. Once the Fascists had beat up anyone they wanted to, while the carabinieri looked the other way. The old men said it was better now.

In this, too, Nuto was smarter than I was. By then he was going everywhere and knew how to reason with anybody. Even the winter he was courting a girl at Sant'Anna and coming and going at night, nobody ever said anything to him about it. Those must have been the years when he started to play the clarinet and everyone knew his father, when he never stuck his nose into the soccer games; the fact is, they let him run around and crack jokes pretty much as he liked. He knew several people at Canelli, and even then, when he heard that they were planning to beat someone up, he called them fools and idiots, told them to leave that profession to men who were paid to do it. He shamed them. He told them that only dogs bark at strange dogs and attack them. A master sics a dog on someone for good reason, to remain master; but if dogs weren't animals they'd make a treaty and all bark at their masters together. Where he picked up these ideas, I don't know, I think from his father and the tramps. He used to say it was like the war of 1918—a lot of dogs unchained by their masters to murder each other and keep their masters in control. You had only to read the papers, he said—the papers of those days—to see that the world is full of masters who sic on their dogs. I often remember this saying of Nuto's on days when you don't even want to know what's going on, when just walking the streets you

see papers in people's hands as black with headlines as a thunderstorm.

Now that I had my first pay I wanted to know how Angiolina, Giulia, and Padrino were living. But I never had a chance to go and see them. I used to ask the men from Cossano who went by on the road at harvest time, driving their cartloads of grapes to Canelli. Once a man came to say that they were expecting me, Giulia was expecting me, they remembered me. I asked how the girls were now.

"What girls?" the man said. "They're two women. They work by the day, like you." Then I really wanted to go to Cossano but never found the time, and in winter the road was too bad.

19

ON THE first market day Cinto came to the Angelo to get the knife I'd promised him. They told me that a boy was waiting outside and I found him dressed for a holiday, wearing his wooden-soled shoes, standing behind four men playing cards. His father, he said, was in the piazza looking at a hoe.

"Which do you want, the money or the knife?" I asked him. He wanted the knife. Then we went out in the sun, walked between stalls with bolts of cloth and watermelons, among the people, between lengths of burlap stretched on the ground and covered with horseshoes, pothooks, plowshares, nails—looking for a jackknife.

"If your father sees it," I told him, "he's capable of taking it away from you. Where are you hiding it?"

Cinto laughed with those lashless eyes. "As for my father," he said, "if he takes it, I'll murder him."

At the knife display I told him to make his own choice. He couldn't believe it. "Come on, hurry up." He chose a knife that tempted even me: handsome, big, a deep chestnut color, with two spring blades and a corkscrew.

Then we went back to the hotel and I asked him if he'd found some more playing cards in the ditches. He was holding the knife in his hand, opening and closing it, testing the blades on his palm. He said he hadn't. I told him that once I'd bought a knife like that in the Canelli market and had used it to cut willows.

I made them give him a glass of peppermint water, and while he was drinking it I asked him if he'd ever been on the

train or the mail bus. More than the train, he said, he'd rather ride a bicycle, but Gosto of Morone had told him that with his foot it was impossible, he'd have to have a motorcycle. I began to tell him about when I drove a pickup truck around California, and he stood there listening, no longer watching the four men playing cards.

Then he said, "Today's the soccer game," and widened his eyes.

I was about to say "And you're not going?" but Valino had appeared at the door of the Angelo, scowling. Cinto was aware of him, knew he was there before he saw him, put down his glass and went up to his father. They went away together into the sunlight.

What wouldn't I have given to still see the world with Cinto's eyes, to begin again in Gaminella like him, with that same father, even with that leg—now that I knew so much and could take care of myself. I certainly was feeling no pity for him, sometimes I envied him. I seemed to know even the dreams he dreamed at night and everything that passed through his mind as he limped across the piazza. I hadn't walked like that, I was no cripple, but how often I'd seen the noisy carts go by, crammed full of women and boys on their way to the fair, to the merry-go-rounds of Castiglione, Cossano, Campetto, everywhere, and I was staying behind with Giulia and Angiolina under the hazel trees or the fig tree or by the side of the bridge, those long summer evenings, looking always at the same vineyards and sky. And then at night you could hear them coming home along the road, singing, laughing, shouting to each other across the Belbo. On evenings like that, a light, a bonfire seen on a distant hill, would make me cry out and roll on the ground because I was poor, because I was a boy, because I was nothing. I was almost happy when a thunderstorm, a real summer disaster, blew up and drenched their party. But now, just thinking about them, I was missing those times and wanting them back.

And I wanted to be back in the yard of the Mora, that August afternoon when everybody had gone to the fair at Canelli, even Cirino and the neighbors. All I had were my wooden shoes, so they told me, "You certainly can't go barefoot. Stay and keep watch." It was my first year at the Mora and I didn't dare rebel. But we'd been waiting a long time for that festival: Canelli had always been famous—they were sure to have a greased pole and sack races, and after that the soccer game.

Sor Matteo and his wife and daughters had gone, too, in the big carriage. Emilia took the baby. The house was closed, I was alone with the dog and the cattle. I stood for a while behind the garden fence to see who was passing on the road. Everybody was going to Canelli. I envied even the beggars and the cripples.

Then I began to throw stones at the dovecote to break the tiles, and I heard them fall and rattle on the cement floor of the terrace. To spite someone I took the pruning hook and ran out to the fields. "This way," I thought, "I won't be guarding anything. Let the house burn down, let the robbers come." Out in the field I couldn't hear voices from the road and this made me still angrier and more afraid: I wanted to cry. I began chasing grasshoppers and pulling their legs off, breaking them at the joints. "Too bad for you," I told them, "you should have gone to Canelli." And I shouted curses, all the curses I knew.

If I'd dared, I'd have made a massacre of the garden flowers. I thought of Irene's and Silvia's faces and was telling myself that even they had to piss.

A little carriage stopped at the gate. "Nobody there?" I heard someone call out. It was two officers from Nizza I'd seen once before on the terrace with the girls. I stayed hidden behind the portico, quiet. "Nobody here? Signorina!" they were shouting. "Miss Irene!" The dog started barking. I didn't make a sound.

They soon left and now I had something to satisfy me. "They too," I thought. "Bastards." I went indoors to eat a piece of bread. The cellar was locked. But on the sideboard among the onions was a full bottle of wine. I took it and went behind the dahlias to drink it all. Now my head was spinning and buzzing, full of flies. I went back to the room, smashed the bottle on the floor in front of the sideboard to make it look as if the cat had done it and spilled a little watered wine to make it look like the real thing. Then I went out to the hayloft.

I stayed drunk until evening; drunk, I watered the animals, changed their fodder and pitched them hay. People began to come by again on the road. From behind the fence I asked them what had been on top of the greased pole, if the race had really been in sacks, who'd won. They were glad to stop and talk, no one had ever talked to me so much. Now I seemed to be someone else. I was positively sorry not to have spoken to the two officers, not to have asked them what they wanted with our girls, and if they really thought they were like the girls of Canelli.

When the Mora began to fill again I knew enough about the fair to be able to talk about it to Cirino, to Emilia, to everybody, as if I'd been there. There was more to drink at dinner. The big carriage returned very late at night, when I'd been asleep for a while and was dreaming that Silvia's smooth back was a greased pole and I was climbing it. I heard Cirino getting up to go to the gate, heard talking, doors slamming and the horse whinnying. I turned over on my mattress and thought how good it was that now we were all here. We'd wake up tomorrow, go out to the yard and again I'd hear them talk about the fair, and talk myself.

20

THE BEAUTY of those times was that everything was done by season, and every season had its customs and its games, following the work and the crops, the rain or fine weather. In winter you went back to the kitchen, your wooden shoes heavy with mud, your hands raw and your back broken by the plow, but after the stubble fields had been turned under we were finished, and the snow fell. We spent so many hours eating chestnuts, sitting up late, tending the barns, that it seemed always to be Sunday. I remember the last winter work and the first after the blackbirds came back—those dark, soggy piles of leaves and rotting cornstalks we set fire to, which smoked in the fields, already smelling of nighttime and sitting up late, or promising good weather for the next day.

The winter was Nuto's season. Now that he was growing up and playing the clarinet, he'd wander the hills in summer or play at the Station. Only in the winter was he always around, at home, at the Mora, in the farmyards. He'd show up wearing that cyclist's beret and a gray-green sweater and tell his stories: that they'd invented a machine for counting the pears on a tree, that thieves had come at night to Canelli and stolen the public urinal, that a man at Calosso would muzzle his children before he went out so they wouldn't bite. He knew all the stories. He knew there was a man at Cassinasco who, when he'd sold his grapes, spread his hundred-lire notes on a mat and put them out in the sun for an hour every morning to keep them from going bad. He knew about another man at Cumini who had a hernia as big as a gourd and one

day told his wife to try and milk him, too. He had a story of two men who ate goat and then one of them began to jump and bleat while the other butted him with his head. He told about wives, broken marriages and farms with a dead man in the cellar.

From autumn to January children play marbles and grown-ups play cards. Nuto knew all the games but preferred the one where you hide a card and guess where it is, make it jump out of the pack by itself or pull it out of a rabbit's ear. But mornings when he came and found me out in the yard alone in the sun, he'd break his cigarette in half and we'd light up; then he'd say, "Let's go have a look under the roof." Under the roof meant the turret with the pigeon roost, an attic we reached by the main stairs, above the floor where the masters lived, where you had to stoop over. There was a trunk up there, a pile of broken springs, warming pans and little mounds of horsehair. A round window looking toward the Salto hill reminded me of the window at Gaminella. Nuto used to rummage in the trunk—it was full of crumbling books, old rust-colored pages, account ledgers, broken pictures. He went through those books, slapped them to remove the mold, but just holding them a short while froze your hands. They belonged to the grandparents, to Sor Matteo's father who'd studied at Alba. Some were written in Latin like a missal, others had pictures of black men and animals. That's how I learned about elephants, lions, and whales. Nuto took a few of them and carried them home under his sweater. "So somebody will use them," he said.

"What will you do with them?" I asked. "Don't you buy a newspaper anyway?"

"They're books," he said. "Read them as much as you can. You'll always be a good-for-nothing if you don't read books."

Crossing the landing of the stairs you could hear Irene playing the piano; some mornings when the sun was shining the long glass door was open and the voice of the piano came

out on the terrace among the lime trees. It always surprised me that she could play a piece of furniture as big and black as that, with a voice that shook the windows, could play it all by herself with the long white hands of a young lady. But she did play and, according to Nuto, even played well. She'd studied at Alba as a child. But the one who banged the piano only to make noise, and sang and then stopped in a huff, was Silvia. Silvia was a year or two younger, and still raced up and down the stairs sometimes—that year she was riding a bicycle and the stationmaster's son used to hold it for her by the saddle.

When I heard the piano, often I'd look down at my hands and realize that between me and the masters, me and the women, there was a difference. Even now, when I haven't worked with my hands for almost twenty years and write my name as I never thought I would, if I look at my hands I know I'm not a gentleman and anyone can see that I've used a hoe. But I've learned that it doesn't make much difference to the women either.

Nuto had told Irene that she played like an artist, that he'd be happy to listen to her all day. So Irene called him up to the terrace (I went with him) and she played difficult but really beautiful pieces through the open door; they filled the house and must have been heard from the white vineyard along the road. I'll be damned if I didn't enjoy them. Nuto was listening with his lips pushed out as if he had a clarinet in his mouth, and through the open door I could see flowers in the room, mirrors, Irene's straight back and her arms hammering the keys, her blond head bent over the music. I could watch the hill, the vineyards, the wooded borders. I knew this wasn't band music, it was speaking of something else, it wasn't made for Gaminella or the trees along the Belbo or for us. But far away against Salto as you looked toward Canelli you could make out the little Nido palace, red among its dry plane trees. And Irene's music belonged to

them, to the ladies and gentlemen of Canelli, it was made for them.

"No!" Nuto called out suddenly. "Wrong!" Irene had already recovered and thrown herself into the music again, but she bent down and gave him a quick look, half blushing, laughing. Then Nuto went inside and turned pages for her. They talked and Irene played some more. I stayed on the terrace, still looking at the Nido and Canelli.

Those two daughters of Sor Matteo were not for me, nor for Nuto either. They were rich, too beautiful, tall. Their companions were officers, gentlemen, civil servants, grown-up young men. When we were all together at night, one of us, Emilia, Cirino, or Serafina, would always know who was courting Silvia now, who got the letters Irene wrote, who'd been with them the night before. They used to say that their stepmother didn't want them to marry, didn't want them to leave and take pieces of the property with them; she wanted to build up her little Santina's dowry. "Yes, yes, just try to hold on to them," the farmer said, "two girls like that."

I didn't say anything, and sometimes on summer days, sitting by the Belbo, I thought about Silvia. Irene was so blond that I didn't dare think about her. But one day, when Irene had come to let Santina play in the sand and no one else was there, I watched them run and stop by the water. I was hiding behind an alder bush. Santina shouted and pointed to something on the opposite bank. And then Irene put down her book, bent over, took off her shoes and stockings, and, blond as she was with her white legs, lifted her skirt up to her knees and waded in. She crossed slowly, testing each step with her foot. Then, calling to Santina not to move, she picked some yellow flowers. I remember them as if it were yesterday.

21

A FEW YEARS later, at Genoa where I was doing my military service, I found a girl who looked like Silvia, a brunette like her, a little chubbier and smarter, as old as Irene and Silvia were when I first went to the Mora. I was acting as my colonel's orderly. He had a small villa by the sea and sent me to take care of his garden. I weeded the garden, lit the stoves, heated bathwater, and hung around the kitchen. Teresa was the maid and used to make fun of the way I spoke. That's just why I was an orderly, not to have sergeants around me all the time making fun of my accent. I looked her straight in the face—I've always done that—looked at her and didn't answer. But I paid attention to what people said, spoke little myself and learned something every day.

Teresa laughed and asked me if I didn't have a girl to wash my shirts. "Not at Genoa," I said.

Then she wanted to know if I took a bundle of laundry home with me on leave.

"I'm not going home," I said. "I want to stay here in Genoa."

"And the girl?"

"What's the difference?" I said. "There are girls even in Genoa."

She laughed and wanted to know who, for instance? Then I laughed, too, and said, "One never knows."

When she became my girl and I climbed up to her cubbyhole at night and we made love, she always asked me what I expected to do at Genoa without a trade and why didn't I

want to go home. She said it half laughing, half serious. "Because you're here," I could have said, but why bother? We were already in each other's arms in bed. Or I might have told her that even Genoa wasn't enough, that even Nuto had been to Genoa, everybody went there—I was sick of Genoa by now, wanted to go farther—but if I'd told her that she'd have exploded, would have grabbed me by the hands and begun to curse, saying I was just like all the others. "But the others," I explained, "want to stay in Genoa, that's why they come. I've got a trade, but in Genoa nobody needs it. I have to go where my trade makes money. But a long way, where no one from my town has ever been."

Teresa knew I'd been born a bastard and kept asking me why I didn't look into it, if I wasn't curious to know my mother at least. "Maybe," she said, "it's your blood that makes you this way. You're a gypsy's son, with that curly hair . . ."

(Emilia, who gave me the name Eel, always said that I must be the son of a street acrobat and a nanny goat from the high Langa. I used to laugh and say I was a priest's son. And even then Nuto asked me, "Why do you say that?" "Because he's a hairy ape," Emilia said. Then Nuto began shouting that nobody is born a hairy ape or bad or criminal; people are all born the same, and it's only when others treat you badly that your blood is spoiled. "Take Ganola," I came back at him, "he's a half-wit, born simple." "Crazy doesn't mean bad," Nuto said. "It's the fools who torment him who drive him out of his mind.")

I only thought about these things when I had a woman in my arms. Some years later—I was already in America—I understood that for me the whole race of women were bastards. I took many women to bed at Fresno where I was living. One of them I almost married. But never could I find out where they kept their fathers and mothers, where they belonged. They lived alone, some worked in the canning factories, some in offices—Rosanne was a schoolteacher who'd come

from somewhere or other, from one of the grain states, with a letter of introduction to a movie magazine. She never wanted to tell me how she'd survived on the coast. It was tough, was all she said—"a hell of a time." The life had left her with a rather high and cracked voice. It's true that there were families on top of families around Fresno, especially in the new houses on the hills across from the farms and the canning factories. On summer evenings you'd hear a great shouting back and forth when the smell of vineyards and fig trees filled the air, and gangs of boys and girls raced through the alleys and along the highways. But those people were Armenians, Mexicans, Italians, who always seemed to have just arrived; they worked their land the way streetsweepers sweep the city sidewalks, sleeping and enjoying themselves in town. Where anyone came from, who his father or grandfather might be, you could never find out. And there weren't any real country girls. Even the girls from the upper valley had no idea what a nanny goat was or a wooded border. They rode to work in cars, on bicycles, in trains like the office girls. In the city they did everything in squads, even on the allegorical floats of the grape festival.

During the months when Rosanne was my girl I discovered that she really was a bastard, that the legs she stretched out on my bed were all the power she had; she may have had parents in the grain state, wherever she liked, but only one thing counted for her—to make me agree to take her back to the coast and open an Italian restaurant with vine-covered pergolas—"a fancy place, you know"—and see to it that somebody noticed her and took her picture for one of the color magazines—"only gimme a break, baby." She was ready to be photographed even in the nude, even with her big legs on a fireman's ladder, anything to make herself known. How she got the idea that I could help her I don't know; when I asked her why she came to bed with me, she laughed and said that, after all, I was a man. ("Put it the other way round,

you come with me because I'm a girl.") And she wasn't stupid, she knew what she wanted—only she wanted impossible things. She never touched a drop of liquor ("Your looks, you know, are your only free advertising."), and it was she, when they repealed prohibition, who advised me to make bathtub gin for people who still wanted it—and there were plenty who did.

She was blond and tall and spent most of her time smoothing her wrinkles and fixing her hair. If you didn't know her and saw her coming out of the schoolyard with that stride of hers, you'd have said she was a bright young student. What she may have taught I don't know; her boys would salute her, throwing their caps in the air and whistling. At first, when I talked to her, I hid my hands and kept my voice down. Right away she asked me why I didn't make myself an American. Because I'm not one, I muttered, "Because I'm a wop," and she laughed and said it was dollars and brains that made an American. "Which of the two do you lack?"

I've often wondered what kind of children would have come from the two of us—from those smooth, hard flanks of hers, from that blond belly nourished on milk and orange juice, and from me and my thick blood. Both of us had come from nowhere, and the only way to find out who we were, what we really had in us, was this. It would be fine, I thought, if my son looked like my father or my grandfather, then I'd finally see who I was. And Rosanne would have given me a son—if I'd agreed to go to the coast. But I didn't budge. I didn't want to—with that mother and with me it would have been another bastard, an American boy. By then I already knew I'd be going home.

As long as we were together she didn't accomplish anything. On Sundays when the weather was good we'd drive to the coast and take a swim. She strolled along the beach in her sandals and colored scarves, drank soda by the pool in her shorts, stretched out in a deck chair as if it were my own

bed. I laughed, not sure at whom. Still, I liked that woman, the way I liked the taste of the air on certain mornings or touching fresh fruit in the stalls of the Italians along the road.

Then one night she told me she was going home to her parents. I didn't move, because I'd never believed her capable of such a thing. I was just going to ask how long she'd be away, but looking down at her knees—she was sitting beside me in the car—she told me not to say anything, that she had made up her mind, she was going home forever. I asked her when she was leaving. "Tomorrow perhaps. Any time."

On the way back to her boardinghouse I said we could work things out, get married. She let me talk, half smiling, looking at her knees, wrinkling her forehead.

"I've thought it over," she said, in that husky voice. "It's no use. I've lost. I've lost my battle."

But she didn't go home, she went to the coast instead. She never appeared in the color magazines. Months later she wrote me a card from Santa Monica asking for money. I sent her some and she didn't answer. I've never heard from her since.

22

I'VE KNOWN many women on my travels through the world, light ones and dark—I went looking for them, threw a lot of money after them; now that I'm no longer young they come after me, but it doesn't matter, and I've understood that Sor Matteo's daughters weren't the most beautiful after all—Santina perhaps, but I never saw her grown up. They had the beauty of dahlias, of Spanish roses, of those flowers that grow in gardens in the shadow of fruit trees. And I know now that they weren't too bright, that with all their piano playing, their novels, their tea, their parasols, they couldn't make a life of their own, couldn't be true gentlewomen or rule a man and a house. Many peasant girls in this valley are better mistresses of themselves, can run things better. Irene and Silvia were no longer peasants, and not yet true ladies. They lived badly, poor girls, and died of it.

I already understood this weakness of theirs during one of the first grape harvests—well, I felt it somehow, even if I still couldn't understand very well. All summer you only had to look up from the yard or the fields and see the terrace, the glass doors, the tiled roof to remember that they were the masters—they and the stepmother and the little girl—and that even Sor Matteo couldn't come into the room without wiping his feet on the mat. Sometimes you'd hear them calling to each other up there, or you'd hitch their horse or watch them coming out of the glass doors and going for a walk with their parasols, so well dressed that even Emilia had nothing to criticize. Some mornings one of them would come down

to the yard, step between the hoes and carts and animals and go to the garden to cut roses. And sometimes they even went out to the fields, up the paths in their outdoor shoes, talking to Serafina or the farmer, scared by the oxen, and carrying pretty little baskets to pick the July grapes. One evening when we'd piled up the sheaves of grain—it was St. John's Eve, there were bonfires everywhere—they came outside to enjoy the coolness and listen to the girls singing. And later, when we were all together in the kitchen or spread out along the rows of vines, I'd hear a lot about them, that they played the piano, read books, embroidered cushions, that they had a brass plate on their pew in church. Well, it was during that grape harvest when the rest of us were preparing the baskets and tubs and cleaning out the cellar, when even Sor Matteo went out to the vineyards, it was then we learned from Emilia that the whole house was in revolt, Silvia was slamming doors and Irene was sitting at the table with red eyes and not eating. I couldn't understand what had come over them in the middle of the harvest and the pleasures of grape picking—and to think that it was all being done for them, to fill their cellars and Sor Matteo's pockets, all for them. Emilia told us the story one evening when we were sitting out on the beam. The Nido business.

It seemed that the old woman—the countess from Genoa—had come back to the Nido from the seashore a couple of weeks ago with her daughters-in-law and grandchildren, had sent invitations to Canelli and the Station for a party under the plane trees—but the Mora, Irene and Silvia and Signora Elvira, had been forgotten. Forgotten, or was it on purpose? The three of them turned on Sor Matteo. Emilia said that the least bitchy person in the house was Santina.

"You'd think I'd murdered someone," Emilia said. "One of them says something, another jumps up, another slams the door. Why don't they scratch where they really itch?"

Then the harvest came and I forgot about it. But that event

was enough to open my eyes. Even Irene and Silvia were people like us who turned nasty when someone hurt them, took offense and suffered, wanted things they didn't have. Not all the gentlefolk were worth the same; some were more important, richer, who wouldn't even invite my mistresses. Then I began to wonder what the rooms and gardens of that ancient little palace, the Nido, could be like, to make Irene and Silvia so obsessed with going there when they couldn't. All we knew was what Tommasino and other farmhands told us, because all that side of the hill was fenced in and a hedge separated it from our vineyards. Not even the hunters could get in—it was posted. And when you looked up from the road below the Nido you saw a mass of strange canes that people called bamboo. Tommasino said there was a park and a lot of gravel around the house, finer and whiter than what the roadman threw down in the spring. Then the Nido fields lay over the hill and behind it, vineyards and corn, corn and vineyards, farms, clumps of walnut, cherry, and almond, as far as Sant'Antonino and beyond where the land fell away to Canelli and the nursery gardens began, with cement walls and flowered borders.

I'd seen flowers from the Nido the year before, when Irene and Signora Elvira had gone there together and came back with bouquets more beautiful than the church windows or the priest's vestments. The year before you might have met the old lady's carriage on the Canelli road; Nuto saw it and said that Moretto, the coachman, looked like a carabiniere in his shiny hat and white tie. This carriage had never stopped at our house; it had passed only once on its way to the Station. The old lady even went to Canelli to hear mass. And our old people said that a long time ago, before the old lady's time, the owners of the Nido didn't go out for mass, they had it at home; they kept a priest who said it every day in a room. But that was when the old lady was still a simple girl and making love with the count's son in Genoa. Then she became

mistress of everything herself, the count's son died and a handsome officer she married in France also died, their sons died somewhere or other, and now the old lady with her white hair and yellow parasol drove to Canelli in a carriage and gave her grandchildren room and board. But when the count's son and the French officer were still alive, the Nido was always lit up at night, there was always a party, and the old lady, still as young as a rose, gave dinners and balls, invited people from Nizza and Alessandria. Fine women came, officers, members of parliament, all in carriages and pairs with their servants, and they played cards, ate ice cream, had weddings.

Irene and Silvia knew all this, and to be treated well, received, and given parties by the old lady was the same for them as looking from the terrace was for me, into the room where the piano was, to know they were at dinner on the floor above us, to watch Emilia do her tricks with the forks and spoons. Except that, being women, they suffered. And then they had no work: they spent all day mooning around the terrace or in the garden. There was nothing to keep them busy—they didn't even like to take care of Santina. You could see how the itch to leave the Mora, to go into that park under the plane trees, to join the countess's daughters-in-law and grandchildren drove them straight out of their minds. It was the same as when I would see the bonfires on the hill of Cassinasco or hear the train whistle at night.

23

THEN THE season came when gunshots echoed early in the morning among the aspens along the Belbo or from the high open places on the hills, and Cirino started telling us he'd seen a hare escaping down a furrow. These are the best days of the year. Picking grapes, stripping vines, squeezing the fruit, are no kind of work; the heat has gone and it's not cold yet; under a few high light clouds you eat rabbit with your polenta and go after mushrooms.

We farmhands hunted mushrooms around the farm, but Irene and Silvia would join their girlfriends from Canelli and their young men and drive as far as Agliano in the buggy. They left one morning when the fog was still thick on the fields; I hitched up the horse myself. They had to meet the others on the square at Canelli. The doctor's son from the Station took the whip. He was the one who always hit the bull's-eye at the fair and played cards all night till dawn. That day a big storm blew up with lightning and thunder, like August. Cirino and Serafina said it was better to have it hail now on the mushrooms and mushroom hunters than on the harvest two weeks before. The downpour never stopped, even at night. Sor Matteo came to wake us with a lantern and a coat over his head, told us to listen for the sound of the buggy, that he was uneasy. The upstairs windows were lit; Emilia was running up and down making coffee; Santina was screaming because they hadn't taken her on the mushroom hunt.

The buggy came back in the morning with the doctor's son waving the whip and shouting: "Long live the waters of

Agliano!" He jumped down without touching the footboard, then helped the two girls down. They sat there shivering, handkerchiefs over their heads and an empty basket on their knees. They went upstairs and I could hear them talking, warming up and laughing.

After that trip to Agliano, the doctor's son often came by on the road below the terrace. He'd wave at the girls and they leaned over the railing and talked. Then on winter afternoons they'd ask him in, and he, who wore hunting boots every day and snapped his riding crop on his boot, would look around, pick a flower or a little branch from the garden—or better still, a red leaf from a young vine—and rush upstairs and through the glass door. A fine blaze was roaring in the fireplace up there, and you could hear the piano and laughing all afternoon. Sometimes that Arturo would stay for supper. Emilia said they gave him tea and biscuits—Silvia always did it, but he was after Irene. Irene, so blond and meek, kept playing the piano so she didn't have to talk to him. Silvia spread herself on the sofa, relaxed and inviting, and they talked their nonsense. Then the door opened and Signora Elvira pushed little Santina in on the run. Arturo rose and said a bored hello. The mistress said, "We have another jealous little lady who wants to be introduced." Then Sor Matteo came in—he couldn't stand Arturo—but Signora Elvira on the other hand was all smiles and seemed to think that even Arturo would do perfectly for Irene. The one who disagreed was Irene, because she said he was false—he didn't even listen to her music, his table manners were bad, and he played with Santina only to get on her mother's good side. But Silvia defended him, flared out, raised her voice; finally Irene, cold and angry, said, "I leave him to you. Why don't you take him?"

"Kick him out of the house," Sor Matteo said. "A man who gambles and doesn't own an inch of land is not a man."

Toward the end of winter, this Arturo began to bring along a railway clerk, a tall, skinny friend of his, and he also made

up to Irene. He knew only Tuscan Italian, no Piedmontese, but he did know music. This beanpole began playing duets with Irene and, seeing them paired off like that, Arturo and Silvia wrapped arms around each other, danced and laughed, and now when Santina came in it was the friend's turn to toss her up and catch her in flight.

"If he weren't a Tuscan," Sor Matteo said, "I'd call him a fool. He acts like one . . . Now, there was a Tuscan with us at Tripoli . . ."

I knew how the room looked with its two bunches of flowers and red leaves on the piano, its curtains embroidered by Irene and the transparent alabaster lamp hung on thin chains which made a light like the moon reflected in water. Some evenings the four of them would bundle up and go out on the terrace in the snow. Here the two men smoked cigars, and if you stood under the leafless young vine you could hear them talk.

Nuto came, too, to listen. The fun was to hear Arturo playing the hotshot, telling how many people he'd thrown off the train at Costigliole the other day, or that time in Acqui when he'd gambled his last soldo and if he'd lost he'd never have gone home again but instead he won and bought everybody dinner. The Tuscan said, "Remember when you punched that man . . ." Then Arturo described the punch.

The girls leaned on the railing and sighed. The Tuscan moved close to Irene and told her about his house and when he used to play the organ in church. Suddenly the two cigars dropped into the snow at our feet, and then we heard whispering up there, running around, some louder sighs. Looking up we could see nothing but the leafless vine and many little cold stars in the sky.

"Tramps," Nuto said, between his teeth.

It was never out of my mind. I even asked Emilia, but you couldn't tell how they were pairing off. Sor Matteo only grumbled about Irene and the doctor's son, kept saying that

one of these days he was going to give that boy a dressing down. The signora acted hurt. Irene would shrug and say that she wouldn't want that peasant Arturo even as a servant, but what could she do when he came to see her? Then Silvia said that the Tuscan was the fool. Signora Elvira was offended again.

Irene couldn't talk to the Tuscan because Arturo watched them and kept his friend in line. That must have meant that Arturo was after both girls, and while he hoped to win Irene, he was amusing himself with the other. We'd have to wait for spring and follow them through the fields. Then we'd see.

But meanwhile Sor Matteo squared off at Arturo—we heard it all from Lanzone who happened to walk under the portico—and told him that women are women and men are men. No? And Arturo, who'd just picked himself a bouquet, slapped his boot with his whip and, sniffing the flowers, gave the master a peculiar look. "Be that as it may," Sor Matteo went on, "when they're well brought up, women know what suits them. And you," he said, "they don't want. Understand?"

At which point Arturo mumbled this and that—what the devil, he'd been courteously invited to come and visit—naturally, a man . . .

"You're not a man," Sor Matteo said, "you're a hog."

So this seemed to end the story of Arturo, not to mention the Tuscan. But the stepmother couldn't stay offended very long because others followed, many others more dangerous. The two officers, for example, who came the day I stayed alone at the Mora. One month—there were fireflies, so it was June—they came up from Canelli every night. They must have had another woman who lived along the highway because they never came from that direction—they cut across from the Belbo, over the bridge and through the corn and hay. I was sixteen then and beginning to understand these things. Cirino hated them because they trampled his alfalfa

and because he remembered what shits officers like them had been during the war. I won't say what Nuto thought. One night the two of them evened the score. They lay in wait for the officers in tall grass, stretching an invisible wire between them. The men arrived, jumping a ditch and already smacking their lips over the girls, and down they went, hard enough to split open their faces. It would have been better to dump them in the manure, but after that evening they never crossed a field again.

When the good weather came no one could hold Silvia back. On summer evenings they'd begun to go beyond the gate and walk their young men up and down the highway, and when they came back under the lime trees we used to try to catch a word or two. They'd all leave together, but return as couples. Silvia started off arm in arm with Irene, laughing, joking, bickering with the men. When they came back, in the scent of the lime trees, Silvia and her man would be close together, whispering and laughing as they walked; the other pair went more slowly, a little apart, and sometimes they would call out and talk loudly to the two ahead. I remember those evenings well, the rest of us farmhands sitting on the beam in the powerful smell of the limes.

24

LITTLE Santa, three or four years old in those days, was something to see. She grew up blond like Irene, with Silvia's black eyes, but when she'd bite her fingers while eating an apple and tear up flowers in a temper, or want us to put her on the horse and kick us until we did, we'd say that she took after her mother. Sor Matteo and the other girls were more easygoing and not such tyrants. Especially Irene, so mild and tall, dressed in white, was never angry at anyone. She didn't need to be, because she always said please when she wanted anything, even to Emilia, to the rest of us, too, looking straight at us when she talked, looking us in the eye. Silvia was the same, but her eyes were already warmer and more teasing. The last year I worked at the Mora I was paid fifty lire and wore a necktie to the fair, but I knew I was too late for Silvia, no help for that.

But neither would I have dared to think of Irene during those last years. Nuto wasn't thinking about her because he played the clarinet everywhere now and had a girl at Canelli. People said that Irene was going with someone from Canelli; they were always driving there, buying things in the stores and giving their old clothes to Emilia. But the Nido had also reopened; there was a dinner party to which the signora and her daughters went, and that day the dressmaker from Canelli came to dress them. I drove them in the carriage as far as the bottom of the hill and listened to them talk about the fine houses of Genoa. They told me to come back at midnight and pick them up, to drive them up to the entrance of Nido courtyard—in the dark the other guests wouldn't see

how the cushions had lost their shine. And they told me to straighten my tie and not shame them.

But when I drove in among the other carriages in the yard at midnight—the house looked enormous from below and shadows of the guests moved against the unshuttered windows—no one showed up and they left me there a long time under the plane trees. When I tired of listening to the crickets—there were crickets even up there—I left the carriage and went to the door. In the front hallway I found a girl in a little white apron who looked at me and ran away. Then she came back and I told her that I'd arrived. She asked me what I wanted. Then I said that the carriage of the Mora was ready.

A door opened and I heard many people laughing. On all the doors in the hallway were paintings of flowers and there were designs in the stones of the polished floor. The girl came back and said that I could leave, because the ladies would be taken home by someone else.

Outside I was sorry I hadn't looked harder at that entrance hall which was more beautiful than a church. I led the horse by the bridle over the fine crunching gravel, looked up at the plane trees against the sky—seen from below they spread apart, each one an archway by itself—and when I reached the gate I lit a cigarette and went slowly down the road among the mixed bamboos and acacias and other strange trees, thinking about how the earth carries every kind of plant.

It was obvious that Irene had a man at the Nido, because sometimes I heard Silvia making fun of her and calling her "madam countess," and before long Emilia knew that this man was a grandson, dead on his feet, one of the many young men the old lady kept her eye on so they wouldn't eat her house out from under her. This grandson, this displaced person, this little count, never lowered himself to come to the Mora, but he sometimes sent a barefoot boy, Berta's son, to carry notes to Irene telling her that he was waiting at the curb to take her for a walk. Irene went.

From the bean patch where I was watering and tying plants on sticks, I could hear Irene and Silvia sitting under the magnolia and talking about it.

Irene said, "What do you expect? That's what the countess is like . . . You can't allow a boy like him to go to the fair at the Station . . . He'd find himself on the same grandstand as his servants . . ."

"What's so bad about that? He sees them at home every day . . ."

"She won't even let him go hunting. You see, his father died that tragic death . . ."

"Still, he could come to see you. Why doesn't he come?" Silvia burst out.

"No more than your man comes. Why doesn't he . . . ? Watch out, Silvia. Are you sure he's telling you the truth?"

"Nobody ever tells the truth. If you think about the truth, you go mad. I pity you if you ever tell it to him."

"It's you who see him," Irene said, "it's you who trust him . . . I only hope he isn't as vulgar as the other one . . ."

Silvia gave a low laugh. I couldn't stay quiet forever behind the beans, they'd have noticed me. I scraped with my hoe and listened.

Once Irene said, "He must have heard, don't you think?"

"Never mind, it's the farm boy," Silvia said.

But there was the time when Silvia cried, squirmed around in her deck chair and cried. Cirino was hammering a piece of iron under the portico and wouldn't let me listen. Irene was fussing around her, smoothing Silvia's hair where Silvia had dug in her nails.

"No, no," Silvia was crying, "I want to go away, to go away . . . I don't believe it, I don't believe it, I don't believe it . . ."

That damned hammering of Cirino's wouldn't let me hear.

"Come upstairs," Irene said, stroking her. "Come up to the terrace, be quiet . . ."

"I don't care," Silvia screamed, "I just don't care . . ."

Silvia had been going with a man from Crevalcuore who had land at Calosso; he owned a sawmill and rode a motorcycle. He'd make Silvia climb up behind him and they'd head for those highways. At night we'd hear the roar of his motor as he stopped and set off again, and soon Silvia would appear at the gate, her black hair in her eyes. Sor Matteo knew nothing about it.

This man, Emilia said, wasn't the first, the doctor's son had had Silvia already at home, in his father's studio. None of us knew much about it; if she and Arturo had really made love, why had they broken off when the fine summer weather was beginning, when it was easier to meet? Instead, the motorcyclist showed up, and now everyone knew that Silvia was out of her mind; she let him take her into the canes or the woods—people would run into them at Camo, at Santa Libera, in the woods of Bravo. Sometimes they even went to a hotel at Nizza.

To look at her, she was always the same—those dark, burning eyes. I don't know if she expected him to marry her. But this Matteo of Crevalcuore was a fighting cock, a woodsman who'd scorched many beds already and nobody had ever stopped him. "So," I was thinking, "if Silvia has a son, it will be a bastard like me. That's how I was born."

Irene was also taking it hard. She must have tried to help Silvia and known more than we did. You couldn't picture Irene on that motorcycle or in a canebrake with some man. More likely Santina, everyone said; most likely she'd do the same when she grew up. Their stepmother said nothing, all she wanted was that the two of them would get back home at a decent time.

25

I NEVER saw Irene as desperate as her sister, but when two days went by without a call to the Nido, she'd stand nervously behind the garden fence or sit in the vineyard with Santina with a book or her embroidery and watch the road from there. When she set out with her parasol toward Canelli, she was happy. What she may have had to say to that Cesarino, that ninny, I don't know; once when I was pedaling like mad for Canelli and caught sight of them among the acacias, it looked as if Irene was standing up, reading a book, while Cesarino sat on a slope in front looking at her.

One day when that Arturo with the boots appeared again at the Mora, he stopped below the terrace, talked to Silvia who was watching the road from there. But Silvia didn't ask him up, she only said that it was a sultry day, that these low-heeled shoes—she lifted a foot—could be bought now in Canelli.

Arturo winked and asked if they were still playing dance music, if Irene still played the piano. "Ask her yourself," Silvia said, and looked beyond the pines.

Irene rarely played anymore. It seemed that there were no pianos at the Nido, the old lady couldn't stand the sight of a girl throwing her fingers out of joint on a keyboard. When Irene went to call on the old lady, she took embroidery along in her bag, a huge bag embroidered with flowers in green wool, and carried home in the bag some books the old lady had given her to read. They were old books, bound in leather. In return she used to bring the old lady the colored fashion magazines she bought at Canelli each week just for this.

Serafina and Emilia used to say that Irene was baiting the trap to become the countess herself, and once Sor Matteo said, "Take care, girls. There are some old people who never die."

It was hard to know how many relatives the countess had at Genoa—people said there was even a bishop. I'd heard the story that the old lady no longer kept servants or maids in her house because her granddaughters and grandsons were enough. If that was true, I couldn't see what hopes Irene had; no matter how well it went for her, that Cesarino would have to share with everyone. Unless Irene could be satisfied with being a maid at the Nido. But when I looked around our property—at the barn, the haylofts, the grain, the grapes—I thought that maybe Irene was richer than he was, and maybe Cesarino was courting her to get his hands on the dowry. This idea made me furious, but it pleased me even more—it didn't seem possible that Irene was in deep enough to give herself away like that, from mere ambition.

In that case, I thought, she must really be in love, must like Cesarino, that he's the one she's dying to marry. And I wished I could talk to her, could tell her to be careful, not to waste herself on that empty cartridge, on a fool who never even left the Nido and sat down while she stood up and read to him. Silvia at least never wasted her days like that, not for anything, but went with someone worth the trouble. If I hadn't been just a farmhand and not yet eighteen, perhaps Silvia would even have gone out with me.

Irene was suffering over it, too. That little count must have been worse than a spoiled girl. He'd have whims, make people wait on him, exploit the old lady's good name with nasty gossip, and to anything Irene said or asked he'd answer no; one had to be careful not to make false moves, should never forget who he was, his health, his tastes. Now it was Silvia who had to listen to Irene's sighs, the few times she didn't escape to the hills or shut herself up in the house. At table—Emilia said—Irene would lower her eyes and Silvia

would stare in her father's face as if she had a fever. Only Signora Elvira kept talking in her paper-thin voice, wiped Santina's chin, harped maliciously on the lost chance of the doctor's son, on the Tuscan, on the officers, the others, on some younger girls of Canelli who were married already and about to baptize their first babies. Sor Matteo just muttered, completely out of it now.

Meanwhile Silvia's affair went on. When she wasn't desperate and bitchy and kept to the yard or the vineyard, it was a pleasure to see her, to hear her talk. Some days she'd have the carriage hitched up and go away alone, to Canelli, driving herself like a man. Once she asked Nuto if he was going to play at the Feast of Good Counsel where they were having the horse races—and she wanted to buy a saddle at any cost, at Canelli, to learn to ride and race with the others. Farmer Lanzone had to explain to her that a carriage horse has bad habits and can't run a race. We knew then that Silvia meant to go to Good Counsel, find that Matteo, and show him that she, too, could ride.

Wait and see, we used to say, if this girl doesn't end up wearing men's clothes, going to all the fairs and walking the tightrope. Just that year a long shed had appeared at Canelli with a motorcycle game that made a noise worse than the threshing machine. The ticket woman was a thin redhead, about forty, with fingers covered with rings who smoked cigarettes. Wait and see, we all said, if Matteo of Crevalcuore doesn't put Silvia in charge of an outfit like that—after he's had all he wants. They also said at Canelli that what you had to do when you bought your ticket was to put your hand on the counter in a certain way and the redhead would tell you right off when you could come back, climb into the long wagon with curtains, and make love with her on the straw. But Silvia hadn't gone that far yet. As crazy as she seemed, it was all for Matteo; she was still so beautiful and strong that many men would have married her even then.

Crazy things were happening. Now she and Matteo were meeting in a vine-keeper's hut at Seraudi, a broken-down shack at the edge of the woods where the motorcycle couldn't go but they went on foot, taking a blanket and cushions. Matteo didn't show himself with Silvia either at the Mora or at Crevalcuore—not to protect her good name, of course, but to save his skin and avoid committing himself. He knew he didn't want to go on, so he kept out of sight.

I was trying to catch in Silvia's face some sign of what she and Matteo were doing. During the grape harvest of that September both she and Irene would come, as they always had, into the white vineyard and I'd crouch under the vines and watch her, watch her hands searching for grapes, watch the curve of her thighs, her waist, her hair in her eyes, and when she went down the path, the way she walked, her skips, the tilt of her head—I knew every part of her from her hair to her toenails, yet I couldn't ever have said, "Look, she's changed, Matteo's come by." She was the same—she was Silvia.

That grape harvest was the last celebration of the year at the Mora. On All Saints' Day, Irene took to her bed, and a doctor came from Canelli and one from the Station—Irene had typhus and was dying of it. They sent Santina with Silvia to relatives at Alba to save them from infection. Silvia didn't want to go, but then she gave in. Now it was the stepmother's and Emilia's turn to do the running around. A stove was always burning in the upstairs rooms and they changed Irene's bed twice a day. She was raving, they gave her shots, she lost her hair. We were always going to Canelli for medicines. One day a nun came into the yard; Cirino said, "She won't see Christmas," and the next day the priest was there.

26

WHAT IS left of all that, of the life we lived at the Mora? For many years a scent of lime trees in the evening had been enough to make me feel like someone else, make me my real self—I was never sure why. I keep thinking of how many people must live here in the valley, in the world, having the same experiences right now that we had then. They don't know it, never think about it. Perhaps there's a house, some girls, some old people, a child—and a Nuto, a Canelli, a railway station, there's someone like me who wants to leave and make his fortune—and in summer they thresh the grain, pick the grapes, in the winter they go hunting. There's a terrace—everything happens as it did with us. It must be that way. Boys, women, the world are certainly no different. They don't carry parasols any longer, Sundays they go to the movies instead of to the fair, they send their grain to the grain pool, the girls smoke—yet life is the same, and they don't know that one day they will look around and for them, too, everything will have passed. The first thing I said when I got off the boat at Genoa among houses smashed by the war was that every house, every courtyard, every terrace had meant something to someone, and that even more than the physical ruin and the dead, you hate to think of so many years of living, so many memories wiped out like that in one night without leaving a sign. Or maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it's better that way, better for everything to go up in a bonfire of dry grass and for people to begin again. That's how it was in America—when you were sick of something, a job or a place, you

changed it. Over there even whole towns, with taverns, city halls and stores, are as empty now as graveyards.

Nuto doesn't like to talk about the Mora, but he asked me several times if I hadn't seen anyone I remembered. He was thinking of those boys from nearby towns, the bowling and soccer clubs, people we met in bars, girls we took dancing. He knew where everybody was, what they'd done; now, when we were at Salto and someone came by on the road he'd say, fixing the man with his cat's eyes, "Now this one here, recognize him?" Then we enjoyed the man's face, his amazement, and Nuto poured us all a drink. We talked. Someone would use the formal *voi* with me. "I'm Eel," I'd break in. "What nonsense! Your brother, your father, your grandmother, what happened to them? That bitch of yours, is she dead?"

They hadn't changed much; it was I who'd changed. They remembered things I'd done or said, tricks we'd played, brawls, stories I'd forgotten. "And Bianchetta?" one of them asked me. "Remember Bianchetta?" Who could forget? "She married one of the Robini," they told me. "She's doing well."

Almost every night Nuto came to see me at the Angelo, dragged me from the circle of the doctor, the town secretary, the police chief and the civil servants, got me talking. We walked like two monks along the street, listening to the crickets in a cool wind from the Belbo—we never had come to town at that time of night in the old days, we lived differently then.

One night, under the moon and the black hills, Nuto asked me what it was like to ship out for America, whether I'd do it again if I could have the twenty years back and another chance. I told him it hadn't been America so much as my rage at being nobody, a mania not so much to leave as, one fine day, to come home after everyone had given me up for dead. In my village I'd have been nothing but a servant, an old Cirino (he had died, too, some time ago, had broken his back falling from a hayloft and hung on for more than a year

after that), so why not take a chance and give in—having crossed the Bormida, why not cross the sea?

"But it isn't easy to ship out," Nuto said. "You had your courage."

It hadn't been courage, I said, I ran away. Why not tell him the truth?

"Remember those talks we had with your father in the shop? Even then he was saying that ignoramuses would always be ignoramuses, because power belongs to those who profit from the ignorance of others, to the government, the priests, the capitalists . . . Here at the Mora it was nothing, but when I'd been a soldier and saw the docks and alleys of Genoa, I understood what they were, the masters, the capitalists, the military . . . We had the Fascists then, and you couldn't say these things . . . But there were the others, too . . ."

I'd never told him, not wanting to get him started on this useless subject. Now, twenty years later, after so much had happened, I no longer knew what to think myself. But that winter in Genoa I believed in it. How many nights I spent arguing in the greenhouse of the villa with Guido, Remo, Cerreti, and all the others. Then Teresa took fright, didn't want to let us in anymore, so I told her to go ahead and stay a maid and be exploited, she deserved it, but we intended to hold on and resist. So we went on working in the barracks, in the bars, and after discharge we found work in the shipyards and went to trade school at night. Now Teresa was listening to me patiently and telling me that I was right to study, to want to better myself, and she fed me in the kitchen. She didn't talk politics again. But one night Cerreti came to warn me that Guido and Remo had been arrested and the police were looking for the others. But then, without blaming me at all, Teresa talked to someone—her brother-in-law, her old boss, someone—and two days later she'd found me a rough job on a ship leaving for America. That's how it was, I told Nuto.

"You see?" he said. "Sometimes all it takes is a word you hear as a boy, or even from an old man, from a poor devil like my father, to open your eyes . . . I'm glad you weren't only thinking of the money . . . And those comrades, how did they die?"

There we were, walking the highway outside of town, talking about our fates. I cocked an ear in the direction of the moon and heard the brakes of a cart creaking in the distance—a sound that hasn't been heard on the streets of America for a long time. I thought of Genoa and my officers, of what my life would have been if they'd found me, too, that morning in Remo's shipyard. In a few days I'd be back in Genoa, on Viale Corsica. It was all over for this summer.

Someone was running along the highway in the dust, it looked at first like a dog. Then I saw it was a boy: he was limping and running to meet us. As soon as I was sure it was Cinto, he'd caught up, thrown himself between my legs, and was moaning like a dog.

"What's the trouble?"

At first we didn't believe him. He said his father had set fire to the house. "Valino, of all people . . . you might know it!" Nuto said.

"He burned down the house," Cinto kept repeating. "He wanted to kill me . . . He hanged himself . . . He burned down the house."

"They must have knocked over the lamp," I said.

"No, no," Cinto yelled, "he killed Rosina and my grandmother. He wanted to kill me, but I didn't let him . . . Then he lit the straw and kept looking for me, but I had the knife and then he hanged himself in the vineyard . . ."

Cinto was panting, moaning, black and scratched up. He sat in the dust at my feet, kept squeezing my leg and repeating, "Papa hanged himself in the vineyard, he burned down the house . . . The cow, too. The rabbits ran away, but I had the knife . . . Everything's burned . . . Piola saw it, too . . ."

27

NUTO TOOK him by the shoulders and lifted him up like a little goat.

"He killed Rosina and your grandmother?"

Cinto was trembling and couldn't speak.

"Did he kill them?" He shook the boy.

"Leave him alone," I told Nuto, "he's half dead. Why don't we go and see?"

Then Cinto threw himself against my legs and wouldn't move.

"Stand up," I told him. "Who did you want to see?"

He was looking for me, he didn't want to go back to the vineyard. He'd run to call Morone and Piola's family, had waked them all. Other people were already running down the hill; he'd yelled at them to put out the fire but he didn't want to go back to the vineyard, he'd lost his knife.

"We won't go to the vineyard," I told him. "We'll stay on the road and Nuto will go up. What are you scared of? If it's true that they've come down from the farms, it's all out by now . . ."

We started walking, holding him by the hand. You can't see the hill of Gaminella from the road, it's hidden by a spur. But as soon as you leave the highway and turn the corner along the steep slope over the Belbo, you would have had to see a fire through the trees. We saw nothing, except for a mist around the moon.

Saying nothing, Nuto yanked Cinto's arm and made him stumble. We went on, almost running. Under the canebrake

you could see that something had happened. You could hear shouting from up there and blows as if someone was chopping down a tree, and a cloud of stinking smoke descended to the road in the cool night air.

Cinto didn't hold back any longer but kept up with us, squeezing my fingers tighter. People were coming and going and talking, by the fig tree. Moonlight already lit up the empty space where the hayloft and barn had been—now I could see it from the path—and the gaps in the house wall. A red glow was dying down at the foot of the wall, giving out a black smoke. There was a stench of wool, flesh, and scorched manure that seized your throat. A rabbit raced between my feet.

Nuto, standing level with the barnyard, was looking grim and beating his forehead with closed fists. "What a stink," he muttered, "what a stink."

The fire had burned itself out, all the neighbors had run to help. At one point, they said, the flames had even lit up the riverbank and you could see them reflected in the water of the Belbo. Nothing had been saved, not even the manure pile behind the house.

Someone ran to call the chief of police; they sent a woman to bring something to drink from Morone's; we made Cinto drink a little wine. He was asking about the dog, if he had been burned, too. Everyone had something to say. We made Cinto sit down in the field and he told us his story, in gulps.

He didn't know, he'd gone down to the Belbo. Then he heard the dog barking, his father tying up the ox. The madame of the Villa had come with her son to divide up the beans and potatoes. She'd said that two rows of potatoes had already been dug, so Valino would have to make up for them, and Rosina had shouted, Valino cursed, the madame went inside to force the grandmother to talk while her son kept an eye on the baskets outside. Then they weighed the beans and potatoes, struck a bargain with eyes full of hate. They loaded the cart and Valino went to the village.

But he came home that evening in a black mood. He started shouting at Rosina and the grandmother because they hadn't picked the green beans earlier. He said that now the madame was eating the beans that belonged to them. The old woman was crying on her straw mattress.

He, Cinto, had stood by the door ready to run away. Then Valino took off his belt and began to whip Rosina. He seemed to be threshing grain. Rosina threw herself against the table, screaming, holding her throat with her hands. Then she screamed louder, a bottle fell, and Rosina, tearing her hair, fell on the grandmother and took her in her arms. Then Valino kicked her—you could hear it—kicked her in the ribs and stomped on her with his shoes. Rosina had fallen on the floor and Valino kicked her again in the face and stomach.

Rosina was dead, Cinto told us, she was dead and bleeding from the mouth. "Get up!" his father said. "Crazy woman!" But Rosina was dead, and now the old woman was quiet, too.

Then Valino had gone after Cinto—and Cinto ran. From the vineyard he couldn't hear anybody, except the dog running up and down on his wire.

Soon afterward Valino began calling Cinto. Cinto said you could tell from his voice that it wasn't to beat him, he was only calling. Then Cinto opened his knife and went to the yard. His father was waiting at the door, black all over. When he saw Cinto with the knife, he said "Scum," and tried to catch him. Cinto escaped again.

Then he heard his father kicking all over the place, cursing and damning the priest. Then he saw the flames.

His father had come out, holding the lamp without a chimney. He ran all around inside the house. He even set fire to the hayloft and straw and smashed the lamp against the window. The room was already full of flames. The women didn't come out, but he thought he heard crying and shouting.

Now the whole place was burning, and Cinto couldn't go down to the field because his father would have seen him as

bright as day. The dog went crazy, barking and yanking his wire. The rabbits were running away. The ox, too, burned to death in the barn.

Valino was running through the vineyard with a rope in his hand, looking for Cinto. And he, still holding the knife, had escaped to the woods. He stayed there, hidden, watching the firelight on the leaves up above.

Even from here the roar of the fire sounded like a furnace. The dog never stopped howling. In the woods, too, it was bright as day. When Cinto couldn't hear the dog anymore or anything else, it was as though he'd just waked up, he couldn't remember what he was doing in the woods. Then slowly, slowly he climbed toward the walnut tree, holding the open knife, listening for noises and watching for fire. And in the glare under the crown of the walnut he saw his father's feet dangling and the ladder on the ground.

He had to repeat the whole story to the police chief and they made him look at his dead father stretched under a sack, to identify him. They made a pile of things recovered from the field—the scythe, a wheelbarrow, the ladder, the ox's muzzle, and a sieve. Cinto was looking for his knife, asking everyone for it, and coughing in the stench of smoke and flesh. They told him he'd find it, that even the hoe and shovel blades could be found when the coals were dead. We took Cinto over to Morone's; it was almost morning. The others had to look in the ashes for what was left of the women.

Nobody was asleep at Morone's. The door was open and the kitchen lit up. The women offered us drinks, the men were sitting down to breakfast. It was cool, almost cold. I was sick of arguments and talk. They were all saying the same things. I stayed with Nuto, walking in the yard under the last stars, and from up there we could make out in the cold, almost violet air the clumps of trees on the plain, the gleam of water. I'd forgotten what dawn was like.

Nuto was walking hunched over, his eyes on the ground. I

told him right away that it was our business to think of Cinto, that we should have done it before. He looked up at me with swollen eyes, seeming half asleep.

The next day things began to get ugly. I heard them saying in the village that the madame was furious about her property, that, since Cinto was the only survivor of the family, she claimed that Cinto should make it up to her, should pay for it—let them put him in jail. They said that she'd gone to a lawyer for advice and the notary had to argue with her for an hour. Then she ran to the priest.

The priest made her feel better. Since Valino had died in mortal sin, he wouldn't think of blessing him in church. They left the coffin on the steps outside, while inside the priest mumbled something over those four black bones of the women, tied in a sack. This all happened toward evening, in secret. The old women from Morone's with veils over their heads went with the dead to the graveyard, picking daisies and clover along the road. The priest didn't come because, when he thought it over, Rosina had also lived in mortal sin. But only the dressmaker said this, a loose tongue from long ago.

28

IRENE didn't die of typhus that winter. I remember that as long as Irene was in danger I tried not to swear in the barn or in the rain behind the plow; I tried to think good thoughts, to help her—as Serafina had told us to. But I don't know if we helped her, perhaps it would have been better if she'd died the day the priest came to bless her. Because, when she finally left the house in January and they drove her, as thin as a skeleton, to hear mass at Canelli, her Cesarino had gone to Genoa some time before without ever once coming to ask how she was or sending someone else to ask. And the Nido was closed.

When Silvia came home she, too, had a big disappointment, but no matter what anyone said, she minded it less. Silvia was used to these meannesses by now, she could take them in her stride and recover.

Her Matteo had found another girl. Silvia hadn't come back from Alba right away in January, and even at the Mora we began to say that if she didn't come home there was a reason—she was pregnant of course. People who went to market at Alba said there were days when Matteo of Crevalcuore would shoot across the piazza or in front of the café on his motorcycle. No one had ever seen her ride away with her arms around him, or even meet him at all. That must mean that Silvia couldn't go out, that she was pregnant. The fact was that when she did come back with the good weather, Matteo had already found himself another woman, the daughter of the café owner at Santo Stefano where he was

now spending his nights. Silvia came back along the highway, holding Santina by the hand: no one had gone to meet her at the train, and they stopped in the garden to touch the first roses. They were chattering together in low voices like mother and daughter, flushed from their walk.

It was Irene, now, who was pale and thin and kept her eyes on the ground. She looked like one of those autumn crocuses that bloom in the fields after the vintage or the grass that keeps on growing under a stone. She wore a red bandanna over her hair, showing a bare neck and ears. Emilia said she would never have the head of hair she used to have—Santina would be the blond one now, her hair was even more beautiful than Irene's. Santina already knew how pretty she was, when she stood beside the fence to let people see her or walked with us in the yard or up the paths and chattered with the women. I asked her what they'd done at Alba, what Silvia had done, and if she felt like answering, she'd say that they lived in a beautiful house with carpets, across from the church, and sometimes they'd play and eat cookies, then one evening they went to the theater with their aunt and Nicoletto and everybody wore good clothes, that the girls went to school with the nuns and by next year she'd be going herself. I couldn't find out much about how Silvia spent her days, but she must have gone on dancing with the officers. She'd never been sick.

Their earlier friends, young men and girls, began coming again to the Mora to see them. Nuto was drafted that year, I was a man now, the farmer couldn't take his belt to me anymore, and nobody called me bastard. I was known on many farms in the region; I came and went in the evenings and at night, and I was going out with Bianchetta. I began to know many things—the smell of the limes and acacias had a meaning for me, too, now I knew what a woman was, knew why the music at dances made me want to wander the fields like a dog. The window that looked on the hills beyond Canelli, from where both thunderstorms and good weather came and

the dawn broke, was always the place where trains smoked by, where the road went to Genoa. I knew that in two years I'd be taking that train like Nuto. At the fairs I was beginning to join the gangs my own age—we drank and sang and talked things over.

Now Silvia was crazy again. Arturo and his Tuscan friend turned up again at the Mora, but she wouldn't even look at them. She was going with an accountant from Canelli who worked at the Contratto factory, and it looked as though they ought to get married, and even Sor Matteo seemed to approve—the accountant would come to the Mora on his bicycle, a little blond fellow from San Marzano who always brought candy for Santina—but one night Silvia disappeared. She didn't come back until the next day, with her arms full of flowers. At Canelli, it seemed, there wasn't only the accountant but a handsome man who knew French and English and came from Milan. He was tall and gray-haired, a real gentleman—they said he was there to buy land. Silvia used to meet him at a friend's villa and they went on picnics together. That time they'd gone out for dinner and she came home the next morning. The accountant heard about it and wanted to murder someone, but this fellow Lugli went to see him, treated him like a boy, and the matter was dropped.

I never saw this man except from a distance. He was perhaps fifty and his children were grown up, but for Silvia he was worse than Matteo of Crevalcuore. Matteo and Arturo and the others were people I understood, they came from around here. Perhaps they weren't worth much, but they were our own people who drank and laughed and spoke like us. But this fellow from Milan, this Lugli, nobody knew what he was doing at Canelli. He gave dinners at the Croce Bianca, got on well with the mayor and the local Fascists, visited the factories. He must have promised to take Silvia to Milan, who knows where?—far from the Mora and the hills. Silvia had lost her head, she waited for him at the Café dello Sport,

drove around among the villas and country estates in the town secretary's car, as far as Acqui. I think that Lugli meant to her what she and her sister might have meant to me—what Genoa and America later came to mean. I knew enough by then to picture them together and imagine what they were saying—how he talked to her about Milan, theaters, big shots, and horse races, and how she listened to him with bold, eager eyes, pretending to know everything. This Lugli was always dressed like a tailor's dummy, had a little pipe stuck in his mouth, had gold teeth and a gold ring. Once Silvia told Irene—and Emilia heard it—that he'd been to England and was going back there.

But one day Sor Matteo blew up in front of his wife and daughters. He shouted that he was sick of long faces and short nights, sick of the horseflies buzzing around, of never knowing at night who he'd have to meet in the morning, of being a joke to all his friends. He blamed the stepmother, those lazy tramps of suitors, the whole whoring race of women. His Santa at least, he said, he was going to bring up himself; let the others marry anyone who'd take them, but get out from under his feet and go back to Alba. Poor man, he was old and no longer in control of himself or of anyone else. Lanzone had discovered this, too, when he brought him the accounts. Everyone knew it. The scene ended with Irene going to bed with red eyes and Signora Elvira hugging Santina and telling her not to listen to such language. Silvia shrugged and stayed away all night and the day after.

Then even the Lugli story ended. We heard that he'd run out, leaving huge debts. But this time Silvia fought back like a cat. She went to Fascist headquarters at Canelli, went to the party secretary, went to the villas where they'd slept together and enjoyed themselves—she did so much that she found out he must be at Genoa. Then she took the Genoa train, bringing with her what little jewelry and money she could lay her hands on.

A month later Sor Matteo went to get her, after the police had told him where she was; being of age Silvia couldn't be sent home. She was starving on the benches at Brignole. She hadn't found Lugli, she hadn't found anybody; she wanted to throw herself under a train. Sor Matteo calmed her, told her it had been a sickness, an accident like her sister's typhus, that we were all waiting for her at the Mora. They came back, but this time Silvia really was pregnant.

29

ABOUT this time we learned another piece of news: the old lady of the Nido had died. Irene said nothing, but you could tell that she was excited, the blood came back to her cheeks. Now that Cesarino could act on his own, we'd soon see what kind of man he was. There were plenty of rumors—that he was the sole heir, that there were many heirs, that the old lady had left everything to the bishop and the monasteries.

Instead a lawyer came to look over the Nido and its lands. He spoke to no one, not even to Tommasino. He gave orders for the farm work, for the crops, for what to sow. He took inventory at the Nido. Nuto, who came home on leave for the harvesting, had heard it all at Canelli. The old lady had left everything to the children of a niece who weren't even counts, and had named her lawyer as guardian. So the Nido stayed closed, and Cesarino didn't return.

I was always with Nuto in those days and we discussed many things—Genoa, army life, music, and Bianchetta. He would smoke and make me smoke, asked me if I wasn't tired of pounding those furrows, said that the world was large and had a place for everybody. He shrugged and had nothing to say about Irene and Silvia.

Nor did Irene say anything about the news from the Nido. She stayed thin and pale and went to sit with Santina on the bank of the Belbo. She'd hold her book on her knees and look at the bushes. On Sundays they all went to mass in black veils—the stepmother, Silvia, all of them together. After so long a time, one Sunday I heard the piano play again.

The winter before, Emilia had loaned me one of Irene's novels that a girl from Canelli had loaned to them. For a long time I'd wanted to follow Nuto's advice and study something. I wasn't a boy any longer, happy enough to listen to the others talk about the stars and saints' days, sitting on the beam after dinner. So I sat by the fire and read those novels, to learn something. They talked about girls who had guardians and aunts and enemies who held them captive in beautiful villas with gardens where there were maids to carry little notes around, administer poison and steal wills. Then a handsome man would appear and kiss the girl, a man on horseback, and at night the girl would feel herself suffocating, would go out to the garden, be snatched away and wake up next morning in a woodsman's hut where the handsome man would come and save her. Or else the story would begin with a boy desperado in the woods, the natural son of the owner of a castle where crimes were committed, poisonings, and the boy would be accused and put in prison, but then a white-haired priest would save him and marry him to the heiress of another castle. I found that I'd known these stories a long time, Virgilia had told them to Giulia and me at Gaminella—they were called the story of The Beautiful Girl with Golden Hair who slept like the dead in a forest until a hunter waked her with a kiss; the story of The Wizard With The Seven Heads who, just when a girl had fallen in love with him, became a handsome young man, the son of a king.

I liked these novels, but how could Irene and Silvia have liked them, too, when they were ladies who'd never known Virgilia or cleaned a barn? I saw that Nuto was exactly right when he said that to live in a hole or a palace made no difference, that blood is red everywhere, everyone wants to be rich, to fall in love and be lucky. Those evenings, coming home under the acacias from Bianchetta's house, I was happy and whistling, not thinking anymore of jumping on the train.

Signora Elvira began asking Arturo to dinner again. This

time he was smart and left the Tuscan friend at home. Sor Matteo stopped resisting. That was before Silvia had confessed what state she was in when she came home from Genoa, and life at the Mora seemed to pick up again, a little tired but the same. Arturo began to court Irene right away; now Silvia looked at him with her hair over her eyes and seemed to find it all very funny. But when Irene sat down at the piano Silvia would leave at once and lean over the terrace or go walking in the fields. Parasols weren't in style anymore, even in the sun women went around now with bare heads.

Irene wanted no part of Arturo. She was meek but cold, walked with him in the garden and up to the gate, but they hardly spoke. Arturo was always the same—he'd thrown away some more of his father's money, he even winked at Emilia, but we could tell that except for cards and target shooting he wasn't worth a cent.

It was Emilia who told us that Silvia was pregnant. She found out before Silvia's father did, or anyone else. The evening Sor Matteo heard the news—Irene and Signora Elvira told him—instead of shouting he broke into a wicked laugh, then clapped his hand on his mouth. "And now," he sneered through his fingers, "go find him a father." But when he started to stand up to go to Silvia's room, he fainted and fell. From that day on he was half paralyzed, his mouth twisted to one side.

When Sor Matteo left his bed and could walk a few steps, Silvia was ready for him. She'd gone to a midwife at Costigliole and had herself cleaned out. She said nothing to anyone. Then two days later we discovered where she'd been from the train ticket she left in her pocket. She came back with rings around her eyes and the face of a corpse—she went to bed and filled it with blood. She died without saying a word, either to the priest or to anyone else. She only kept calling for "Papa" in a low voice.

For the funeral we picked all the flowers from the garden

and the farms around. It was June and there were plenty of them. They buried her without her father knowing, but he heard the priest saying the litany in the next room, took fright and tried to say that he wasn't dead yet. When he came out on the terrace later, held up by Elvira and Arturo's father, he wore a little beret over his eyes and stayed in the sun, not saying a word. Arturo and his father took turns, were always near him.

Now it was Santina's mother who no longer looked kindly on Arturo. With her husband sick, the idea of Irene marrying and carrying off the dowry no longer suited her. Better for Irene to stay single at home and play godmother to Santina, so that finally the little one would be mistress of everything. Sor Matteo had nothing more to say; it was all he could do to put his spoon in his mouth. The signora kept accounts with us and the head farmer and stuck her nose into everything.

But Arturo was clever and made himself felt. Now he'd be doing Irene a favor by marrying her, because after Silvia's affair everyone was saying that the Mora girls were whores. He didn't say so himself, but he kept showing up with a long, long face, was always with their father, ran errands to Canelli using our horse, and in church on Sunday he'd touch Irene's hand with holy water. He was always there in his dark clothes—he'd left the riding boots at home—and supplied all the medicines. Even before they were married he was in the house from morning till night and walked around the farm.

Irene accepted him because she wanted to leave, not to have to see the Nido on its hill any longer, not to hear her stepmother grumbling and making scenes. She married him in November, the year after Silvia died, and they didn't have a big wedding because of the mourning and because Sor Matteo was hardly able to speak at all. They left for Turin, and Signora Elvira threw a fit in front of Serafina and Emilia—she never would have thought that a girl she'd treated like a

daughter could be so ungrateful. The prettiest one at the wedding was Santina, all dressed in silk—she was only six, but she was the one who looked like a bride.

I was drafted for the army that spring and began to forget the Mora. Arturo came back and started giving orders. He sold the piano, sold the horse and some of the pasture rights. Irene, who'd expected to go and live in a new house, went back to looking after her father and putting on his poultices. Arturo was always away now; he started gambling again, hunting and giving dinners for his friends. The next year, the one time I went back on leave from Genoa, the dowry—half the Mora—was already gone and Irene was living at Nizza in one room, where Arturo beat her.

30

I REMEMBER one Sunday in summer when Silvia was alive and Irene was young. I must have been seventeen or eighteen and was beginning to explore the villages and towns. It was the Feast of Good Counsel, the first of September. For all their tea parties, their visiting and their friends, Irene and Silvia couldn't go because of some mysterious business of clothes and grudges that kept them from joining their usual company, and now they were stretched out on their deck chairs looking at the sky above the dovecote. That morning I'd given my neck a good scrubbing, changed my shirt and shoes and was coming back from town for something to eat, expecting to jump on my bicycle and return. Nuto had been at the fair since the day before because he was playing for the dances.

From the terrace Silvia asked me where I was going. She seemed to want to gossip. Every so often she'd talk to me like that, with her beautiful girl's smile—which was when I stopped feeling like a farmhand. But I was in a hurry that day, in no mood to talk. Why didn't I take the carriage? Silvia asked, I'd get there faster. Then she called to Irene, "Why don't you come to the fair, too? Eel will take us and watch the horse."

I didn't like it much but had to agree. They came down with their picnic basket, their parasols and a blanket. Silvia was wearing a flowered dress and Irene a white one. They climbed in with their high-heeled shoes and spread their parasols.

My neck and back were well washed, and Silvia sat next

to me under her parasol and smelled of flowers. I saw her small rosy ear, pierced for earrings, the white nape of her neck, and Irene's blond head behind her. They were talking to each other about the young men who came to see them, criticizing and laughing, and every so often they'd look at me and tell me not to listen; then they were trying to guess which of the men would come to Good Counsel. When we started to climb I jumped out so as not to tire the horse, and Silvia took the reins.

As we drove they kept asking me whose house that was, whose farm, what bell tower. I knew all about the grapes on the vines, but their owners I didn't know. We turned to look at the bell tower of Calosso and I showed them in what direction the Mora was now.

Then Irene asked me if I really didn't know who my parents were. I told her I wasn't letting it worry me; and it was then that Silvia looked me up and down, from head to foot, and told Irene, very seriously, that I was a good-looking young man, I didn't even look like a native. Not to offend me, Irene said that I must have good hands and I quickly stuck them out of sight. Then she laughed like Silvia. They went back to talking about their grudges and their clothes and we came up under the trees at the Feast of Good Counsel.

There was a crowd of stalls selling candy, there were pennants, carts, and shooting galleries, and now and then you'd hear the crack of air rifles. I led the horse under the shade of the plane trees where the hitching bars were, unharnessed the carriage, and spread the hay. Irene and Silvia were asking, "Where's the racecourse, where is it?" But there was plenty of time, and they began looking for their friends. I had to keep an eye on the horse and meanwhile see the fair.

It was early, Nuto wasn't playing yet, but from a distance you could hear the instruments blatting, squealing, snorting, joking, each for itself. I found Nuto drinking soda with the boys from Seraudi. They were standing in the space behind

the church from where you could see the whole hill facing you and the white vineyards and their borders and, far away, the farmhouses in the woods. The people at Good Counsel came from up there, from the loneliest farmyards and from farther still, from the little churches, from villages beyond the Mango where there were nothing but goat paths and no one ever went. They'd come to the fair in carts, in carriages, on bicycles and on foot. A crowd of girls and old women was going into the church while the men stood around and looked up. The gentlemen, the well-dressed girls, the little boys with neckties were there, too, waiting at the door for the procession to start. I told Nuto that I'd come with Irene and Silvia and we saw them laughing in their circle of friends. That flowered dress was really the most beautiful.

I went with Nuto to see the horses at the inn stables. Bizzarro from the Station stopped us at the door and told us to stand watch. He and the others uncorked a bottle, half of which spilled on the ground. But it wasn't for drinking. They poured the still fizzing wine into a bowl and made Laiolo, a horse as black as a moor, lick at it, and when he'd drunk it all they smacked him on his hind legs with a whip handle to wake him up. Laiolo let fly with his feet, arching his tail like a cat. "Don't say a word," they told us. "Wait and see, the flag is ours."

Just then Silvia and her young men came to the door. "If you're drinking already," a fat boy said, a great laugher, "it'll be you that races, not the horses."

Bizzarro began to chuckle and wipe off his sweat with a red handkerchief. "These young ladies should race," he said. "They're lighter than us."

Then Nuto left to play for the procession of the Madonna. The band lined up in front of the church, then the Madonna came out. Nuto winked at us, spat, wiped his face with his hand and put his clarinet in his mouth. They played a piece loud enough to be heard from the Mango.

There on that open space among the plane trees I liked to hear the trumpets and clarinet, liked to see everyone kneel and run around, the Madonna come lurching out of the big door on the sacristans' shoulders. Then the priests came out, the altar boys in their surplices, the old women, the gentry, the incense, all those candles in the sunlight, the colors of the dresses, the girls. Even the men and women from the stalls, the candy sellers, people from the shooting galleries and merry-go-rounds, they all were standing and watching under the plane trees.

The Madonna made a tour of the square and someone set off the firecrackers. I saw Irene, as blond as honey, covering her ears. I was glad that I was the one who'd brought them here in the carriage, that I was going to the fair with them.

I went over for a minute to brush some hay under the horse's nose and stopped to look at our blanket, the shawls, the basket.

It was time for the race and the music played again while the horses came down the road. I kept a lookout for the flowered dress and the white one. I could see them talking and laughing. What wouldn't I have given to be one of their men and take them dancing myself.

Twice the race went by, down the hill and up and under the plane trees, and the horses made a noise like the Belbo in flood. Laiolo was ridden by a boy I didn't know, hunched over, chin down, and whipping like mad. Bizzarro stood near me and started swearing, then yelled, "Hurray!" when another horse stumbled and went down on his face like a sack; then he swore again when Laiolo lifted his head and took a jump; he tore the handkerchief from his neck, said "You bastard, you" to me, and the Seraudi boys were dancing and butting each other like goats; then the people on the other side began to shout, Bizzarro threw himself on the grass and, big as he was, turned a cartwheel and banged his head on the ground. Everybody shouted again. A horse from Neive had won.

After that I lost sight of Irene and Silvia. I had my turn at target shooting and cards, then went to the inn to listen to the horse owners fighting and drinking one bottle after another while the parish priest tried to quiet them down. Some were singing, some cursing, some still eating salami and cheese. No girls were coming in here, that was sure.

By now Nuto and the band were sitting and starting to play for the dance. You could hear music and laughing in the stillness, the evening was cool and clear. I was circling behind the stalls, watching them roll up the burlap partitions while the boys cracked jokes and drank and some were already behind the counters lifting the women's skirts. The younger ones were calling to each other, stealing candy, making a racket.

I went to see them dancing on the platform under the big tent. The Seraudi gang was already at it. Their sisters were there, but I stood watching because I was looking for the flowered dress and the white one. I saw them both in the light of the acetylene lamp, their arms around their men, their faces on their men's shoulders as the music played and swept them around. "I wish I was Nuto," I thought. I went by Nuto's bench and he made them fill my glass, the same as the players'.

Later, Silvia found me stretched on the grass, near the horse's face. I was lying flat and counting the stars between the plane trees. Suddenly I saw her smiling face, her flowered dress between me and the arch of the sky. "He's here asleep," she shouted.

So I jumped up and their men made a lot of noise, wanting them to stay longer. Far away behind the church some girls were singing. One of the men offered to walk them home, but there were other girls who said, "What about us?"

We set out by the light of the acetylene lamp, and then I drove slowly down the dark road listening to the horseshoes clopping. That chorus behind the church was still singing.

Irene had wrapped herself in a shawl, Silvia talked and talked about the people, the dancers, the summer, criticizing everybody and laughing. They asked me if I had a girl of my own. I said I'd been with Nuto, to watch them play.

Then little by little Silvia calmed down and finally she rested her head on my shoulder, gave me a smile, and asked if she could stay like that while I drove. I held the reins and watched the horse's ears.

31

NUTO TOOK Cinto into his household, to make a carpenter out of him and teach him to play the clarinet. We agreed that if the boy did well, I'd find him a job in Genoa when he was ready for it. Something else to decide: to take him to the Alessandria hospital and have the doctor look at his leg. Nuto's wife protested that there were already too many of them in the Salto house, with all those apprentices at work, and then she couldn't keep an eye on him. We told her that Cinto was an intelligent boy. But even so, I took him aside and explained to him why he must be careful, this wasn't like the Gaminella road—cars, trucks, motorcycles coming and going from Canelli right in front of the shop—he must always look out before crossing.

That was how Cinto found a house to live in, and the next day I had to go back to Genoa. I spent the morning at Salto, and Nuto kept after me, saying, "So you're leaving? Aren't you coming back for the grape harvest?"

"Perhaps I'll ship out," I said. "I'll come back for the fair another year."

Nuto flexed his lips in that way he has. "You haven't been here long," he said. "We haven't even talked."

I was laughing. "I even found you another son . . ."

When we rose from the table Nuto made up his mind. He grabbed his jacket and looked up. "Let's go across," he mumbled. "This is your country."

We went through the alder groves, over the Belbo footbridge and came out among the acacias on the Gaminella road.

"Aren't we going to look at the house?" I said. "Even Valino was worth something."

We climbed the path. It was a skeleton of black, empty walls and now you could see the walnut tree rising over the rows of vines, enormous. "Only the trees are left," I said. "Was it worth Valino's while to cut brush . . . ? The trees have won."

Nuto was silent and looked at the yard full of stones and ashes. I walked around among the stones and couldn't even find the cellar hole—the rubble had filled it up. Some birds were making a noise in the bushes, a few fluttered around the vines.

"I'm going to eat a fig," I said. "Who cares now?" I took a fig and recognized the old flavor.

"I wouldn't put it past the Madame of the Villa," I said, "to make me spit it out."

Nuto kept silent and looked at the hill.

"Now these people are dead, too," he said. "How many have died since you left the Mora!"

The beam was the same as ever and I sat down, saying that of all the dead it was hardest to forget Sor Matteo's daughters. "Let's leave Silvia out, she died at home. But Irene, living with that tramp . . . struggling the way they did . . . And Santina, who knows how Santina died . . ."

Nuto tossed some pebbles and looked up.

"Don't you want to go to high Gaminella? Let's go, it's still early."

So we went, he walking ahead along the paths between the vineyards. I remembered that dry white earth, the crushed slippery grass of the paths, and that coarse smell of hill and vineyard already ripe with the coming grape harvest under the sun. Long wind-streaks filled the sky, thin white films like the condensation you see at night in the darkness behind the stars. I was thinking that tomorrow I'd be in Genoa, on the Viale Corsica. Then I remembered how the sea is also

veined with its currents and that, as a child, when I watched the clouds and the Milky Way, I'd already begun my travels without knowing it.

Nuto was waiting for me at the top of the rise, and said, "You, you didn't see Santa when she was twenty. What a sight that was, what a sight. More beautiful than Irene and eyes like the black heart of a poppy . . . But a bitch, a hangman's bitch . . ."

"Is it possible that she ended like that . . ."

I stopped to look down the valley. As a boy I'd never climbed this high. You could see as far as the outskirts of Canelli, as the railway station and the dark wood of Calamandrana. I realized that Nuto wanted to tell me something—and for some reason the Feast of Good Counsel came back to my mind.

"Once I went to the fair with Silvia and Irene," I said for no reason, "in the carriage. I was a boy. From up there you could see the farthest villages, farms, barnyards, even vine-spray stains over the windows. There was a horse race and we all seemed to go out of our minds . . . now I can't even remember who won. I only remember those farms and Silvia's dress, rose and violet, and flowered . . ."

"Santa, too," Nuto said, "once made us take her to the fair at Bubbio. One year she'd only go dancing when I was playing. Her mother was still alive . . . they were still living at the Mora . . ."

He turned and said, "Shall we go?"

He led me up through more of those level places on the path. Now and then he'd look around, trying to find a road. I was thinking of how nothing changes, everything comes around again—I could see Nuto driving Santa to the fair through those hills as I'd driven her sisters. I caught sight of the first small grotto in the soft stone above the vineyards, one of those little caves where they keep their hoes, or else, if there's a spring, you find maidenhair fern in the shade above the water. We crossed a meager vineyard, full of ferns

and those little yellow flowers with hard stems that seem to belong to the mountains—I'd always known that you chewed them and put them on cuts to close them up. And the hill still rose in front of us: we'd passed several farms and were out in the open.

"I might as well tell you," Nuto said suddenly, without looking up, "I know how they killed her. I was there myself."

He was walking on an almost level road that circles a ridge. I said nothing and let him talk. I kept my eyes on the road, barely turning my head whenever a bird or a wasp grazed me.

There'd been a time, Nuto said, when he used to go to Canelli by that road behind the movie theater. He used to look up to see if her curtains were moving. People talk so much. Nicoletto was already living at the Mora, and Santa, who couldn't stand him, ran away to Canelli as soon as her mother died, rented a room, and became a schoolteacher. But being the kind of girl she was, she found work at Fascist headquarters and after a while people were talking about an officer of the militia, about the mayor, the party secretary—the scum of the whole region. With her fine golden hair it was her big chance to climb in a car and explore the province, to dine in villas, in rich men's houses, at the Acqui baths—if it hadn't been for those friends of hers. Nuto tried to avoid her in the street, but when he went under the window he'd look up at the curtains.

Then, in the summer of '43, the good life ended for Santa, too. Nuto was always at Canelli, picking up news and passing it on, but he no longer watched her curtains. They said that Santa had run away to Alessandria with her group commander.

Then September came, the Germans returned, the war returned—soldiers came home to hide, disguised, starving, barefoot. The Fascists kept up their shooting all night and everyone said: "We knew it would end like this." The

Republic of Salò had begun. One fine day Nuto heard that Santa had come back to Canelli and taken her old job at Fascist headquarters, was drinking heavily and going to bed with the blackshirts.

32

HE COULDN'T believe it. Right to the end he couldn't believe it. Once he saw her crossing the bridge on her way from the railroad station wearing a gray fur coat and suede shoes, her eyes lively from the cold. She stopped him.

"How are things at the Salto? Still playing in the band . . . ? Oh Nuto, I was afraid you were in Germany too . . . It must be bad up there . . . Are they leaving you alone . . . ?"

Crossing Canelli was always a risk in those days. There were patrols, Germans. And if it hadn't been for the war, a girl like Santa would never have stopped a Nuto on the street. He was edgy that day and answered her only yes and no.

Then he saw her again at the Café dello Sport. She'd called to him as she was walking out the door. Nuto took a good look at the people going in, but it was a quiet morning, a bright Sunday with people on their way to mass.

"You knew me when I was only so high," Santa said. "You believe me. There are evil people in Canelli. They'd burn me if they could . . . They think that the only life for a girl is the life of a fool. They'd like to see me die like Irene—I should kiss the hand that hits me. But I bite the hand that hits me . . . trash, too weak to be evil . . ."

Santa was smoking cigarettes you couldn't find in Canelli, and offered him some. "Take them," she said, "take them all. There must be a lot of smokers up there, with you . . .

"You see how it is," Santina went on, "because I knew someone once and played the fool even you turned to the window when I went by. But you knew my mother, you

know what I'm like . . . you took me to the fair . . . Don't you think I was just as sick as you of those cowards we had before . . . ? These ones now at least defend themselves . . . Now I have to live and eat their bread because I've always done my own work, nobody's ever kept me, but if I ever wanted to speak up . . . if I ever lost my patience . . ."

Santa was saying these things at the little marble-topped table, looking seriously at Nuto with her bold and delicate mouth, her moist, resentful eyes—like her sisters'. Nuto was doing all he could to find out if she was lying, he even told her that these were times when you had to choose, either one side or the other, and he'd chosen, he was for the deserters, the patriots, the Communists. He should have asked her right then to spy for them at the command posts, but he didn't dare—the idea of putting a woman in so much danger, especially Santa, would never have occurred to him.

But it did occur to Santa, and she gave Nuto a lot of news of troop movements, of secret orders from the Command, of what the Fascist Republicans were saying. Another day she sent him a message not to come to Canelli because it was dangerous, and in fact the Germans swept the piazzas and cafés. Santa said she wasn't risking anything herself; there were some chicken-hearted old acquaintances of hers who came to her to talk out their troubles—she'd have thrown them out except for the news she was able to pass on to the patriots. The morning the blackshirts shot the two boys under the plane tree and left them there like dogs, Santa came on her bicycle to the Mora and from there to Salto and talked to Nuto's mother, told her that if they owned a rifle or a pistol to hide it in the bushes. Two days later the blackshirts came and turned the house upside down.

Then one day Santa took Nuto by the arm and told him she couldn't stand it any longer. She couldn't go back to the Mora because Nicoletto was unbearable, and after all those murders her job at Canelli was scorching her, driving her

mad: if she had to live much more of this life she'd take a pistol and shoot somebody—she knew who—perhaps herself.

"I'd go to the hills, too," she said, "but I can't. They'd shoot me on sight. I'm 'that woman from Fascist headquarters.' "

Then Nuto took her up into the woods and introduced her to Baracca. He told Baracca everything she'd done so far. Baracca stood there listening, staring at the ground. When he spoke all he said was "Go back to Canelli."

"Oh no . . ." Santa said.

"Go back to Canelli and wait for orders. We'll send you some."

Two months later—at the end of May—Santa left Canelli because she'd been warned that they were coming after her. The owner of the movie theater told her that a German patrol had come to search her house. All Canelli was talking about it. Santa escaped to the hills and joined the partisans. Now Nuto was picking up news of her wherever he could, from anyone who'd run errands for him at night, and they all said that she was carrying arms like the rest of them and had won their respect. If it hadn't been for his old mother and the danger of his house being burned down, Nuto would have joined the bands himself to help her.

But Santa didn't need any help. During the June roundup, when so many men died along those paths, Santa fought beside Baracca all night long in a farmhouse behind Superga, and it was she who went to the door and yelled to the Fascists that she knew every single one of them and they didn't scare her. The next morning she and Baracca got away.

Nuto told me all this in a low voice, stopping now and then to look around; he looked at the stubble, the bare vineyards, at the slope he was starting to climb again. He said, "Let's go over here." The place we'd reached couldn't even be seen from the Belbo; everything was small, misty, far away and only rough slopes and distant hilltops surrounded us now. "Did you know Gaminella was so big?" he said.

We stood still at the top of a vineyard, in a hollow sheltered by acacias. There was the black ruin of a house. Nuto said quickly, "Partisans were there. The Germans burned the farm.

"Two boys came to get me at Salto one evening. I knew them. They were armed. We took the same road we took today. It was already dark when we started walking, they couldn't tell me what Baracca wanted. The farm dogs barked when we went by, but you couldn't see anyone, there were no lights; you know how it was in those days. I was uneasy."

Nuto had seen a light under the portico. He noticed a motorcycle in the yard and some blankets. A few boys were there, not many—most of them were camping farther down in the woods.

Baracca said he'd called him to give him some news, bad news. There was proof that their Santa was spying on them, that she'd directed the June roundup herself, that she was the one who'd brought down the Committee of National Liberation at Nizza, that even German prisoners had been carrying her notes, reporting ammunition dumps to the Fascists. Baracca was an accountant from Cuneo, a smart man who'd also fought in Africa and had little to say—later he died with the others at Ca' Nere. He told Nuto that he still couldn't understand why Santa had fought with him that night of the roundup. "Maybe she liked you in bed," Nuto answered, but he was desperate, his voice was shaking.

Baracca said that Santa was pretty good herself, with anyone who wanted it. And that, too, was what had happened. Smelling danger, she threw her last punch and took two of the best boys with her. Now they had to pick her up at Canelli. The order was already written.

"Baracca kept me up there three days, partly to relieve his feelings by talking about Santa, partly to make sure I wouldn't get in his way. One morning Santa came back, under guard. She wasn't wearing the windbreaker and trousers

she'd worn all those months. To escape from Canelli she'd dressed like a woman again, in a light summer dress, and when the partisans stopped her up on Gaminella she seemed to have dropped down from nowhere . . . She was carrying information from the Fascist bulletins. It did her no good. In front of all of us, Baracca read the list of men who'd deserted on her instigation, all the ammunition we'd lost, all the boys for whose death she was responsible. Santa just listened, unarmed, sitting in a chair. She stared at me with her resentful eyes, trying to catch mine . . . Then Baracca read her the sentence and told two boys to take her outside. The boys were more stunned than she was. They'd always seen her in her jacket and belt and they couldn't get it into their heads that they had her now, dressed in white. They led her out. She turned around at the door, looked at me and made a face like a child . . . But outside she tried to run away. We heard a scream, we heard running and a burst of machine-gun fire that went on forever. When we went out, she was lying there on that grass in front of the acacias."

Instead of Nuto I was seeing Baracca, this other man dead by hanging. I looked at the broken, black walls of the farmhouse, I looked all around and asked him if Santa was buried here.

"Isn't there a chance they might find her one day? They found those other two . . ."

Nuto was sitting on a low wall and watching me with his stubborn eyes. He shook his head. "No, not Santa," he said. "They won't find her. You can't cover a woman like that with dirt and just leave her. Too many men still drooled at the thought of her. Baracca took care. He had us cut all the dry branches we could find in the vineyard and cover her over. Then we poured gasoline on her and lit it. By noon it was all ash. The mark was still there last year, like the bed of a bonfire."