

ORSOLA

OR SO LA

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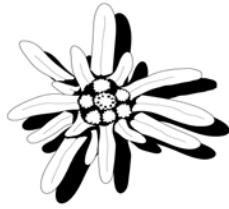
Prologue

The end of the war coincided with truffle season. As the soldiers passed through the small town of Borgonuovo, the villagers handed them out. Their nails were ragged – but not blue with frostbite like the soldiers'. The villagers implored the Reggimento to rest at the waterfall. They helped the men take their packs off and scooped water in buckets for them to wash their hands, splash over their faces, and to drink. Sweet alpine water, still cold with spring's thaw. Along with the truffles the men were offered the local delicacy of bresaola and cheeses from nearby crotti.

Already delirious with exhaustion, the men wondered if they were in fact imagining the feast, and if the pounding of the waterfall was simply their ears ringing from gunfire. Many years later, after they had settled into new post-war lives, some soldiers made a pilgrimage back to Acquafraggia, to find that the place in their memories really did exist.

Orsola's father, Alberto, had fought in the Reggimento Alpini and was one of the soldiers who had returned that day. He did not eat truffles at the waterfall, but at his own kitchen table, which was almost within spitting distance.

PART ONE



1921

One

The Martello house was built with its back to Acquafraggia, which Orsola had always thought a mistake.

If the wind was blowing in the right direction, mist from the falls peppered the back wall, making it the perfect place for the vegetable garden. The house sheltered the plants from the intense afternoon sun in summer, and from the worst of the winter snows. The wall provided support for the pomodori plants that grew heavy as the little yellow flowers tightened into small green balls then into elongated red fruit. Basilico grew happily at their feet, a green fragrant friend that kept away the bugs. Orsola chewed on the leaves while she scooped water out of the tub and poured it carefully at the base of each plant.

To fill the garden tub, she had to carry the water all the way from the waterfall. It was slow going and hurt her back. It took four trips to fill the tub completely – but that wasn't the reason why it was the chore that took her the longest. It was her reluctance to leave the falls.

Acquafraggia was her favourite place to be and she found it impossible to resist its magnetic pull. Inevitably she would abandon her task, despite knowing her mother's reaction to such negligence, and succumb to the delight of paddling in the shallows and climbing the boulders. The waterfall was her playground. She would scour the cliff-face for stella alpina growing low enough for her to pluck gently, ensuring she didn't rip the roots from their precarious foothold. She would place the little flowers in her apron pocket for safe keeping. Then she would look for special rocks to collect. The most precious were heart shaped, but she would keep any that caught her eye. Sometimes one that sparkled in a mysterious way, or another that was extra smooth. She would trace the outline of the rocks with her

finger, and feel them hum with the power of the river.

The rocks were kept on the windowsill of the bedroom she shared with her two younger brothers. Her rocks were piled neatly in one corner while Bruno's and Gianni's various sticks, bones, and dead bugs were spread haphazardly over the remaining space. When her mother said to tidy the "pile of rubbish" on the window sill, she was only referring to Orsola's rocks.



The summer Orsola turned ten was the first time in her memory that Italia wasn't being assaulted by some tragedy. The war was over and the ravages of the flu had faded, although not before taking her beloved sister Anna with it. Her father had returned from the war a more serious man, but also more compliant. Assunta and Alberto didn't argue like they used to, which Orsola was grateful for, even though it had felt strange at first. Sometimes he still seemed like a visitor in their house, like a relative who had come to stay. Her father provided the physical affection that her mother didn't, but it was affection without spirit. It was warm arms and cheeks, but distant eyes – still, Orsola drank in the tenderness like a stray kitten. But most importantly of all, the return of her father had meant the introduction of Enzo and Maria into their lives. And Lago di Como.

Enzo Beretta was a soldier in the Reggimento Alpini alongside her father. He lived on the shores of Lago di Como, visiting distance from Borgonuovo. Enzo and Alberto had formed a bond during those bitter nights on the mountain and now that war was over, the men had taken to spending their Sundays together. In summer, the Martellos would catch the train to Varenna and enjoy Enzo and his wife Maria's hospitality. Enzo owned a boat and liked taking his guests out on the lake, where they could fish and swim and marvel at the holiday homes of the rich people from Milano and Firenze and sometimes even Roma.

One afternoon on the boat, when they were passing close by a magnificent villa, Orsola watched a girl, about her age, playing in the garden, chasing a small dog through the manicured hedge rows. The villa was one of Orsola's favorites, with its symmetrical pillars and tandem staircases that led to a large upstairs balcony – all washed in a soft pink, like a sunrise. The hairy little dog yelped excitedly as they ran, the girl's giggling voice travelled across the water.

“Orsa! Come here, Orsa!”

The dog was called Orsa. Her nickname. She supposed the dog did kind of look like what it was named after – a little bear. Orsola shouted and waved.

“Ciao, Orsa! Ciao!”

The girl turned and waved back.

Orsola adored these boat trips. She loved the gentle lapping of the water on the boat's hull as they crept along, sending ripples of lace edged waves to the shore. The boat was named *Genevieve* – which was the name she had chosen as her communion name. It had been an eyebrow-raising choice, if the state of her family's and Pastor's foreheads were anything to go by. Genevieve was the patron saint of Paris. Orsola had drawn a picture of herself wearing a white beret beside the Eiffel Tower. The picture was on her bedroom wall.

Genevieve, the boat, was wedge shaped and sat low in the water. It was originally Enzo's father's boat, which he raced in the annual Como boat race, until both he and the boat became too old. Because of its sleek design, seating was minimal, and there was very little shelter from the elements. Passengers kept a watchful eye for the thunderstorms that rolled over the Alps bringing with them short, intense downpours, which would soak them through, as if they had taken a dip in the lake itself.

Orsola liked to sit near Enzo. He was quiet, like her. More of a listener than a talker, but he was kind and his slow smiles made her feel warm. Enzo's and Maria's daughter Evangelina had been ten, the same age as Orsola now, when she died of the flu.

Orsola loved the sudden quiet when Enzo cut the engine of its roar. The way the mountains were mirrored on the glassy surface. But the beauty did not fully eclipse Orsola's fear of the lake's depths.

Emboldened by rare praise from her mother that morning, for helping with an uncooperative Gianni who almost made them miss the train, Orsola leaned daringly out into the wind. She admired the spray cascading over the prow of the boat, the mist tickling her skin and making her sparkle and shimmer like an angel.

Her fingers rubbed the pendant at her throat. Her necklace was the most beautiful thing she owned. She undid the clasp at the back of her neck and held it up in front of herself. She admired the fineness of the brass chain and the way the wind made the St Christopher pendant spin like a whirly-seed falling from a sycamore tree. She followed the hypnotic movements of the necklace, and felt her eyes soften their focus, grow heavy and relax.

Behind her, she heard snatches of conversation and her brothers' shouts, but the noise of the swirling air and the motor all but silenced her family.

The weight of the chain was deceiving, so light as to almost not register on her finger tips, but somehow substantial at the same time. She dreamily dangled the necklace over the water. It was snatched out of her hands by the wind.

Orsola froze. She saw her necklace rest briefly on the foamy wake, then it was gone. Her body remained motionless, but her mind raced. Had her mother seen? Had anyone else witnessed her carelessness?

Her first fear was punishment. From her mother and from God. She was no longer under the protection of St Christopher – who, as far she knew, had kept her safe until this minute. St Christopher, who promised protection from sickness, lightning and storms. Perhaps even more importantly, the saint of travel, whose blessing she needed to get to Paris safely. He was no longer watching over her, his eyes already turning away. She suddenly felt very vulnerable.