

ONE

## When entering the village of Montefalcione

Europe ends at Naples and ends badly.  
Calabria, Sicily and all the rest belong to Africa.  
*Creuzé de Lesser, 1806*

ACROSS THE MOUNTAIN on a road distressed by another earthquake roll the wheels of a circus train. It twists and turns and comes to a halt outside the village of Montefalcione at mid afternoon, by a lemon tree where in fact a man dips his hat in the shade. It is a day not unusual in August in 1950, except for the circus. The man beneath the lemon tree wakes from his yellow nap, unfolds his head from his shoulder, and lazily swats a mosquito at his neck fatly bouncing on blood infused with pomodoro sauce. He gets to his feet to arrange his sandals and compose himself. "A circus, *eh?*" he says, followed by a good cough. The man is headed for Manocalzati. He is old and weary and doesn't much look as if he will make it beyond the end of the road

## MEZZOGIORNO

what with his coughing and spitting. But looks can be deceiving and, besides, if he tells us Manocalzati he means somewhere else. He pulls a jacket over his heavy shirt to protect him from the sun; his hat on his head, his chin on his chest, while around his neck a chain supports a stopped clock given to him by his late father.

It is the weekend of the big *fiesta* in Montefalcione, the *fiesta* for Sant'Antonio and Santa Lucia, which is the most important celebration on the calendar for this tiny village. Everyone is headed here, for the procession, the celebrations, and the circus, except for the old boy who has seen enough *fieste* and is not interested in another one. He adjusts his balls instead. His old man balls, like his old man eyes, have seen better days. A persistent dog lollops by on the tail of a wind that knocks the lemons from the tree, its curiosity piqued by the sights, sounds and smells of the circus. The old man has cancer, his reactionary guts resembling a lemon with nails in it. This is the reason he travels to Manocalzati, a neighbouring village where he has deduced he must die. First, he visits for a moment the old part of his mind, the reptilian part that contains the early days of his mother and father, and the lame mule he cherished more than his wife. That was back in the days of the old *fiesta*. Old Italy died with his father, he determines, and he stretches out his arms to establish time with no less accuracy than the dead

## *Life. Death. Southern Italy.*

clock about his neck. The presence of the neck serves the clock, he tells the circus.

The language is Neapolitan, much like Italian but gnarled and with fewer accents, generally dismissed as a language of the gutter.

The old man shares a cigarette with the circus before it continues toward the village, the colourful wagons drawn slowly by horses and within them animals making a noise. He continues then in the opposite direction, on foot to Manocalzati, alone except for the hungry dog lifting its eyes to wait.

"*Viva l'Italia!*" he bellows at the nervous animal and spits.

THE SIGHT of a circus in these mountains is a curious sight indeed. A melanoma under the sun. *Metaplasia of the charivari*. The circus travels from Naples through the south of Italy once a year, bringing exotic entertainment to the isolated communities concealed behind invisible borders. Half the people of Montefalcione are present when the circus pitches its tent in the space between the town hall and the new cemetery. A march of elegant horses through the piazza culminates at a red wagon for a bawdy and morbidly humorous puppet show in which the principal characters, Pulcinella and his wife Zeza, bicker for forty-five minutes before the circus starts. The quarrelsome couple delight the crowd, who hoot with

laughter at the violence and barbed exchanges, especially when directed at the landlord, who doesn't get his rent. The couple have a daughter, Tolla Cetrulo, whose name infers a phallus. She hides her suitor Don Nicola Pacchesecche under the bed. Pulcinella goes berserk at the shame his daughter brings upon the house and proceeds to beat Don Nicola fearsomely with a stick.

"Now he's cleared off, the rotten student!" wheezes Pulcinella, having frightened the young pup away. He turns to admonish his daughter. "It would be better for you not to have been born!" he tells her. "Because if I catch you again, I'll give you such a thrashing you'll be living in the cemetery within three months!"

He points a wooden finger at the cemetery down the road.

"You've put up a show, so now you brag!" interjects Zeza, Pulcinella's wife.

"Shove off, Zeza," Pulcinella says. "Or I might do you a mischief."

"What would you do?" she snaps back. "To hell with you! I hope you come to a sticky end."

Pulcinella agonises over why they must always fight in the middle of the street, while Tolla, the daughter, runs about the tiny stage delighting the audience.

"If you take it into your head to keep me from getting married," the girl warns her father, "I'll show you a thing or two."

"What would you do, chubby face?" demands Pulcinella, finding himself caught between wife and daughter. "You'd better forget that young ruffian."

Don Nicola suddenly returns.

"Villain! Rascal!" he shouts, waving a gun in the face of the old man. "I'll show you what Don Nicola is made of. I'll put an end to your capers. When I've finished with you you'll be sausage meat!"

Pulcinella crumbles to the floor, pleading for his life. It's a humiliating exhibition.

The young pup continues to rage. "Curse you, you son of a whore!" he barks. "You have dealt me so many blows with your confounded stick I am black and blue all over."

Tolla jumps in. She doesn't want the day to end with unpleasantness. "If you really love me, don't kill father!" she begs. "Sweetheart, my honey darling, forgo your revenge!"

Don Nicola withdraws his vow but continues to prod the simpering fool with his gun. "I want to marry your daughter," he says. "What do you think about that? Aren't you glad? Can't you talk, old man? Can't you hear?"

"Yes, my son. I'm blind and dumb with pleasure." Pulcinella snorts, his lips a parchment grin. "I won't speak again for a hundred years. I shall stay at home ecstatic with delight!"

The two men shake hands and everybody's happy.

"My dear husband!" coos Tolla.

“My darling wife!” chimes Don Nicola, winking his good eye at the audience.

There is a Neapolitan saying: *O padrone diventa parzonale, e o parzonale diventa padrone*. The owner becomes the farmer and the farmer becomes the owner. Somebody like Don Nicola will always want to reverse the roles. A lack of healthy competition sits the arrogant pup in good stead. Many of the young men of the village have gone away to the cities and to other countries to find work, in order that they may return one day and not have to doff their hat for the landlord, kiss his hand or engage in the traditional symbols of servility. This leaves the womenfolk all alone and the playing field relatively empty. Everyone in the audience applauds Don Nicola Pacchesecche, but it understands he is not a man to trust with the corn piled high on the threshing floor.

“*I’m not moving if I don’t give you a kiss,*” he starts to sing. “*Tonight I’ll show you an earthquake. I don’t give a hoot for your love, and I’m not looking for your love.*”

The evening is illuminated by light bulbs strung across the piazza for the occasion of the *festa*. They elicit a cheer from the crowd when they come on. Suddenly the doors of the *chiesa madre* are thrown open and Zeza exits with her daughter in a terrible state, having just suffered a fit of the broken heart. Pulcinella is enraged, running up and down Montefalcione snapping his black teeth and cursing like a dog. However, he must

not concern himself too deeply with the fleeting Don Nicola; Don Nicola has already departed this story. So too the circus for the most part, but not the doubt and insecurity, the backbiting *paesano* and solicitous relatives that shimmer across inhospitable lands such as this one.

The day unfolds to the coarse rasp of the changing seasons. There is no echo of childhood here, no retirement plan for the old. Life is an endurance, no more or less. But if existence is simply the measure of life, what purpose in life does it serve a daring farmer to run barefoot through the snow for a lark? —a woman to throw a curse upon a neighbour? —the dead to call back from the grave? What is folklore and superstition if life is nothing beyond the crops of the field?

This is a question for the padre, of course; the padre who will preach to the women about damnation but enthuse to the men about Naples and dirty Neapolitan gramophone records, as we shall witness.

ARRIVING in the village of Montefalcione for the *festa*, the traveller may observe Quirino, a boy of indeterminable age, place his ear to a wall when the music starts to play. The music is the tarantella, a whirling dervish whose origins lie with tradition and the *taranta* spider that is known to bite peasants in the field and then sing as they writhe on the ground in search of reality in the dust. *Head bumper. Mouth eater. Chin*

## MEZZOGIORNO

*chopper*, the boy sings to himself. *Eye peeper*. *Knee knapy*. *Shin sharp*. The music of the wall is a good sound. Let us begin.

TWO

## Italy Iantosca 1955

IN THE NORTH, in Piemonte and the Aosta valley, the people sing in a deep clear voice but they wouldn't know a good song if it hit them. In the centre of Italy, the regions of Tuscany, Umbria and Lazio, between the cities of Florence and Rome, music is a series of dull folk operas called *magi* that take people with long necks an age to sing. Not like in the south, where singers sing beneath a knotted brow a short song of Sant'Antonio, of *scarpe nuove* and a demijohn of wine to all things good and indifferent.

Quirino puts himself at the front of the village. This is the piazza, he says. The piazza. *See the horses? See the women?* Something is going on because there are people on the balconies. This is the panorama of the village of Montefalcione. If you follow that, that is Sant'Antonio up there. Sant'Antonio church, *chiesa madre*, the mother