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La Balena: A Weird Fiction Representation of Women's Asylums and Emigration in Fascist

Italy

Undergraduate Honors Thesis

by Aiden Blasi

University of Vermont, 2021

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La Balena

The man who called himself Jezza rowed towards the moon, his paddles carving through slices of silver reflected on the water. Sicily was lost in the night, and in front of us was nothing but everything: night sky and sea, mirror images, each just as black as the other and just as endless. Looking at either for too long made my head spin in the infinite emptiness. I dug my fingernails into the wood so that I wouldn't sink into one of them. We sat facing each other in the dinghy. He smiled every time our eyes met, his white walrus mustache curling to show his jagged, yellow teeth.

"You didn't worry." His Italian was broken. He only spoke in the past tense. But I understood it was a command "There was no problems."

I smiled and nodded. I did the best I could, anyway. Papa told me the boat was from England, but this man's accent was coarse and his gaze hungry. When he opened his mouth, smoke followed his breath like a great fire was churning in his stomach. He pulled a cigarette and a book of matches out of his flat cap to stoke the flame. Nothing of the Englishmen I knew from novels and films was in him: no monocle or peacoat or pith helmet. When I was a little girl, Papa told me to never be alone with a man who wasn't family, and now here I was adrift from the only land I ever knew with a man I met on the shore.

We sat there for eons, while he rowed into the void.

"You were beautiful," he said. "Most beautiful. Why did you go to America?"

"My husband," I said.

He smiled and held up his left hand. "No ring."

"I haven't met him yet."

We glided north, chasing the waves that swam under us. After a moment too long, it came. A great whale emerged from the nothingness below us. First, we saw its eyes through the mist, hundreds of them, little lights growing and growing as they crept in from the horizon.

“Our ship,” Jezza said.

Jezza grabbed a lantern off the floor of the dinghy, fiddled with it for a moment, then lit it with his burning cigarette. He stood, his feet sure even as the boat tottered, and waved the lantern above his head a few times. By the time I could see the whale’s cracked white skin, its black steel belly, the steam spewing from its head, it was towering over us. Had Jezza rowed a little more it would have crushed us beneath its weight. Shadows of men were swarming on its back, and more in the eyes on its ribcage. It had slowed to a crawl, and Jezza brought us up within arm's reach of it, looked up to the sky, and waved his lantern three more times.

When half the steel whale had passed us, we found that two ropes had been lowered down, skimming the surface of the water. Jezza leaned out and grabbed the first rope, then hooked it on to the prow of our boat. He pointed for me to do the same on my end, then waved the light once more. Within seconds, gears and pulleys came to life, and the dinghy lurched out of the water, slowly climbing the side of the ship. Chains rattled and wood squealed. My stomach tossed with every creak and groan of the machines above us as we swung in their tendrils, rocking back and forth, but still they pulled.

When we reached the deck of the ship, more men were waiting for us. Jezza laughed and bellowed at them in English and took a step to jump down onto the deck of the steamship. One of the men stepped forward and held out a hand to stop him. The two exchanged meaningful glares and strained words I didn’t understand. The man turned to me. He looked younger than Jezza,

with a thick black beard splotted with patches of grey. His eyes were hazel and kind and he spoke in nearly fluent Italian. “*Signorina*,” he said. “I am the captain of this ship.”

I stammered, “Thank you for taking me aboard, Captain.”

“Well,” he sighed. “About that. You see, there’s a...”

Jeza spat a question at him in English.

“There’s a state official on the ship,” the captain said gravely. “He came on board just before we left, with a whole squadron of blackshirts. *Il Duce* has assigned him to work in the consulate in New York.”

“Christ,” Jeza mumbled, followed by another question.

“In case you didn’t realize, Jeza, fascists don’t take kindly to people refusing their orders. Now, I’ll need you to take this young lady back to shore. I’ve left you a stipend and arranged a boat to take you back to Liverpool. You can meet us there when we return-”

“Captain, please,” I begged. “My father gave you everything we had.”

“I’m sorry. Perhaps another time, but it’s too great a risk. For you and us both.”

“I have to go, I can’t stay here-”

“There are ships to America every day, *signorina*. If the blackshirts find... someone like you... Well, if they’re feeling kind, they’ll throw you into the sea. If not, they’ll have the lot of us shot.”

“Arthur,” Jeza interrupted. He barked something at the captain.

The two traded low growls and bloodshot eyes. I grabbed onto every stray word I knew, trying to moor onto some meaning. “... take the bride... I can...”

“Are you...?”

“He’ll never...”

“I know, but if he...”

“Arthur,” Jezza hissed again. “If you don’t let me... I’ll tell... the Americans...”

The captain’s mouth hung agape, but his voice halted. He simply stared at Jezza for a moment, his eyes blank and gleaming like stars. “You can’t be serious,” he stammered.

“I am.”

The captain folded his arms over his chest. He paused. His hand wandered up to his face and fiddled with the grey in his beard. His eyes shifted from me to Jezza and back. But when he nodded curtly, they turned towards the floor. Without another word, Jezza took my hand and led me down onto the deck. “*Signorina*,” the captain began, his eyes still avoiding me. “Jezza will be staying with you below deck, to keep you out of trouble. If you’re to remain on this ship, you must follow his every instruction. To the letter. Understand?”

My chest tightened. I tried to say something, anything, but my mind and my lungs were empty.

He finally looked at me. “Do you understand?”

I nodded.

~~~

I didn’t sleep that night, but I still had the dreams.

I was back in the hospital. Leather straps clutched my wrist and a white veil of wires tangled in my hair. I couldn’t see them, but they were there; my mind was thrashing but my body was perfectly still. I was tied to the stiff slab of straw which was my bed. A weight was pressing down on my chest, holding me down. I couldn’t see his hands, but I could feel his weight, I smelled the cologne he always wore: the Doctor. I tried to scream but my mouth wouldn’t move. All I could do was wait for the shock.

*I'm not here*, I told myself, going through the mantras Mama taught me. *This isn't happening.*

My fingers and toes came back to me first. I clenched and unclenched them just to make sure I could. They started shaking. *It's 1933. I left the hospital. I'm not here, this isn't happening.* The shaking crawled up my arms and legs as they woke up, and then I couldn't stop, until my whole body was writhing in the bed. A hand appeared on my shoulder, and then another on my arm. Jezza's face was above me, barely visible in the darkness of the steerage, yet his pale grey eyes seemed to glow with worry. He slept in the bunk beside mine. The beds were pressed as close to each other and as far up against the walls as they would go. He had given me a bag he took from his usual quarters for a pillow and his coat as a blanket. It all smelled of cigarettes and sea water. He had been sleeping on his balled up flat cap, leaving his halo of balding salt and pepper hair open to the dank air. But now he muttered something in English and reached a hand up to stroke the black curls of my hair. "What happened, *bella?*" he asked in Italian.

"I was dreaming. Sometimes I dream when I'm awake."

I could tell he didn't understand. I didn't either. My eyes and my ears hadn't been my own ever since I came back home. I saw things that other people didn't. Papa said the doctors in Palermo would teach me how to be a woman, how to be a wife. I felt more like a little girl on that boat than I ever had, but this was what I had asked for. This was what I needed.

It had been years since Antonio left. When I tried to recall his face, all that came to me were his piercing, frozen blue eyes, one of the few pairs that wasn't a dull, dark brown in our village. I remembered his bride waiting in the post office every day and wandering the roads home aimlessly every night. I remembered consumption taking the air out of her chest. No one bothered to mail a postcard to New York, since like as not he had died himself or moved on to a

different woman. But America was a place to go. So, when he finally did send for his bride, I volunteered to go in her place.

Jeza brushed his calloused fingers against my cheek. It was so dark, I never saw his hand, only felt it scraping my skin. “You slept,” he ordered.

I nodded, and the fingers left me. I closed my eyes, hoping it would keep out the dreams, but still, I didn’t sleep. The belly of the ship was too alive. It rocked back and forth. All through the night limbs adjusted, steel bed frames creaked, bodies above and beside me shifted and rolled. More people than had ever lived in my village laid within earshot, curling under tattered coats they used for blankets, breathing through their mouths so they didn’t have to smell each other, weeping into their straw mattresses. I could even hear the fish gliding on the other side of the steel, like they were scratching at the hull with scaly fingers, trying to get in and lay with us.

There were no windows. There was no day. There was no night. Only black. I had seen oil lamps and candles strewn about as Jeza led me down from the deck. When we rose from our sleep, we would light them, but it wouldn’t change the fact that we had left time behind in Italy.

One or two compartments away, a bed wailed under the weight of a moving body. This was different from the shy creaks and murmurs that came from restless sleepers. This was a body rising out of slumber brazenly, like it wanted everyone to know. Shoelaces scraped against the metal floor and boots pounded into it. The boots got nearer and nearer to me, banging in my ears. I shut my eyes tighter. My heart thumped, following the footsteps’ crescendo. They stopped, giving way to a taut silence. Eyes crawled over Jeza’s coat like snakes, waiting to pounce.

I melted into my bed when the stomping came back and began receding into the distance. An orotund voice began singing a familiar song, curiously loud. “*Mamma mia dammi cento lire, che in America voglio andar. Cento lire io te le do, ma in America no, no, no*”

The smell of smoke wafted through the steerage with the tune. It smelled like the boots kicking a lamp over and leaving us all to be swallowed by the flames. It smelled like Jezza lying beside me, his mouth ever so slightly agape like a bloated corpse. It smelled like my father's pipe. "*Quando furono in mezzo al mare, il bastimento si sprofondò,*" the voice sang.

I shucked off Jezza's coat and got to my feet, still wearing the ivory dress I left home in. I hadn't had a moment alone to change. I followed the smoke. It led me out of our compartment and through several more. They were small rooms, with open doorways on each wall and as many bunks as could fit crammed in. The smoke and the song carried me to the dining room at the center of the ship, where I found the man attached to them.

He sat alone at a long metal table, leaning back and resting his elbows on its surface. He was dressed all in black, which highlighted his wan, milky skin. His head was utterly bald and his body stout. "*Il mio sangue è rosso e fino, i pesci del mare lo beveran. La mia carne è bianca e pura, la balena la mangerà.*"

I took another step towards him, and he turned. His eyes were black and wide as the night, nearly bulging out of his skull. It seemed somehow wrong that such a face had produced such a rich voice, like his mouth was the wrong shape to contain it. His lips curled into a smile as he lifted a cigarette to them. I could've sworn the fingers loosely holding the cigarette were webbed. "You know that one?"

His accent told me he was from Rome.

I nodded.

He chuckled. "Don't worry. It's only a song." He turned his body to show me an insignia stitched onto his shirt. Golden fasces, topped with a star and flanked by a laurel wreath. "You're quite safe on this vessel."

“*Buonasera, signore,*” I said, bowing my head, thanking God for the seconds I didn’t have to look at him. His eyes never blinked.

“I’m no *signore,*” he interrupted. “Just a soldier. Another rod in the fasces. I’m down here, aren’t I?” He tossed the butt of his cigarette on the floor and stamped it out, a little too hard. “Did I wake you?”

“No.”

“A fellow sleepwalker, then.”

I smiled as pleasantly as I could. He did the same. A long scar curled around his neck, the dark, scaly skin around it tightening as he moved his face.

“I don’t think I’ve slept a full night since the war... Got bad dreams. And this.” He rolled up his left pant leg to show that the flesh ended just below his knee and was replaced by a wooden peg. He gave it a knock. “What’s your name, girl?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but then a hand clasped my shoulder, the fingers finding the exposed flesh on my collar. “*Ciao, little bride,*” Jezza’s voice said. He nodded to the fascist and added a “*Buongiorno.*”

The fascist stood from his bench and gave a salute. “*Buonasera,*” he corrected. He turned to me with a smirk. “Is this your father?”

“I was the first mate,” Jezza answered. “What was your name?”

“Girardi.”

“You were the Party, yes? You didn’t stay here. The peasants stayed here. You came, we went and spoke to the captain.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary. I’m not fussy.”

“Yes,” he insisted. “Peasants, animals, down. You, your brothers, up, up, up.”

“Well, it’s your ship.” Girardi shrugged. “Lead the way.” He turned to me and bowed his head. “It was a pleasure, *signora*. I’m sure we’ll see each other again.”

Jeza led him across the hall and up some rickety wooden stairs, tossing me a wink over his shoulder as he did. When he opened the door, I breathed air for the first time since he’d taken me under the deck.

~~~

We met Europe one last time in Lisbon. Most of the steerage passengers poured outside while the crew loaded more cargo and people onto the ship, to buy something at the markets or to sit on the docks and smoke or to simply see land in case they never would again. Jeza told me to stay below deck. I didn’t mind. For the first time, the cabin wasn’t steaming with the heat of bodies. Sounds of the city leaked through the hull: fog horns blaring, church bells ringing, motors whirring. Though I still hadn’t seen daylight, its radiance warmed the steel.

We left with more people than we came with: Spaniards, Portuguese, Moroccans. Jeza tried to keep me away from the others, but that didn’t last past the first meal. We sat at tables that seemed to stretch across the ocean and ate some sort of stew with stale bread and drank from a few bottles of wine that were passed around. People cursed the mush but inhaled it all the same. They made introductions and sang songs of home and taught each other snippets of English: “Hello, I would like a job,” “Thank you, sir,” “May I have some bread, please?”

Two nights passed before he returned. Girardi stepped out of the shadows and patrolled the length of the table just long enough so that everyone certainly saw him. Then, without taking any food or even speaking a word, he stepped back, his black uniform melting into the dark. Some fell silent when they saw him. Others carried on as though they weren’t afraid. His wet face glistened whenever a flicker of flame from the candles caught it. My eyes were dragged

towards him, even as the table around me chattered and Jezza's eyes pricked me silently and I tried to look anywhere else. His lips slid into a grin whenever our gazes met.

Every dinner he came. Not immediately. Each time he gave me enough time to fill my bowl, to find my seat, to listen to the clattering of tongues and lose myself in words flying past me. Enough time to forget. But still he came. Every time he materialized his flesh seemed even more pallid and clammy, his eyes more unblinking. It almost made me thankful for Jezza, forever at my side during the day and lying next to me at night. The two seemed to have an unspoken agreement, like two vultures circling the same corpse.

Jezza always waited for Girardi to fly away before he eased the grip of his claws on me. He always did, though. He tried to hide it at first, but quickly realized that there was nowhere to hide down here. It only took a few tries for him to give up and brazenly walk among us as he carried on his business. He would wait for me to settle in at my bunk, then shoot me a knowing glance before stalking through the compartments and down the long corridors of dining tables towards the kitchens. A few minutes later, he would reemerge with a large crate he carried with ease. Then, he would disappear once more, through a set of doors that opened onto a staircase that went nowhere: more specifically, down, down into an inky blackness even more profound than that of the steerage when all the candles were out. Eyes followed him as he repeated the ritual a few times before taking his place in the bed next to mine. Voices murmured then suddenly halted when he came back into view. Still, if I listened close enough, I could hear the echoes ricocheting on the steel walls, in a smattering of tongues he didn't speak, asking the same question: "What's he doing down there?"

Jezza was gone when it happened. I had a few breaths to myself before I smelled Girardi: a cocktail of seawater and cologne, an alien odor and a hint of ancient familiarity. "*Buonasera*,

signora,” he greeted me, speaking for the first time since that night when he sang. The rest of the passengers seemed to dissolve, and the silence made my ears ache. “I trust the trip has treated you well so far,” he added.

“It’s no first class,” I said. “*Signore.*”

“It’s a bit... stuffy up there for my tastes. I’ve gotten to spend a bit of time with the captain, though... And it seems you’ve gotten to know that first mate fellow.”

Moisture beaded on his skin. Why didn’t he blink? “He’s... an interesting man,” I answered.

“I should say so. The captain told me all about him, after a few glasses of wine.” He smirked and leaned in. “You know, it’s kind of you to humor him, but you best be careful.”

I nodded with a tight-lipped smile and bowed my head. “Excuse me, *signore*,” I said as I tried to pull away from him. I took a few steps towards my bunk, towards a lamp hanging on the wall next to it. I wanted to be out of the shadows but moving through them was like wading through water.

He followed me and grabbed one of the poles of my bed frame, leaning against it and watching me. When he moved, he shuffled in a way that wasn’t quite human, his shoulders stooped and his gait odder than his wooden leg alone could account for. Yet I suddenly felt as if I had seen his shamble a hundred times before. I drowned in his smell. I knew that cologne which was hiding under the fishy musk. “Did he tell you about himself?” he asked.

“He doesn’t speak Italian so well,” I answered once I managed to swallow his suffocating scent.

“He’s a veteran, so the captain says. The Great War. Funny, isn’t it? Me, an Italian boy in Austria, him a Brit in Gallipoli, but we were there for the same reason. Whatever that was...”

“Quite funny,” I said though neither of us did so much as smile.

“Anyway, Gallipoli was a massacre. You can imagine, I’m sure. Not every wound is so visible.” He drew a finger across the scar on the side of his neck, his fingertip scratching on the scaly skin. Where had I heard that sound before? “But he came home, like we all did. Met a girl. Settled down. Like we were meant to. Had a little girl, twenty years back. Got a job on the docks, worked his way up and got a ship of his own, wanted his girl to have the youth he never did. Started moving shipments. Shared a cabin with his wife and his daughter and they travelled the whole world together, as a family.”

He smiled, as if the memories were his own. I studied the slope of his hairless skull, his thick lips, his hunched shoulders. Somehow it had all been burned into my mind in the short time since I’d met him. It seemed older, primordial, that image of him I saw even when I closed my eyes, like he was a shadow that had always followed me.

When I didn’t say anything, he continued. “The captain thought you looked like her, you know. Jezza’s daughter. Same age. Black curls. Brown eyes. Pretty as a picture. She’s dead now.” His smile didn’t abate. “Storm got them, somewhere in the Pacific. Four days later, Jezza gets found on the beach of some... savage island, and the rest of the ship vanishes without a trace.”

The longer I looked at his face, the more I took in its sheer strangeness. His nose flattened, his eyes spread further apart until they were almost on the sides of his head, his spine extended and curled into a hunch as he rose inches above me. Bones rattled and cracked as he grew out of his own body. A webbed claw rose and laid a slimy finger under my chin, inspecting my face, its nail scratching at my throat. I wanted to scream but I couldn’t open my mouth.

“And now he takes an interest in you,” Girardi whispered. “Fascinating. Wouldn’t you like to dig in that brain and see what’s going on in there?”

His face shifted by the second now, and I could only stare at the unspeakable horror. I felt leather straps tugging at wrists and wires untangling my head.

“*Bella?*” a British accent called from behind me.

Girardi’s head swiveled towards the source of the word as he peeked over my shoulder. I gripped the frame of my bunk harder to stop from trembling. “Speak of the devil,” he said. One of his eyes kept flashing glances towards me while the other rested on Jezza. “We were just talking about you. Good things, I assure you. Your captain speaks highly of you.”

Jezza didn’t answer. He had learned new bits and fragments of Italian since we left, but still, he couldn’t keep up with Girardi.

Girardi just smiled and nodded, baring his rows of fangs. He turned to me one last time. “*Arrivederci, signora.*”

In a heartbeat, he had left. At least, his body had vanished, even though I still felt him leering. Jezza was left staring at me, struck dumb. I tightened my grip on the bed frame until my knuckles went as white as sea foam, but still I ended up crumpled on the ground, curled in a ball, my fists in my hair, my throat gasping for air. Jezza was above me and put one hand on my shoulder and another on my head. He said something sharp in English, and then “What was it, young one?”

I squirmed as his hand slid down my back, but I remained in his arms. His lips and the stubble surrounding them prickled my forehead.

“What was it, my bride?” he repeated.

“Girardi,” I whispered. “Girardi, Girardi, Girardi, Girardi.” I looked up in Jezza’s eyes. I summoned the English words like an incantation in an inhuman language, knowing it was a death curse. “He knows... He knows me.”

I don’t know how I forgot. He was always by the Doctor’s side, his black shirt the shadow to the white lab coat. Papa met him on the train to Palermo. Or was it at the hospital? Or the station? It was everywhere, he was everywhere. His slick hands strapped me into the chair while the nurses put electric seaweed in my hair. He must have known, remembered me from the hospital. He knew I wasn’t meant to leave the country. He knew he had me in his teeth to play with as he saw fit. It was all a game.

“*Bene, bene, bene,*” Jezza cooed. He twirled my hair in his fingers. “You were alright, little bride. You were alright.”

~~~

I woke to the feeling of calloused, sandpaper fingers scraping my cheek. “*Bella,*” Jezza whispered as I opened my eyes. He was standing over me in a heavy coat, with his hood drawn up over his head and his flat cap pulled low over his eyes. He smiled with a certain sadness in his eyes. He almost looked like a man. The rest of the cabin was as quiet as I had ever heard it. No snores, no weeping babies, no sleepless men. “You came,” he commanded in a whisper.

He stretched out a hand, covered in a knit fingerless glove, and I took it in my own. I wondered if I was wrong about him altogether. Girardi said I looked like his daughter—perhaps that was all he saw. Perhaps he was only looking for her scent in the strands of my hair, trying to feel her ghost when his face lingered close to me, touching her one last time when his hands wandered. But then he stopped me as I rose to a sitting position and planted his lips on my knuckles, just briefly. The hairs on my arm stood as a wave of chills washed over me. Then, he

pulled me to my feet, and began leading me through the dark steerage, not bothering with a lamp or a candle. I was dressed only in my white nightgown, my bare feet pressing against the cool metal floor. He led me to a steel door then released my hand to push it open.

When it swung, I saw the night for the first time since we'd boarded the ship. How long had it been now? Two days? Six weeks? Three months? It seemed there were even more stars than I remembered, even more infinity, as if space had been expanding ever since we left Italy, welcoming new visitors. The cosmos swirled. I felt that if I stepped out, I might be crushed by the weight of the night sky. Nausea rose in my gut, as I knew that from the deck, I was looking out at everything: entire solar systems and galaxies of which man could only see the faintest light. Yet I couldn't look away.

Jezza disappeared through the door and left it ajar for me. I hesitated for a moment, peeking out at the universe through the slit in the steel. A white flash caught my eye, almost like a star crashing down, only it had come up from the water. I pulled the door open another hair.

It was a whale.

A ghostly whale rising out of the ocean like some sort of god, then sinking once more. Each time it surfaced, a pearl island appeared and then got swallowed up again. It seemed close enough and massive enough that its tail might flick us out of the water the next time it snapped up to the surface. I felt the openness of the expanse below the surface of the water, just as black and as vast as the night sky, only without those whispers of distant stars to provide specks of light. Anything could be down there, and everything was. Another planet beneath our own with inhabitants even more strange and terrifying.

I walked out onto a promenade deck and felt the wind try to grab me.

Jezza was waiting for me, lighting a cigarette a short way down the deck. The glow of the flame illuminated his face, joining the stars. At his feet was a black mass. It squirmed. I took a step closer until I saw.

It was Girardi. His arms were tied behind his back and his mouth gagged. His wooden leg was gone, and he tried to push himself with the other, but was only able to spin in circles on the floor. His grey skin glistened in the moonlight like fish scales or a bloated corpse. Jezza knelt down near him and looked up at me. He took one long drag of the cigarette. When he spoke, smoke trailed his words. "It was a gift. For you."

Jezza took the cigarette in two fingers and pressed the burning end down on the back of Girardi's neck. Girardi's screams were muffled as he writhed on the ground. He slammed his head into the steel floor just to make noise. Jezza grabbed him by the collar of his shirt to stop it. Then he dragged his catch over to the railing. Girardi tossed and spasmed what limbs he had left, but it was no use. I saw gills on his neck where there used to be a scar. I wanted to tell Jezza the sea wouldn't kill him. It was his home. But I was struck silent, paralyzed at the thought of what he might become down there, in the world below, his world.

As I watched Girardi gliding down through the night, I hoped the whale was hungry.

~~~

It is August 16th, 1931. Day 74 in my new home. Long, slender arms are pressing down on my shoulders. They stretch up above me to the surface of the water, and beyond. I can't see the shoulders or the face they belong to. The skin is pale, dotted with freckles and moles. Beyond the water's surface seems to be nothing but a black void and the white of the arms, refracted in a hundred different directions. Ice cubes bob and dance in the waves, twirling faster and faster as I

struggle. Bubbles come pouring from my nose. The hands grip me tighter. My chest feels like it's about to cave in. I am going to drown, so I stop thrashing.

The hands release me, and the water is crashing around my ears as I emerge from its surface. Ice cubes graze my arms and my collarbones, needling me with cold. My hair grows stiff, freezing onto my shoulders as I sit in the tub. The nurse tells me it's nearly time for bed and that I can go. I have been in the tub since breakfast. Every few hours she switches the water from ice cold to scalding hot. She holds me under the surface for a full sixty seconds every so often. I am naked and trembling when I stand up, until she hands me a towel. There's a mirror on the other side of the room. Last time I mopped the floors, I peeked in the next room and found that the other side of the mirror was clear glass. The nurse turns on the lights.

It is June 2nd, 1931. Day 1. The lights shock me the most. They are a cold, sickening white color, light without fire, born and killed with the flick of a switch. I feel like I am in the headlights of a car. I am in the Doctor's office and he is telling me that he will teach me my duties to the nation, to the husband and children I don't have. He tells me I will be happier this way. I am taking off the dress I left home in and putting on a formless, coarse grey garb.

On Day 74, the nurse hands me the same garb. She leads me through the dark corridors with concrete floors and white walls. The floors are always dirty no matter who is on mop duty. Nine beds line the room I've been assigned to. The other eight are already filled, and the lights are out. As soon as the nurse leaves, the mounds of blankets and hair come to life, eventually forming the silhouettes of women.

"Hey, new girl," a whisper cuts through the dark. "You didn't rat us out, did you?"

I shake my head before realizing it is too dark for them to see. "No," I say aloud. "They just took me to the tubs."

“Good,” a different voice whispers, “you don’t smell quite so much like shit.”

Giggles that sound just shy of cackles.

“Should we take her with us?”

“She *is* pretty.”

“Is that a reason to take her or leave her?”

“I like her. She’s quiet.”

“What if she rats on us?”

“She could have done that already if she wanted to.”

Silhouettes shuffle and shift around, rising out of the beds. Some of them stoop down and lift their mattresses, grabbing things they’ve hidden away under them. Something scratches and then the single, dull light of a candle emerges. The warm glow illuminates Giulia’s face. She is the prettiest in the ward, by wide consensus, with wavy blonde hair down to her collarbones and a mile wide, mischievous smile. She is a bit older than me, but younger than most of the women in our ward.

“How do we get them in?” she asks the shadows on the periphery of the candle’s glow.

“What about the window?”

“It’s barred, idiot.”

“You’ve got man hands, Cristina. Surely you can rip them off.”

A heavy thwack.

“Ow.”

“Settle down, ladies...” Giulia says. “Why don’t we use the front door?”

“What about the guard?”

“I’ll handle him,” Giulia’s smile widens even further until she looks like a movie star.

“Bianca,” another voice whispers. “I’ve got a hairpin. Do you want me to pick the lock on your shackles?”

“No, no,” a voice responds from a bed on the far side of the room. “Just... send Luca up here when you get them in.”

More giggles. I hear footsteps that are trying to be quiet. Giulia and her candle come closer to me. The light doesn’t quite reach her feet, so she seems to glide through air without taking a step. She puts a hand on my arm. “Come on. It’ll be fun.”

Moments later, we are in the hall I just came from. The nurses have disappeared. The group of girls step as quietly as possible down a rickety stairwell and whisper as loudly as possible. Giulia’s candle is our only guiding light. One of the girls misses the last step and only barely stops herself from falling face-first, waving her arms wildly. A raucous laughter finally bursts from the seams of the other girls’ hushed voices.

We tiptoe through the labyrinth of halls. Without the rest of the girls, I would not be able to find my way to the front door. Every corridor looks the same. Every linoleum square, every closed door, every unlit tube in the ceiling, all completely, perfectly uniform.

Somehow, we come to the front door, a grand maple wall twice my height.

It is Day 1 and that door is closing behind me. It will open again three minutes after we approach it on Day 74 and on Day 291 after that.

Next to the door sits a man in a glass box. He wears a military uniform and carries a gun. Sometimes his face changes, but the uniform and the gun are always there, in the box. Giulia walks straight up to the counter in front of the glass, pulling me and the other girls along with an immaterial grip. “*Buonasera*, Franco,” she says through her smile.

He sits in a chair yet still towers over us, leering down at our faces. “What are you all doing out of bed?”

“We’re expecting guests.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“We’re going to have a party. Want to come?”

The man is sighing. “Please go to bed. Do you have any idea how much fucking paperwork I have to do? Don’t make me do more.”

“No one’s making you do anything.” A car growls outside. “Just look away for a few minutes and everything will be fine.”

“You want to get sent to the high security ward, huh? You want to get me fired?”

A car horn and voices seep through the door. “Ah,” Giulia says. “They’re here.”

“Who’s here?” The man in the box rises to his feet and puts one hand on his pistol.

“Our friends. Weren’t you listening? I know them from way back, they’re good guys.”

“Guys?”

Giulia leans forward on the counter, bringing her face as close to the glass as she can.

“I’ll show you my tits if you let them in.”

The man’s face blushes. “I-” he stammers.

Fists pound on the other side of the door. The other girls flock to the door and pry it open. Giulia smiles at the man in the box and pulls down her garb until her chest is bare. I sneak a glance, then turn my eyes to the floor.

The rest of the girls return, flanked by four men. One of them carries a crate in the crook of his arm, necks of wine bottles peeking out of the top. Each of them is wearing frumpy coats and dented hats and trousers with patched-over holes. Each of them walks with the same

calculated nonchalance. The tallest one rips off his hat and runs a hand through the greasy curls underneath in one motion.

“*Ciao, Giulia,*” he says in a soaring voice. He comes over to us and takes a cigarette out of the corner of his mouth to peck Giulia on each cheek, paying no mind to the man in the box. After the kisses, he keeps his hands on her shoulders and stares at her with a beaming smile. “When are you getting out of here? Everyone in Trapani misses you so.”

She laughs. “I’m the queen of this place. What would they do without me?”

“You’re a queen back home too, what am *I* to do?”

“I’m letting you visit, aren’t I?”

The other three men file in, their eyes scanning us and picking out their favorites. The girls flock to the one with the wine, scrambling to grab a bottle for themselves, laughing all the while. “Eh, get the hell out of my doorway, will you?” the man in the box speaks up. “Before we all get in trouble.”

The other men turn their heads to the box as if only just noticing him. “*Grazie, signore,*” the tall one says with a grand bow before looping his arm through Giulia’s and sauntering down the hall.

The boys and girls congeal into pairs and groups of three. I follow half a step behind Giulia, the rest of them surrounding me, seemingly without noticing me. I try to listen to their conversations, but they all talk in low voices that drown in the air between us.

A hand grabs my wrist and pulls. I nearly fall over. I am in the dark. Giulia’s candle is gone and I cannot see my own hands. After a moment of nothing, there are flashes of place: a leather couch, an oak desk, white lab coats hanging on the wall as the lights flicker and then finally hold a steady, electric beam.

I am standing in the Doctor's office. I recognize the smell before the surroundings. It smells so much like him that I wonder if he's still here, hiding in the walls. But a different man is before me, one of the men Giulia brought in. He has a stout figure, not much taller than me. His smile curls like a wicked sickle. He takes off his cap, revealing a sharp widow's peak. I am backing away from him until I hit the opposite wall. I feel the cool air behind the glass of the windows. He is coming towards me. I am reaching out and burying my hand in his chest to keep him at bay. "No," I am saying, as strongly as I can.

His eyes widen and he takes a step back. "Oh, of course," he says. He is reaching for his pockets. "What do you want?"

"What?"

"Do you want money? What?"

I shake my head. "I want to leave."

"I assumed since you were with Giulia--"

"I don't want anything."

He leans on the surface of the Doctor's desk. He is looking down at me and raising an eyebrow. "What are you here for, then?"

I pause.

He snickers. His eyes are scanning the desk and his hands are travelling to his coat pockets and pulling out a cigarette. "Is it really worse than whoring?"

He finds a lighter in the top drawer of the desk and sets his cigarette aflame. I am staying silent. He is still digging, pulling out the bottom drawer. There is a sea of papers in there. He inspects them for a moment and then pulls out a large stack, nearly half the drawer.

“Aha,” he says, already starting to comb through the papers. “Giulia C.” A thick, cream colored folder slams on the desk with her name on it. I am picking it up. “What’s your name?”

I am reading the doctor’s handwriting.

Sex: Female. Date of Birth: 3 May, 1911. History of prostitution, vagabonding, promiscuity, impulsive behavior, bouts of hysteria. Continuously undermines authority of hospital staff and exerts negative influence over fellow patients.

“Come on,” he says. “I’m just curious.”

Ran away from parents (deceased) at age thirteen. Father drank heavily. Described several instances of violence in home.

“I don’t care if you’re a whore, you know. I’m not a Catholic, not since I was a child. If we want a strong race, we ought to have us healthy ones breed like pigs, I say.”

No remaining close family or friends to speak of.

“Do pigs wait until marriage?”

Little hope of recovery.

“That’s what they ought to be doing here. Farming.”

Will not be missed.

“I’m all for motherhood, but all this... weight of tradition, I don’t know.”

Prime candidate for experimental treatments.

The folder closes and drops out of my hands back onto the desk. Papers scatter, covering the desk and spilling over onto the floor. “Are you alright?” he asks me.

My feet are taking me back towards the hallway, through the door. “I’m sorry, okay?” the man is calling out behind me. “Where are you going?”

I am floating through dark corridors, passing closed iron doors that all look the same. Our bedrooms aren't allowed to have doors, but these are the rooms where they take one of us at a time and lock us away for days on end. The girls who go in don't like to talk about it, if they can remember at all.

It is Day 61. I am mopping the floors in a hallway like this one and I can hear screams piercing through the metal.

Day 74. I am trying to retrace the path from our room, to follow the ghost of the candlelight in my memory. My fingertips are pulsating with my heartbeat and running through the veins of stucco on the walls as I feel my way through the corridor. I feel myself tilting, leaning harder and harder against the wall until my shoulder hits it. The hall is spinning around me but I don't stop moving.

I am walking up the staircase. I don't remember how I got there. Now, I can hear the rest of the girls and I am following their shouts and cackles. Flickers of warm candlelight are splashing out from the doorway of our bedroom. When I'm rounding the corner, my eyes have to adjust to the flame. The candle is standing in the center of the floor, casting its glow across the off-white squares of linoleum. All along the wall, where the light is thin, shadows dance, great, flailing beasts with eight limbs and two heads conjoined together at random, writhing and thrashing on the beds where women used to sleep. Noses and ears and half open mouths pop out of the darkness, but I can't quite catch a whole face. Chatter and moans emanate from all around the room, slipping out of different mouths but speaking in one voice, a dull roar like a swarm of locusts' wings.

I gather my courage, lingering in the doorway. I am taking a few hesitant steps into the chamber, and the noises of flailing bodies surround me. I lower myself to my knees, beaten down

by the gazes of its many eyes and the sounds of its mouths. The floor is cold enough to puncture my garb and prickle my knees. “Giulia,” I am whispering to the candle.

The beasts continue their noises: laughs and soft sighs and heavy breathing. I am saying her name again. “Giulia.”

“What?” she snaps back from somewhere across the darkness. “Who is it?”

“It’s me,” I say.

The chatter continues on around me. I hear a man shooting whispers, then Giulia’s low mumble in reply, but the words are lost in the waves of voices between me and them. Her face emerges from the dark and she takes me by the arm, lifting me and sweeping me out into the hall. The voices fade away.

One of her hands is lingering on my arm. I am silent for a moment.

“Well,” she says. “What is it?”

I am trying to speak but all the breath has left me.

“Spit it out, come on.”

“You...” the words are draining from my brain down my spine and puddling by my feet.

“I- I was- He brought me into the Doctor’s office,” I am stammering. “And I saw... You have to leave. We have to leave.”

She’s drawing her hand away from me and crossing her arms across her chest. She’s staring at my face with a look I recognize: the same one my father gave me when he was angry, the same one that flashes on the nurses’ faces when a patient is disobedient. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“They’re killing us. They’re going to kill us.”

“I’ll ask again, what the hell are you saying?”

“I saw his notes. They’re... Something is going to happen to you. He said you can’t be cured. They’re going to do something.”

“What?”

“I don’t know.” I am trembling. “I don’t know what’s happening, I don’t know anything.”

“Hey,” she snaps. “Calm down. You know what happens to girls who cry around here.”

“You can’t stay here. I can’t stay here.”

She is scoffing, a puff of air shooting out of her nose, her lips curling into a gentle slope.

“What do you want to do? You gonna stage a prison break?”

“You got *them* in. You can get us out. We can leave. Both of us.”

“And go where?” The words slide out of her mouth and land on the floor with a hard thud. A chill passes over me. Giulia doesn’t flinch.

“I don’t know... Anywhere.”

“Are you gonna go home? Hm? Back to people who sent you here in the first place?”

“No, I...”

She takes my hands in her own. Her grip is like hot iron. “I don’t know about you,” she is almost whispering. “But I’ve run out of places to run. Everywhere I go, I’m just a whore.” She’s even smiling. “Maybe you still have a chance, but I don’t.”

“Then... what do we do?”

“We are not a ‘we.’ Me? I’ve been here four years. I’m going to die here. And I intend to enjoy myself until then. You? You’re young. You’re new. You’re going to give them what they want and get out of here as soon as you can. You’re going to be cured. And you’re not going to worry about me or ‘we’ anymore. Got it?”

I am nodding because I can't think of anything else to do.

She smiles. "*Bene*. Good girl."

She is turning her head and looking down towards the echoes of the party and the candle.

She is looking at me once more. "No time to lose, I guess."

I am watching her walk away. She still manages to look like she's floating, gliding, slipping.

It is Day 163. There is even a grace to the way her figure moves as a man in a white coat and a man in a black shirt drag her away, through one of those black, windowless doors to nowhere. She isn't struggling.

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On the night Girardi returned to the sea, I slept for the first time since I left Italy. A dark, dreamless sleep. I might have never awoken if not for Jezza gently shaking my shoulder. He loomed over me with a smile and an odd, restless peace in his eyes. "Dinner," was all he said.

"Dinner?" I asked, but he had already disappeared.

I sat up in bed and looked around. All the other bunks were empty, besides the few lumps of sallow skin and blankets who had been too sick or old or tired to move for the last few days. My stomach clenched. Blood rushed to my head as I stood up. I swayed for half a moment until I readjusted to the rhythm of the waves. A dull swarm of murmurs floated throughout the cabin, echoing off the steel walls from every direction. I peered through the doorway of our compartment, though, and found its true source: a blooming orange glow in the dining hall against which stood dozens of silhouettes, each a different size and shape, all flickering and shifting with every blink. I walked towards them, the hum rising and turning into many distinct voices in almost as many languages.

They were gathered around the dining tables, sitting and rapping their fingers on the metal tabletop, pacing up and down the aisles between them, exchanging whispers. No one had food, and no one was rising to get any. Jezza was nowhere to be seen. I caught stray words in the stale air as they stumbled out of restless mouths. There had been no breakfast, and now they had been waiting for dinner for who knows how long, and where the hell was all the crew anyway. The people waiting around the table gradually congealed into groups: families, countrymen, and even friends struck up on this journey all orbiting one another. I stood alone, no one so much as looking at me. Their whispers climbed into chatter and even shouting.

The voices swelled, the air vibrating and hot with breath. But then, a clattering thud like something banging against metal clapped, once, then again, and again, in a deliberate, slow rhythm. Silence fell. The seas of shadows parted. A pair of boots stood on the dining table a ways down its length. Darkness was all there was above the leather, so that when they started walking, they seemed to be doing it on their own. They strode towards a candelabrum a few paces ahead and stopped, then a hand dived into the light and grabbed it. The man was revealed as he lifted the candles to his face.

Sharp cheekbones and a long nose that looked more like a fin cast shadows over his pale, unblemished skin. He took off his billed cap and tucked it under his arm to reveal a full head of jet black, wet-looking hair, slicked back without a single one out of place. His broad shoulders were cloaked in a black shirt and an unbuttoned trench coat. The muscles in his face rippled as he clenched his jaw and looked down at all of us from his perch. He surveyed us for a moment, then nodded curtly, and opened his mouth, leaving it agape and his jaw hanging for half a breath. “*Signore,*” he finally said, “*e signori.*”

His voice was soft, on the verge of a whisper. I strained to make out the words over the humming of the ship's engines and the rolling of waves above us. Everyone else was doing the same. All were quiet, except for a few whispered translations. Several men emerged from the shadows, flanking the dining table, most of them in matching black shirts. Jezza was among them. He looked at me and gave a nod as if to reassure me before looking down at the floor.

"I am Adjutant Malavasi. I have the honor of leading some of the soldiers you may have seen onboard." A gentle tap rang out, wood on metal. "I've joined you tonight," he continued, his voice low, his boots pacing the length of the table with slow, loose steps, "seeing as there's been... developments in our journey as of late. Developments concerning one, or perhaps a few, of you individually, but also all of us on this vessel collectively."

He paused. "You see... A body is made up of cells, yes? And if one of those cells becomes cancerous, well... it must be removed. There's simply no way around it. If it isn't removed, swiftly, that means the death not only of the body, but all of the cells therein. Am I being clear?" He seemed to wait for an answer, but none came. "No, of course not... I've been avoiding the meat of the matter. Well, I won't waste your time with metaphors any longer."

He was holding something. The weight of it was palpable. With each step he swung whatever it was through the thick air, but the candlelight was not quite strong enough to reveal it. "Someone on this ship has done grave harm," he said, pausing between almost every word as if feeling their shape in his mouth. "Harm to me, to you, to himself, all of us... You see, one of my men has gone missing." He punctuated each sentence by tapping the table with the thing in his hands, ever so softly. "A good man." Tap. "A patriot." Tap. "A veteran." Tap.

"Lost a leg in the war, even, fighting for his country. Reliable sort of fellow, not the sort you'd expect to just disappear. We checked his room, looked the whole ship up and down, no

sign of him. Now, granted, it's a big ship. All sorts of... nooks and crannies he could be hiding in." Here, he stopped pacing, and turned to look us in our eyes one by one. "However." He raised the object in his hand over his head, brandishing it. "I don't imagine he got very far on his own."

My eyes squinted against the flame. It took a moment before my vision adjusted and I recognized it. White bony fingers wrapped around the oaken thigh of a wooden leg. It was the very one that Girardi had shown me the night we first spoke, flopping at the knee and the ankle, the rusty joints squealing. "We found this, still locked away in his room. Wherever he is, he didn't go willingly." Malavasi tossed the leg down on the table and it clattered, the crash ricocheting off the walls until it sounded like we were inside a storm cloud. "And if a man like that, a good man, a strong man, isn't safe, no one is. So, now is the time for vigilance. If you want to make it to the other side of this ocean, then I strongly suggest you keep your eyes open. If you see anything suspicious, or if you know anything about what happened to our brother, you must report it. Those with useful information will be rewarded. Those who remain silent will receive their due as well." He stared a moment longer, then nodded. "*Buonasera*. Enjoy the soup."

Malavasi set the candles down, picked up the leg, and dismounted the tabletop. He and the other blackshirts melted into the shadows as the rest of us took our seats. Jezza sat across from me. He tried his best to keep his eyes calm and gave me a few more reassuring nods, but his clenched fists gave him away.

Dinner was served. The broth was more watery than usual, and the bread ever so slightly smaller, but no one complained. For once, not a word was spoken in any tongue.

It remained silent every following night when we gathered for the single meal of the day. Where once there was laughter and chatter, despite the dark and the damp and the questionable stew, now there was only anticipation, like the surreal nausea you get when you just start falling.

The fascists always came at dinner time, I guess because they knew no one would be willing to give up a meal. They would begin by gathering the Italians. By the third night, we all started sitting together to begin with. Then a blackshirt would approach us and bark a word. “*Francese*” on one day, “*Spagnolo*” on another. “*Inglese*,” “*Tedesco*,” every day another language. We were to raise our hands if we spoke it and go with them when they pointed at us. I, like most of us, only spoke Italian, but we all knew what was happening. They tapped a foreigner on the shoulder, and the lot of them went out onto the promenade. Not even the iron doors could keep out all the questions, the screams, the beatings. Soon enough, the others learned to avoid all the Italians, as if each one of us was wearing black. Everyone ate, slept, lived with their own.

I lost track of how many nights and days passed like this. How many meals, how many languages, how many cold stares. It must have been weeks. They all bled into one another as one long sinking feeling in my gut. Jezza always sat by my side, invading our colony of Italians. The only others to cross our border was a group of three men who marched into our compartment one night just as we were settling into our beds. They stood with their arms crossed over their chests and scowls stretched across their faces. “*Portoghese*,” the one in the middle barked.

All of us stared at them blankly. They spoke in the party’s code, but even in uttering the single word, their accents sounded strange. Each of them wore shabby trousers and shirts that were probably white or grey when they boarded the ship but were now stained with tinges of yellow or brown, sleeves rolled up past their elbows to display their muscles, their black hair,

their olive skin. “*Portoghese?*” the middle one asked again. He followed it with a few words in that language. They stared at us. We looked at each other.

A man among us slowly raised his hand: Pietro, a skinny man, whom I had seen nearly every day but had never spoken to. He wore clothes a size too big from his crumpled trilby to his scuffed loafers. His face was hairless but sallow and marked with scars and blemishes, so that in the dark, he could have been anywhere from fifteen to fifty. He poked his head out from his burrow in a top bunk. The three asked him a question, and he nodded meekly in response. The middle of the three turned to his companions and gave an ever so slight flick of his head. They stalked towards the bunk, stood before it for half a breath, then grabbed him by his jacket and pulled.

Pietro let out a wail as he slid out of the bed. He grabbed onto a bed post at the last second, halting his flight. They kept pulling until his jacket tore and hung limply half off of his body. They gripped him again as he tried to scramble back on the bunk, pulling this time by his legs. He struck the floor with a low, metallic thud and a scream that echoed through the hull. The two dragged him further, as he shouted and clawed at the floor, trying to tether himself. The other Italian men rose to their feet, but beyond that were paralyzed, standing mute on the spot.

The Portugeuse men dragged Pietro out into the open floor space in the center of our compartment, in full view of all the bunks lined against the walls. One of them held him down by his shoulders while the other two began pounding his face, his stomach, anywhere they could hit as he writhed beneath them. Pietro managed to get out a few words between the blows, his voice clogged with his own tears, mucus, blood. “*Aiutami! Aiutami!*”

This awoke one of our men. One of the older men aboard, his hair grey and his stride slow, stepped out to get between Pietro and the men. Perhaps he thought he was afforded some filial respect from the rest of us. “*Basta*,” he shouted. “Enough!”

But they didn’t relent. Instead, one of the men pushed the old man aside with a stray swing of his arm, without even looking at him. The old man tottered back onto his heels for a moment, waving his arms about wildly, as if he were trying to tread water. I couldn’t see him fall, but I heard the hollow, wet smack of his skull hitting something and a few half-swallowed screams from bystanders. The rest of our men shot into action having smelled the blood, closing in on them, grabbing them by their hair and clothes, throwing punches of their own. They turned away from Pietro, who laid in a crumpled heap on the ground. Jezza stepped in front of me, shielding me behind his frame. Still, I glimpsed fists clashing into noses, elbows flying into stomachs, teeth sinking into skin. More people crowded into our compartment. Most simply watched, but some jumped into the fray themselves, not knowing who was fighting who or why but simply wanting to draw blood. The spectators hollered and screamed and laughed and cried.

Two men grappled at each other and wrestled until they crashed into one of the walls. One of their heads slammed into the sconce on the wall, throwing the candle within to the floor. The light lowered and vanished, like a sunset on a film running too fast. The incomprehensible tangle of voices that filled the cabin amplified. The sounds of bodies meeting bodies, writhing and brawling, grew. Until a white flash and a thunderous crack shot out. My ears rang with a high, numbing tone. The light slowly returned, as someone picked up and relit the candle. One of the Portugeuse was extending his arm straight up in the air. His hand trembled violently around the handle of a small revolver. A hole had been punched in the ceiling above him.

His compatriots rose their feet, bloodied. They panted for a moment. I couldn't hear their breathing or anything besides the ringing. He lowered the gun but kept it in sight. Once they caught their breath, the three had one more question. "*Portoghese?*" I read from their silent lips.

Pietro trembled and shook his head frantically. His mouth opened, crying something at them; I couldn't tell what. The three men left single file, satisfied with their handiwork. The spectators trickled out, returning to the restless monotony. Sounds returned to me, and the ringing faded before dinner time.

A few meals later the blackshirts finally made their way to Portugal. When they demanded a translator, our table remained silent. The fascists took one of theirs out onto the promenade all the same.

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I was lying in my bunk a few nights later, my stomach rumbling even though I had just left the dinner table. Some were still sitting there, and the sound of their spoons scraping against the bottoms of their bowls cut through the rumble of the ship and the sea around us. I couldn't stay there anymore, listening to the scratching, feeling every pair of eyes scanning each other, waiting for no one knew what. The air had grown tight and still, like the moment between two strikes of lightning. I was the first to leave the table, and when I did, half the others snapped their heads or jumped in their seats, broken from a trance. I lowered my head and rushed into the dark so they would stop looking at me. Slow, gentle steps followed me. I knew it was Jezza, even though I didn't dare turn around. His feet followed me all the way to my bunk. I wanted to hide under my covers and sleep without dreams. I closed my eyes but my mind kept churning, flashing pictures on my eyelids: Girardi flying through the night, the wooden leg, Pietro's bloodied face, the empty spots at the dinner table where the chosen once sat.

I was awoken from my not-sleep several times. First by Jezza moving. He had been continuing his ritual, whatever it was, despite everything, bringing boxes down to the black below without so much as a word in any tongue. His bunk creaked as his weight lifted. I listened to his silence as he hesitated a moment, then faded away to do his duty.

I only opened my eyes, though, when I felt a hand on my shoulder, shaking me, a moment later. “Hey,” a hushed and hasty voice whispered. “Hey you, wake up.”

One of the men from my country was squatting down at my bedside, his face inches from mine. An older man, whose years had been hard from the look of it. Shadows pooled in every pockmark on his cheek, all the wrinkles that ran like trenches on his forehead. Neither of us said anything for a moment, but his eyes darted around, like they were searching for something in the whites of mine. “The Englishman,” he finally stammered in a thin whisper. “What is he doing?”

“I don’t know.”

“You have to,” he replied, shaking his head. “You have to know. You’re lying.”

My hands shivered beneath my covers, even though my face grew hot and sweat trickled down my torso. I slid further into my blankets, withering as my muscles tightened.

His brown irises grew darker, melding into his pupils, and began pushing the white out. “Every day you’re with him. You’re lying. What’s in the boxes? Where is he taking them?”

“He doesn’t speak-”

“It’s food, isn’t it?” He grabbed the frame of my bed and shook it. “*Isn’t it?*”

“I don’t know anything.”

“Whore,” he hissed through his teeth. “He’s a thief, and you’re a whore, and the both of you will rot in hell.”

He stared at me for a moment longer, his eyes all black and his lip quivering, as if trembling under the weight of the next curse he was going to whisper. But it never came. He crawled away, sinking into the dark.

When Jezza returned, I thought about telling him what happened, but I knew that words were useless. Still, his eyes lingered on mine for even longer than usual, and he nodded curtly, as if he had read everything from my face. He took his jacket from the bed and wrapped it around his shoulders, the collar half-hiding his face. He brought two fingers to his lips, miming a cigarette, then stuck both hands deep in his pockets, and wandered off. With an easy, meandering pace, he crossed the threshold of our compartment and disappeared. The metal shriek and the heavy thud of a door told me and everyone else listening he had gone out onto the deck.

The pockmarked man swam to the surface of the dim light once more, at the opposite side of the compartment between two bunks. I lowered my ears beneath the covers but I could still hear him whispering with others. Not the words themselves, but the hot breath passing through teeth and the lips slapping. Three or four voices. Feet shuffling, growing nearer and then more distant, like waves crashing on the hull and receding. The door swung open and closed louder than it did before. It sucked all the air out of the cabin as it shut, and suddenly it went silent and time seemed to move slower, as if the sea had come flooding in and we were all underwater. I shifted in the bed just to hear the metal frame whimper beneath me. I opened my mouth to utter some kind of noise, but a weight pressed on my chest, pinning me, squeezing the breath out of my lungs. I half-thought that everyone had disappeared, but I didn't dare lower the cover to look.

The door opened again. A rush of cold night air flew in, and with it the smell of salt and sea, and the soft, solid sounds of flesh, of limbs thwacking against a solid surface. A gurgling,

hoarse noise that sounded not quite human and not quite animal leaked through the door before it shut. Then, there was one set of footsteps, his footsteps, and I was allowed to breathe again. I had come to know the cadence of his gait, the rasp of his breath, the timbre of his weight. My muscles relaxed at his approach before I even knew that they had been tensed. I sat up.

Though his sound had been familiar, he looked different than he had a moment before. His cap was pulled down low over his brow and his greying hair jutted out, tossed about at odd angles. His face seemed to have sunk into itself, his expression long and hollow. His coat was askew on his shoulders and had a slight rip on the collar. His hands were clenched into fists and shaking. Both of them were covered in a black, wet glimmer: blood. One of them was clutching a switchblade, equally black from the point down to the handle.

He lingered by the end of my bed for a moment, like he was unsure what to do. He sat on the end, by my feet, his back turned to me. I trembled, whether from fear or joy, I didn't know. He opened a fist and wiped the blade on the hem of his jacket until it gleamed like a sliver of the moon, and then wiped it a bit more. He folded the blade away gently, with a barely audible click.

“We went,” he said, quiet but steady, his head half-turned towards me. “Tonight.”

He dropped his gaze away from me and to the floor once more. He flicked the knife open and closed, back and forth, at a steady rhythm, interrupted only occasionally when he noticed that he had missed a speck of blood. I sat up with him, unable to move. The others moved about the cabin, desperately trying to avoid looking at either one of us, just as I avoided looking at them. Jezza didn't seem to notice. He only looked at the blade and his own hands. His palms were tinged with splotches of faded pink from the blood he had failed to wipe away.

Night fell. Or at least, the inhabitants of the steerage collectively, wordlessly decided that they could no longer stay upright on two feet and returned to their bunks. More than a few beds

remained empty and cold, though these were quickly colonized by the neighbors who were still among us and who wanted more room for their limbs or their belongings. When the sounds of waking life dampened and the waters settled, Jezza abruptly stood from his post. This time he turned to face me and nodded. “We went,” he whispered. “Now.”

“Where?” I asked.

“Below.”

He offered me a stained hand. I hesitated for a breath. The only “below” I could think of was the fathoms of sea beneath our feet. There was the pit of black which a stairway led down into, the one that Jezza had descended into after dinner to do his ritual, whatever that was. But there was nothing for me there. There was nothing there at all. Here there was hunger, blood, whispers, but those were somethings. Then, I remembered the empty beds and the people who had disappeared and the blackness which had smothered us when the candles went out. And I realized that the nothing was invading here too. I looked at the hand he extended towards me, and then the other one hanging limply at his side, still loosely holding the switchblade.

I took his hand in mine and rose from the bed.

We crept silently through the cabin, past the stalks of bedposts and the bodies lying half-awake within them. The interior of the ship seemed to stretch so that the walk to the stairway into the below was further away than I had remembered it, more compartments spawning in front of us as we passed through each one. When we reached the dining hall and the steel door that had until recently separated the something from the nothing, he turned the wheel and pushed the door open slowly, carefully, with ease. He pulled me forward, only hesitating so much as necessary to keep our movements silent. I caught one last glimpse of the candlelight before my vision darkened.

My skin prickled as the damp, cold air hit it. Jezza stepped down the stairwell with sure, quick feet, pulling me along. I was already lost, unable to feel the walls containing us or even the floor that I was stepping on. I was floating, falling down, not moving of my own accord, my stomach dropping and my head spinning. When the descent stopped, my gut did not return to me. We waded forward a while longer, Jezza pulling me left and right, forward and back, as I drifted behind him.

Then, he stopped suddenly. My hand slipped out of his and I was utterly untethered. Alone. The only sign that Jezza hadn't disappeared entirely was a soft, dull scraping noise, once, twice, and then a small, blinding eruption of light. I could see his thumb and index finger clutching the match and a hint of his face behind the flame. The rest was swallowed by shadow. His eyes were full with a strange mixture of pity, guilt, desire; for what, I did not know. He tried to smile, curling his dry, cracked lips. He lowered the match and cast the light on a large, wooden crate, the top askew to reveal that it was filled with black nothing. The match went out and he lit another. "You stayed," he whispered. "It was safe. Below. Below."

I shivered. "Will you stay here?" I asked. "With me?"

"You were below. You. They didn't find you."

"You," I said, pointing towards the flame and the man behind it.

He shook his head. "Up. They knew me."

The nothing pressed its weight on my shoulders and wrapped around my throat. "Is this goodbye then?"

"No. Never." Something touched my arm. It might have been him, it might not. He smiled even more frantically, showing his jagged teeth, yellow in the flame. His eyes were

gleaming with dew. He held out an arm, miming carrying something heavy, like the boxes he had transported below every night. “Food. Food every day. I saw you every day. Always.”

The something ran through my hair, brushing the skin of my scalp slowly. “Jezza,” I said. It was the first time his name had crossed my lips. “Please.”

I wasn’t sure what I was asking for. I had come with him because I needed to get away from there. I needed to find a here, so that there would be there and I would be here. But here, there was no here. We were nowhere. When he left, there would be only nothing. And then what was I?

The flame of the match crept up to his fingertips and began searing the skin, a wisp of smoke rising from the pink flesh. With a flick of his hand, the flame was gone, leaving only the smell of burnt skin.

Something scooped me up, grabbing me with two arms, one slipping behind my back and another lifting me up under my legs. My arms scraped against wood, and I knew that I was being laid into the empty box Jezza had shown me. Some sort of hay or straw padded the bottom, prickling and scratching through my clothes. My legs folded up towards my chest and my back pressed against one of the walls. The lid screeched as it moved into place and the air was sucked out of the box.

“You went to America,” his voice seeped through the wood. “You lived.”

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I often wondered if I was a fish.

Even before the nothing. Before the boat. Before the hospital. They sent me to the hospital so that I could be a woman. But if I wasn’t already a woman, what had I been being all that time? A fish seemed as good as anything. Swimming is like flying, only downwards. And

the world beneath the waves couldn't be all that much stranger than the one on land. I had lived on the same land all my life, land that I had tilled with my own hands, land that I had eaten the fruits of, and yet I was foreign to it.

They were foreign too. The blackshirts. Girardi. Malavasi, too. More foreign than me. They spoke of the land, the nation, the people, but they weren't of them. I saw. No one else seemed to, no one back on land and no one here at sea. But I saw. The way their faces were crooked and swollen, like they were plastered over a skull that didn't match. The damp, pale skin. The black of their eyes. I remembered too. I was young, but I remembered. They rose from out of the sea fully formed and strode the land, marching all the way to Rome. The elected among us followed their lead and the rest melted into air. I don't think I came from their world. At least, I don't remember it if I did. But I don't remember being born from my mother either. Mother and father were creatures of the land, like most of my country. But they were chosen. I saw what became of the unchosen at the hospital, and I saw it again in the below.

The dull aching of my folded limbs had long since faded into numbness. I couldn't feel my body and couldn't see anything. The only sensation that remained was the weight of my head, dangling in midair. Everything below the neck had dissolved. For a while, I could tell when I was sleeping because in my dreams, I regained my senses. It was always the same dream. I was under water, swimming at unfathomable depths. Both the seafloor and the surface were invisible, so that I didn't know up from down. But I could see the area around me clearly. I could even breathe. I was gliding through the water, past great columns of steel and stone that rose from the black below to the black above, endlessly tall and as wide as a field. I looked up, or perhaps down, and saw the pallid belly of a whale, swimming at the same pace as me. Then, I

woke up, and I was back in the nothing. But soon the dream disappeared, and with it the border between sleep and wakefulness. Most often I found myself somewhere between the two.

Eventually, the pangs of hunger and the desiccation of thirst crept in. I was grateful. They reminded me that I had a stomach and a throat. Soon after, footsteps pattered. Not above, as they always were, but down in the below. It was Jezza: his rhythm, his weight, accompanied by a thin, wooden creaking. His feet paused and there was a gentle thud, as if he had set something down. His feet crept up and down the length of the hold, fading then returning a moment later over and over, closer and closer to my box. There were other sounds too: wood scraping against wood; more footsteps, different from Jezza's gentle, steady pace; hot breath cutting through the dank air. The sounds were all around me, even as he grew closer and closer. When he finally arrived at my box, he hesitated for a moment and the noises faded. A small ray of orange light from a lantern oozed through a crack at the lid, beaming straight down onto my eye. Then, softly, a weight pressed down on the lid of the box. He moved on, the light faded, and I heard his fingertips brushing against the lid as his feet dragged him away, as if he were trying to tether himself to me.

I pushed the lid open when silence fell again. Jezza's feet faded first, and then the other rumblings and murmurs lingered for another moment. I stuck an arm out and felt around the top of the lid. First, I felt the cool outline of a glass bottle. I slipped it down into the box and poured the contents into my mouth. Water splashed down my throat, tainted with a slight musty flavor, but easing the tightness in my throat all the same. I smelled the food before my hands found it, a slab of salted meat and a small slice of stale bread wrapped in paper. As I took the package, my hand brushed against the edge of another piece of paper. I felt the lid again until I found a small scrap with jagged edges, ripped from something larger. There were indentations on it, letters, but

it was too dark to read. I tucked it away and tore into the meat. My hand ventured into my pocket and played with the note, trying and failing to read with my fingertips.

Jezza wasn't one of them. Neither was he one of the chosen. That's what I thought, at least. He was like them in some ways, though. For one thing, he could see them. He was the only one who could see them for what they were, other than me. Perhaps because he had been to their world. He had drowned and been reborn. I suppose he wanted the same thing from me as they did, for different reasons. Still, I suspected he was simply a man. I could tell because he wanted to live so badly. He was willing to kill to live. For me to live.

I must have fallen asleep, because the next moment I was hungry once more. The rumbling of my stomach woke me up. Once I was conscious, however, a whole host of other sounds came into focus. The same sounds as before: feet, lungs, mouths. A single set of footsteps stalked past me. It wasn't Jezza. The steps were too sharp, too staccato to be his. They stopped a few yards away from my box. A sound like water trickling leaked through my wooden walls. A cough echoed. I kept completely still and held my breath until the feet walked again and passed by me, heading back where they came from. I opened the lid and peered out.

I wasn't sure what I was expecting. It was just as dark outside of the box as within, and I could see nothing but quick flutters of shadows, stirring the deeper blackness around them. Along with the usual stench of sea and fish, I faintly smelled urine. Voices murmured from the shadow's direction in a language I couldn't recognize. The shadow sank and disappeared, followed by a loud clap. Noises drifted in from every angle, disembodied voices and wordless stirrings. I stepped out of the box for the first time since I had gone in. My legs trembled beneath my weight, and blood rushed to my head. I wandered a few steps away from my box, trying to keep my feet as silent as possible as the sounds bubbled to a crescendo. I stumbled on something,

and I might have gotten turned around, but it was still black and noise all around me, so I couldn't tell. I just kept walking, not knowing where I was going or why. Shadows shifted in the corners of my eyes, but by the time I snapped my head towards them, they were already gone. If it weren't for the damned sounds, scratching at my eardrums, I might have believed I was alone. I clenched my fists until my nails stabbed into my palms. Once more I stumbled, this time from stubbing my foot on another wooden box. There was another thump, softer, from within. Then, a muffled voice, shouting in an alien tongue. I ran my hands over the surface of the lid until I found the cusp. I don't know what possessed me to open it; it wasn't quite curiosity, for I was fairly certain what I would find. It couldn't have been simply for the sake of seeing either, since there was no sight to see. It might have been something like the reason you pick at a scab or nibble at a fingernail.

As soon as I lifted the lid, something shot out of the black pit of the box and wrapped around my wrist, squeezing tightly, slick and clammy and cold. The voice within shouted once again. I ripped my hand away and let out a raspy, hoarse scream, my throat straining to make a sound after all the time I had spent in thirst and silence. The rising tide of sounds which had enveloped me suddenly disappeared for a half-moment of utter stillness. I couldn't breathe. Then, they came back, louder than ever, chattering and crawling into my head.

I ran. Blindly, wildly, chased by the sounds. I crashed into boxes and shelves and walls and shadows over and over again, but I kept getting up and running again, navigating the labyrinth with only my hands, blinded by darkness and deafened by cacophony. Suddenly, I was running through the hallways of the hospital two years before. I could hear the laughter of the other girls and the nurses shouting. I could feel the cold of the ice baths prickle my skin and smell hair singed by electricity. Then, I was in a dinghy on the open ocean, narrow, but

apparently endlessly long, since no matter how long I ran, I never made any progress. Jezza's oars plunged into the waves with a wet clap, but I couldn't see him. I couldn't even see the moon. In another instant, the metal walls containing me collapsed into an open, interminable nothing rolling out before me, and I realized that I was in my family's field, the scent of wheat wafting across my face. I kept running, even though I was only going from nowhere to nowhere.

And then I crashed into something.

I was back in the cargo hold. My face had slammed into a cold steel wall. Immediately, I felt a warmth gushing down from my nose and my eyes began watering. I tasted a mixture of iron and sweetness in the back of my throat. I tried to wipe it from my face but could barely keep up with the flow. Once it slowed down somewhat and the blood began to dry into a crust on my cheeks and chest, I pressed my palms to the wall, picked a direction, and crawled along the outline of the ship. I had no idea where the wall would take me, but it was something to follow. The voices were now a distant echo, yet all the same, I was being chased, and if I stood still for a moment, the nothing would swallow me whole. I kept myself anchored to the wall with my fingertips and moved as quickly as I could without falling.

Eventually, my foot hit something solid. I squatted down and prodded at the ground with my hands. Stairs. I stooped down on all fours and felt my way up. It wasn't the same staircase Jezza had taken me down on, that I was fairly certain of. It felt steeper, and it had sharp turns which I had to navigate. My palms quickly coated with dust and grime. My knees began to ache against the hard floor. After rounding several corners, I felt a straight ridge shooting up the wall. After some fumbling, I felt a door handle. My hands reached to turn it, but I stopped myself. How far up had I come? Was I back at the steerage? Could I go back there? Did I want to?

I left the door behind and kept climbing. I climbed until there wasn't any further to climb. Hundreds of steps passed below my hands and my knees. As I ascended, more and more somethings returned to me. First it was the chants and low, powerful growls of the ship itself, its engines and machinery. Then, voices. Not like the ones down in the dark, but the familiar hum of the steerage, muffled through the walls. There were shouts and whispers and chats, and I even caught a few stray words in Italian, though nothing I could make sense of. They were right beside me and then, gradually, below me. Eventually, I rounded a corner to find light: an electric bulb, wrapped in an iron cage, shining brightly despite a few flickers. I looked down at my own crawling body as my eyes strained: half-dried blood and dirt stained my dress. I tried to wipe the dust off my knees when I rose to my feet, but it wouldn't go. Pain racked my entire frame, but I kept on climbing. The rest of the stairwell was well-lit, all the way up to the final door.

It felt just the same as the other doors I had passed, and probably looked the same as well. Steel, windowless, with a wheel at the center. However, this one had been left ever so slightly ajar. It was just a crack, but it was enough for an entire world to seep through. A single beam of a warm, inviting light emanated from it. I heard voices once more, but these were soft, easy voices sliding out of well-fed mouths. There was something else beneath the voices too, but I couldn't quite make it out, no matter how hard I concentrated. Something low and hypnotic. But it was the smells which truly beckoned to me: fragrant garlic, caramelized onion, rosemary sizzling in butter, fresh bread, white wine, a sharp cheese.

I moved towards the door, unable to stop myself, and pushed it the rest of the way open. I raised a hand to cover my eyes from the searing light. The aromas sharpened, so much so that my knees buckled and I gagged on the smells, vomit burning the back of my throat. New sounds

washed over me. Knives tapping on cutting boards, oil hissing, a stray shout or two. My eyes adjusted and I found myself in a bright, warm hallway, its walls a vibrant, clean white.

I rose to my feet and followed the sounds, emerging into a large, crowded room. A dozen men in white buttoned uniforms stormed about, lugging pots brimming with broth and steaming pans. There were flames everywhere, with two long lines of stoves, one against the far wall and in the center of the floor, most of them covered with pans. One man was on a step ladder, smoking a cigarette and stirring a pot of stew taller than him. They tossed slabs of salmon onto pans, followed by a flurry of spices and a splash of lemon juice. None of them seemed to notice me, too busy bickering with each other in English and transferring food from pot to pan to plate as rapidly as they could. I tiptoed along the walls, my stomach tightening.

I inched towards a set of double doors on the other side of the kitchen. They flung open just before I reached them, nearly slamming into me. A man carrying a silver tray and wearing a tuxedo, pristine white gloves, and a scowl burst through the door and pushed past me without a glance, shouting something at the cooks. As the door swung behind him, the sounds of the next room waxed and waned. There was low, flirtatious chatter in all manner of languages, and beneath that, the sound which I had barely heard a moment earlier: music.

It sounded like something American, a jazz piece with a gentle rhythm that swayed like a low tide. There were tinny trumpets and a piano and even strings. Through the double doors, I found an open, massive hall. Grand chandeliers hung from a ceiling I couldn't even see. Circular tables crowded together, blanketed in crisp white tablecloths, half-eaten plates of food, glasses of wine, and a single candle for each. People sat at each of them, most in couples, some in threes and fours, all wearing their finest dresses and suits. They leaned forward to whisper in each other's ears, or lounged in their seats and sipped their drinks, or craned their necks to speak with

the inhabitants of other tables and howled with laughter. Faint traces of cigar smoke drifted in the dim light. The women flashed blinding smiles beneath twinkling eyes and rosy cheeks, and the men smirked in return. Beyond the sea of tables was the stage from which the music emanated: a shining beacon where men in white tuxedos carried on with their tune, aloof from the crowd below. A small floor space had been cleared where couples swayed in each others' arms.

I kept walking further and further into the ballroom, unable to resist the pull of the warmth and the sounds and smells which settled over me like a heavy blanket. No one seemed to notice me despite the clothes I wore, which were far too frumpy and dull for such an occasion even without the blood which now covered them. I floated among them like a ghost. The only sign that I really existed there, in that place, in that moment was that the waiters had to dodge me when I stood in their paths, twisting their bodies to flow past me like water bending around a rock in a stream. I began to feel motion sick, not from the rocking of the sea which I had long gotten used to, but from the room spinning around me. My mind began losing the race to keep up with all the sensations. The laughter grew, and at the same time the music swelled to its zenith. Applause rang out, pounding me down, when suddenly something grabbed me by the arm.

I turned to see an uncannily pale hand gripping me, attached to an arm clad in a sleeve of the deepest black. A familiar face looked down at me: the man who spoke to us in the steerage, the leader of the blackshirts. He was wearing an extravagant military uniform, including a tight, black jacket decorated with ribbons and medals and broad shoulder pads. I saw myself reflected in the pools of his pupils. He spoke in perfect English, "Are you alright, ma'am?"

I barely heard him amidst the music and laughter. I answered, in Italian, "I'm not sure."

"Do you need a nurse?" he half-whispered, switching languages with ease.

“I... I think I want to speak with the captain.”

“What happened to you, *signora*?”

“Please, I need to speak to him, it’s urgent.”

He hesitated. Then, his thin lips curled into a smirk. He tapped at an insignia sewn on his breast amidst the medals and the badges of honor, the golden fasces of the blackshirts. “My name is Malavasi. I’m an official of the state. Whatever you need, my men and I can help you.”

“I wouldn’t want to waste your time.”

He cocked his head, the smile only widening. “So, it’s an urgent waste of time?”

I stammered as the breath caught in my throat.

He chuckled, a puff of air escaping his nose. “But who am I to question a young lady in distress? Come along.”

He stretched out a hand. It was ever so slightly trembling as it waited for my own. His palm was shockingly soft to the touch, though it was cold and a little wet. I walked by his side, and for the first time, people began looking at me. Bodies contorted in their chairs to turn to us, eyes widened, and mouths whispered into ears. Finally, they saw me.

He smiled and nodded at people as we proceeded through the hall, even letting go of me to gently shake a few hands and pat a few backs in passing. The band kept on playing and the dancers kept on dancing.

Malavasi brought me to another white hallway which looked identical to the one from which I had emerged. At the end of it was a door leading to the open air. We emerged onto a platform high above the main deck with a stairwell leading yet further up. The stars were covered by long ropes of clouds, still tinged purple and golden by the recently set sun, hidden behind the horizon: the first hint of daylight I had seen since I left home. I looked out over the

railing to watch men crawling on the deck, a hundred feet down. My head swooned, and I would have been rooted to the spot if not for Malavasi. He guided me forth, up the stairs and into the bridge.

Inside, the opposite wall was almost entirely glass, lined with windows looking out over the water. Beneath the windows, long boards were filled with alien technologies, dotted by flickering red lights, levers, and switches. Five men in uniform stood around, one at the steering wheel which stood like a monolith in the center of the floor, a few scattered about, fiddling with controls. One stood with his back facing us, staring out the windows with his arms folded behind his back. He turned upon hearing the door shut closed behind us. I recognized him as the captain, though his once bushy beard had been trimmed and combed. He recognized me too, for he was unable to hide his astonishment, staring at me with wide eyes.

“Captain,” Malavasi purred. “This young lady asked to speak with you personally.”

The captain stammered for a moment, his face growing red and his eyes darting wildly. He took a few steps towards us, then managed to say, “I’m sorry, what was that, *signora*?”

“She’d like to speak with you,” Malavasi repeated, barely any louder than the first time.

“Ah, yes, erm...” The captain turned to me. “*Signora*, are you alright? What happened?”

I paused, letting the silence breathe. “I’d prefer to speak to you alone, Captain.”

“Right, of course.” The captain shot a glance at Malavasi, then turned to the men behind him. “Gentlemen, if you could give us a moment...”

They trickled out of the room one by one. As they did, the captain’s eyes fell once more on Malavasi, who remained standing at my side, meek but unyielding. The door shut behind the last man, and the three of us stood in silence for another moment. Malavasi smiled pleasantly,

like we were strangers meeting at a party. Then, his smile dropped suddenly and he let out a soft, “Oh. Forgive me, *signora*.”

He strode across the room at an easy pace, but he wasn't heading for the door. Instead, he slunk towards the consoles at the opposite side, admired the view in the windows for a moment, then grabbed two chairs from their places in front of the machines. He returned to us, dragging the chairs as he went. The legs scraped against the metal floor, producing a horrific, wailing screech that made every muscle in my body constrict. Even the captain cringed. But the blackshirt was unaffected, keeping up his slow, relaxed pace and his loose posture, savoring the taste of every second. Finally, he reached the two of us and placed the chairs opposite each other. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a white handkerchief, wetted a corner of it with his tongue, and handed it to me. Then, he leaned against a nearby beam and reached into the other side of his jacket to pull out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. He put one between his lips, then offered the pack to both of us. The captain took one, but I shook my head.

Once their cigarettes were lighted and the smell of tobacco began to fill the sealed room, Malavasi nodded slightly. “Please,” he said in a breath, indicating the chairs.

We took our seats. The captain watched me, trying to read my face. I began wiping at the dried blood on my lips with the handkerchief. It was cool, damp, and perhaps the softest, richest piece of fabric I had ever touched. The pain of the blow began echoing in my nose and the back of my head. The captain was sweating, and he pulled out a handkerchief of his own to blot his forehead. He tried to tell me something with his eyes, but I couldn't quite make out what. Meanwhile, Malavasi looked on, and between puffs of smoke he kept up that damned smile.

I took in a deep, shaky breath. I laid my hands down on my lap and dug my nails into my knees so that I wouldn't tremble. I swallowed hard. “I... I know who killed Girardi.”

Malavasi took another drag of his cigarette, and when it left his lips the smile did not return. But he didn't look surprised. He even nodded, as if he were encouraging me.

"Is that so?" the captain stammered, staring at me blankly.

"I saw it. I saw everything. I- I wanted to say something earlier, but he wouldn't let me-"

"Slow down," the captain said. "It's alright, just... Just think about what you're saying. Make sure you're remembering everything right."

"Jezza," I blurted out. "It was Jezza."

The captain was stunned to silence. His head swiveled back and forth as his gaze alternated between me, sitting in front of him, bloodied but steady, and Malavasi, watching the scene with detached interest. "Adjutant," the captain said, "I assure you that I know nothing about this, this is-... I never-"

Malavasi halted his flood of words with a flick of the hand, keeping his eyes on me.

"He..." I continued. "He wants me. Ever since he saw me, he hasn't left me alone for a moment. Girardi, he spoke to me once or twice, I don't know. I guess that made him jealous..."

The captain started fidgeting in his seat. He buried his face in his palms as he listened.

"He killed him," I lied. I knew Girardi hadn't died, only returned to his home in the deep, but I couldn't let them know that I knew. "He showed me. He threw him off the deck, into the sea. He brought me out there, just before he did it, to show me. He wanted me to see what he was willing to do... Then, after you spoke to us in the steerage, he-... He shut me in a box in the cargo hold so that I couldn't tell anyone. I escaped, and I came here."

The captain's head snapped up out of his hands. "He took you down to the cargo hold?"

I nodded. The captain seemed to understand.

"These are... serious allegations, *signora*," he went on. "Do you have any proof?"

I hesitated. Silence filled the room like the smoke. “I was there,” I said. “I saw.”

Suddenly, silently, Malavasi stood up straight and began walking. He walked to one of the tables on which the ship’s technology sat, found an ashtray there, and neatly put out his cigarette. Then, he turned, and without so much as a word or a glance, proceeded towards the door and left. I caught a glimpse of his face. For the first time, since that night when he stood on our dining table and spoke to us, there was something there other than his aloof amusement, something I couldn’t comprehend. His brow had furrowed and his jaw clenched shut, so tight that I could hear his teeth grinding. What little color there was in his face had been fully sapped out. Had he actually turned his gaze on us, it might have cut us down where we sat. The door shut behind him with a decisive crash.

The captain took off his hat and wiped at his brow, then ran a hand down his face before settling on his chin, stroking his beard. “Shit,” he murmured. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I-” I stammered. “I want...” I had asked myself that very question this whole time and found no clear answer. “I’m tired of hiding,” I finally said. “I’m tired of the dark.”

“We’ll reach New York any day now. If you had just held off...”

“I’m tired of it. I’m tired of being afraid,” I heard my voice growing into a shout which ricocheted off of the walls. “I’m tired of living like a rat. All I want is some goddamned comfort, is that so much to ask? Don’t I deserve that?”

“Did he really bring you down to the cargo hold?”

“I saw the others down there. I don’t know what’s going on, but I know what I saw.”

He let out a long sigh. “You needn’t concern yourself with that business. You’ve already made enough of a mess here.”

“Tell me who they are, before I tell the blackshirt.”

“You think he doesn’t know?” the captain scoffed. “They’re... They’re from Germany. But they’re not Germans, not anymore. Jews, mostly, some Gypsies. The Germans are perfectly aware we’re taking them, the Italians too. It’s a mutually beneficial arrangement. We get paid, and the state has a few less... undesirables to deal with.”

“Then why are they... down there?”

“The Americans don’t want them. They’d turn our ship away if they knew. So, if you breathe a word of it to anyone when we get to New York...” the captain’s voice trailed off, not quite knowing how to finish the threat.

“I’m not going back down there. Don’t send me back down there. I’m not one of them.”

“I’m sure you’ll be rewarded for your bravery,” he sneered. “Was it all true, then?”

“True enough.”

“Christ, what a mess.” He lowered his head and began rubbing at his forehead. “He was always a bit strange, after what happened to him, but I never would have imagined... Perhaps it’s for the best. He’ll be back with his family, wherever they may be.”

We sat in silence, waiting, knowing that Malavasi would return. And he did. The door opened with a clatter, and a group of men began filing in. There were two in black shirts, carrying Jezza between them, and Malavasi tailing behind. They brought Jezza out onto the floor and dumped him in front of us. The captain shot to his feet and watched in horror. I felt a hand not quite holding me but hovering near enough to gingerly graze the skin at the nape of my neck. I turned to find Malavasi looming over me, his expression unreadable. “*Signora*,” he whispered. “Is this the man you spoke of?”

I turned to look at him, knelt on the floor with the two blackshirts shadowing him. His eyes were already waiting for me. They weren’t filled with anger, or fear, or even shock. The

grey of his irises glistened, and his wrinkled, blemished face softened like kneaded dough. He had been given a black eye and a split lip, but he didn't show any sign of pain. He did not try to stand or fight, but he did not bow his head or quiver either. All he did was give me a simple, subtle nod. Our gazes locked together.

“Yes,” I answered in a breath.

“Is this the man who killed Girardi?”

I hesitated for a moment. I couldn't breathe. The chamber had become a vacuum. Still, I managed to nod and say once more, “Yes.”

Jezza's lips parted. “*Ciao, bella,*” was all he could get out.

In the same instant, Malavasi lifted his hand from my back and took two steps forward. By the time I saw the pistol in his hand, its barrel was already pressing into Jezza's temple. I watched as his finger tugged at the trigger. And for just a second, the hand looked less like a hand and more like a claw, with twisted, long fingers and nails like daggers. There was a flash, and a deafening, awestrking, thrilling crack. My ears buzzed and my fingertips tingled as I watched Jezza crumple to the floor. The captain swore and practically jumped as a red mist sprayed over his feet. The blackshirts didn't flinch, and neither did I.

Malavasi stood over the body for a moment as the shot's echoes rang out then faded. Then, he moved once more towards me and extended an empty hand. Already, the monstrous features had disappeared, and it looked like an unnaturally soft human hand. The other hand was still clutching the pistol, both it and the gun covered in blood. I was confused for a moment, until he nodded towards the handkerchief which I was still holding, rubbing it between my thumb and my forefinger unconsciously, stroking the silky fabric. I gave it to him, and he began wiping his hand and the barrel of the gun. Then, he holstered the pistol and slicked back his hair, even

though, from what I could tell, not a single one was out of place. He tucked the wet, bloody handkerchief in his jacket, then turned to me. "Allow me to show you to your room."

It took me a moment to hear his words. I sat utterly still, watching the body before me. His blood had begun pooling, and brushed against the tips of my shoes, coating them with red. There was more of it than I would have expected. It kept flowing, the wound in his head pulsating and pumping out more, as if it were a living thing of its own.

He bled red blood, like I did. He was a man. Nothing more, nothing less.

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Dawn was breaking when we arrived in New York. I stood out onto the deck, along with hundreds of others. It was a grey morning, fog rolling over the harbor. However, some rays of sun broke through the clouds, tinting the mist which blanketed the city and the sea a luscious shade of orange. Out of the orange impossibly tall skyscrapers topped with pyramids rose like the stalks of steel flowers, piercing the clouds above, playing with the last of the night's stars. The buildings were dotted with glowing beacons, windows through which, even at this early hour, people were living their lives. Deep, weirdly harmonious horns bayed out from the harbor and the other ships which popped out of the fog as we approached them, only to disappear once more after we passed. I gripped the handrail until my knuckles turned white to stay upright as my knees buckled and my gut sank into itself at the mere sight of the skyline.

It was unlike anything I had ever seen. And yet, it was uncannily familiar. It only took me a moment to realize that though I had never seen such a city in the waking world, I had visited regularly when I was in the box in the cargo hold. The steel and stone monolithic inhabitants of this city were the very same ones in my dream. I swam through this skyline, me and the whale.

The night before, I had been packing my things. I had come onto the ship with next to nothing, but once I was accepted as a citizen of first-class, others had kindly lent and gifted me dresses, shoes, and even pearls, all of which were probably worth more than my family's farm. I was given a suitcase which I could stuff them into as well. Eventually, I found the dress I had worn on the night Jezza died, and long before that. It was still stained with blood, despite several attempts at washing. As I was folding it, I felt something in its pockets and was hit with a jolt of memory. I dug through the pocket with greedy, trembling hands and found the note which Jezza had left me down in the cargo hold. I unfolded the scrap.

I found not a letter, as I had expected, but drawings. They were two small, simple illustrations done in pencil, but they betrayed a surprising talent. The first was a woman. She had bountiful black curls. Her massive, onyx eyes sat nestled in a heart-shaped face, above sharp, skeletal cheekbones, a thin nose, and full lips. It was a portrait of me. Beneath it was scribbled "*La cara sposa.*" In the corner of the paper was another drawing. It was much smaller and clearly less methodically done, a sketch really. But I could easily tell what it was. It was the outline of a whale, its tail curling upwards, its flippers extended. It too had its own caption: "*La balena.*" I folded the paper again and tucked it away securely in my suitcase.

It took hours for everyone to deboard the ship. I watched the balcony as an endless stream of crates was unloaded, lowered down on winches, rolled out onto the docks on carts, or simply carried in a sailor's arms. Even once the passengers began shuffling off, I lingered there for some time. Some faces I recognized from the steerage passed me by, but they did not recognize me. I didn't blame them. I suspected that I wouldn't have been able to recognize myself either.

When I finally did descend, the captain accompanied me and spoke to the man in the booth at the checkpoint for me. He translated all his questions and told me how to fill out the forms and eased the man's concerns when I didn't have an answer. When the man asked for my name, I figured that now was as good a time as any for a new one, a fresh start. I racked my mind for a moment, then said, "Giulia..." I struggled to remember Antonio's last name, the one I would soon be adopting. "Russo," I finally recalled. "Giulia Russo."

At the end of the lengthy process, the man handed me a stamped piece of paper with the name "Julia Russell." I didn't bother protesting.

Once I had my papers, the captain took his leave, and I was allowed on yet another boat, this one a small ferry to the mainland. We passed in the shade of a colossus, a metal woman armored in a green patina. One of her arms was extended straight up in the air, her hand covered by the clouds. The people on the ferry craned their heads to look up at her in awe and whispered when they spoke about her, as if they were afraid they might draw her attention.

When we reached the shore, I wasn't quite sure where to go. Before I left, my father sent word to Antonio that his bride would be coming, but I had no idea if the letter reached him or whether he would come at all. A mob of people was waiting for us at the docks, families, some being reunited, and others being torn apart. But none of them were my people. Suddenly, the city which had seemed so magnificent from the sea became sinister from the ground. The majestic, soaring buildings now grew looming and oppressive. The greys and blacks of the steel and the red of the bricks were drab and foreboding. The milky dawn had turned to a glaring daylight. A noxious miasma washed over me, a mixture of smoke, sea, and piss. I choked on the stench. The crowds were filled with men with hardened scowls and suspicious eyes. They all seemed to be staring at me. I felt naked and wounded.

I began simply shouting at the top of my lungs so that my voice would cut through the dull, buzzing roar of chatter. “Antonio!” I called. “Antonio Russo! Antonio Russo!”

I wandered through the crowd, shouting like a madwoman. The strangers either didn’t regard me at all, or cast menacing looks at me as they cursed under their breaths, all pushing past me on their way to wherever they were going. I bounced around in the mob. I must have run in circles, for I saw the same faces and the same landmarks wherever I went. Until, finally, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I whipped my head to see an incredibly lanky man, willowy and perhaps the tallest man in the crowd. It was him, only different. He looked older than I would have thought. He couldn’t have been thirty, but already his face was weathered by hard days. He had evidently tried to look his very best for this day, wearing a shabby brown tweed suit and a black bowtie, his black hair carefully parted and gleaming with pomade. His face was clean shaven aside from a pencil mustache, and he smelled of cologne.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice tight, speaking English through a thick accent. His swampy green eyes looked me up and down with bemusement. Had they always been green? “Do I know you?”

He lived in a cramped apartment on the fourth floor of a brick building in a place he called Harlem. He took me through crowded streets, narrow alleys, and even down into the belly of the earth in order to board a rickety train, all without speaking a word after I explained why I was there. He just took my bags and began walking, so I followed him. The screeching of the train and the chattering of the crowds made my head hurt. As we passed through the dark tunnels, I felt an inexplicable terror gnawing at my stomach, but I didn’t say anything to him. On the streets, men stood in lines, waiting for something, their faces empty and battered. Emaciated

children wandered, holding signs that I could only read a few words of: “job,” “food,” “anything.” Huddled families sat in alleys, where they had apparently made their homes.

When we finally arrived at his door, he opened a series of locks and let me in. Most of the apartment was one room, barely larger than the cabin I had just left behind in the first class of the ship, with a stove, a sink, a small wooden dining table, and a narrow bed all grouped together. A clothesline, drooping under the weight of a few wet outfits, spanned the length of the room. The walls were bare aside from the peeling yellow wallpaper and one single decoration hanging on the far wall: a framed portrait of *Il Duce*.

His hairless, bloated head bulged out of the collar of a black military uniform, decorated with a long grid of medals that went on beyond the frame. A black cap topped his head, decorated with a large, golden eagle and a tassel. His plump lips were curved into a stoic, menacing half-frown. His chin was tilted upwards, displaying his thick, square jaw, but his beady black eyes seemed to be staring directly at me as I entered the room.

Antonio dropped my bags in one of the few open spaces on the floor, then turned to me. His face was blank, racked with fatigue. “Make yourself at home,” he muttered.

I’m still not sure if I really saw what I saw in that moment. Or perhaps I do know, in some sense, but my mind cannot accept it. I don’t know. And I don’t know if I will ever know. But in that moment, I was certain, and I was petrified. For I could have sworn that when he turned his head, I saw him blink, and a third, translucent, membranous eyelid slid upwards from the bottom of his eye, as though it were the eye of a frog.

Afterword

Historical Background

This creative writing project draws inspiration from the Italian regime's use of forced institutionalization in asylums across the country, particularly against women. These psychiatric hospitals were an arm of the state in its larger ongoing campaigns to disenfranchise women culturally, politically, and economically and simultaneously advance its practice of eugenics.

Asylums, and compulsory hospitalization in them, existed long before Mussolini's rise to power. However, during his reign their use intensified and became explicitly aligned with the goals of the party. Between 1927 and 1941, the number of patients currently in asylums rose from around sixty-two thousand to almost ninety-five thousand (Valeriano ch. II.4). Regulations for the conditions of the wards were almost never enforced, and patients were generally subjected to widespread malnourishment and crowded quarters where disease ran rampant. Many died not as a result of the psychological conditions for which they were hospitalized, but from illnesses like bronchitis and enteritis (Valeriano ch. V.1). Treatments ranged from electroshock therapy to hydrotherapy to subjecting patients to fevers by inoculating them with malaria and insulin-induced comas (Valeriano ch. IV.2). However, often they simply sought to indefinitely contain individuals deemed dangerous to themselves, their families, or society. What made these women so dangerous was their refusal or inability to fulfill the role demanded of them: the virtuous daughter, then obedient wife, then productive mother. With or without what one might today recognize as true symptoms of mental illness, women were institutionalized for "crimes" such as running away from their family home, sexual promiscuity, homosexuality, alternative political beliefs, or not desiring a traditional life of marriage and motherhood.

Fascist ideology viewed the nation as a singular organism within which individuals were cells contributing to the greater whole. Individuals perceived as immoral were tumors which needed to be excised, threatening both the other individual cells around them and the entire body (Valeriano I.2). Women's role in this organism was actually somewhat ambiguous in the early years of fascism. Mussolini supported women's suffrage prior to coming to power. Fascist propaganda often exalted women, or at least, a very particular type of woman. Women could become a precious part of the great machine of the state by producing children, future soldiers and mothers; not only was motherhood natural and healthy, it was patriotic service. Rural women in costume performing folkloric rituals and dances were commonplace in propaganda films and other public spaces (Valeriano ch II.1). Giovanni Gentile, an influential fascist ideologue, argued that feminism was obsolete and the struggle for equal rights was over because the very notion of "rights" itself was a shibboleth of liberalism, and under fascism, men and women were equal in having no rights at all (Iazzi 82). However, the spaces that women could inhabit were narrow and violently enforced. The only truly acceptable roles for women were domestic and reproductive.

This served economic and political purposes. During the First World War, in Italy, as in many other countries, women gained more footholds in the workforce as men were sent off to the front lines in droves. The post-war period was a time of high unemployment and civic strife. Rather than promoting class struggle as leftists of the time did, fascists foregrounded struggles across lines such as gender (Iazzi 27). Women's employment became the cause of men's unemployment. Groups of veterans, one of Mussolini's key constituencies, came to oppose female employment, often threatening owners and managers of companies with violence if they did not fire all their women workers (Iazzi 29). The confinement of women to a motherly role also served to advance the regime's cultural and racial goals. While they generally did not

directly pursue the extermination of the “lesser races” to the same extent that their German allies did, Italian fascists did come to subscribe to the same racist pseudoscience. By controlling women’s bodies, the regime was able to control who did and did not reproduce, thereby advancing a project of eugenics to, over time, eliminate the “poor of health, poor of intellect, and poor of morals” (Valeriano ch.II.4). In this way, as writer Lucia Re argues in her essay “Fascist Theories of ‘Woman’ and the Construction of Gender,” the racial hierarchy and “the entire Fascist ideological edifice may be said to hinge on the point of gender difference” (Iazzi 83). Asylums served the dual purpose of enforcing women’s domestic, reproductive role to bolster the ranks of the race and containing individuals with traits the state wanted to eliminate.

The veneration of tradition which these gender roles reflected was the first of fourteen common elements of fascism Umberto Eco identified in his article “Ur-Fascism” (5). He also identified in this cult of tradition the rejection of modernity and the necessity for a new “syncretistic” culture which not only draws from and combines different traditions and beliefs, but also tolerates contradictions between them (6). Eco argues this was manifested in the seemingly empty and at times contradictory ideology of the Italian regime, saying “Mussolini did not have any philosophy: he had only rhetoric” (3). The party assumed the aesthetics of a revolutionary movement, but violently disrupted strikes and unions while functioning as a reactionary counter to the rising threat of communism (Elazar 310). They promised industrialization and progress while simultaneously exalting tradition. They were populist, but only for an exclusive segment of the populace (Eco 8).

Many scholars have tried to reckon with the apparent blending of the progressive and the intensely reactionary in fascist ideology (Pickering-Iazzi 106). Antonio Gramsci, a philosopher and founding member of the Communist Party of Italy who was imprisoned until his death by the

fascist government, recognized that fascism “can only partly be assumed to be a class phenomenon, a movement of political forces conscious of a real goal; it has overflowed... it has become an unleashing of elemental forces within the bourgeois system of economic and political governance which cannot be stopped” (Adamson 618). Gramsci saw fascism as a two headed beast, uniting the radicalism of unemployed veterans and the conservatism of the urban middle class and petite bourgeoisie and later of the ruling elite who eventually cooperated with fascism (Adamson 617). The works of writers such as Eco and Walter Benjamin who touch on fascism as a cultural and even psychological force help make sense of how these disparate interests were glued together. Like Eco, Benjamin did not treat the fascism as a logical ideology. Instead, he conceived of it as the “aestheticization of politics” (Jay 41). Reality and politics were treated as a work of art, and the only criterion of value for a thing was its aesthetic worth and how it served to mythologize the state, rather than its rationality, coherence, or morality. This is evident in the disparate allies fascism gathered, ranging from futurists to traditionalists.

Futurism began as an avant-garde artistic and philosophical movement which emerged in Italy in the early twentieth century, and eventually branched out into politics, even forming a Futurist Political Party which provided a model for the creation of the Fascist Party. From its very name, futurism may seem incompatible with the cult of tradition which is foundational to fascism in Eco’s definition. However, while futurism and fascism certainly aren’t synonymous, the two movements were intimately allied in their early years and the rhetoric of each influenced the other (Pickering-Iazzi 71). Futurists glorified technology, speed, virility, youth, and violence. The founder of futurism, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, wrote in *The Futurist Manifesto* that “Beauty exists only in struggle. There is no masterpiece that has not an aggressive character” (Pugliese 27). Eco repeats these ideas almost verbatim in his identification of the fascist “cult of

action for action's sake" and the conception of life as permanent struggle and warfare (6, 7). It is also emblematic of Benjamin's aesthetic-based definition: war and struggle are beautiful, and thus worth pursuing for their own sake. Another point Marinetti outlined in *The Futurist Manifesto* was that "We want to glorify war—the only cure for the world—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the anarchists, the beautiful ideas which kill, and contempt for women" (Pugliese 28). Despite being an explicitly anti-conservative movement, the futurists held a reactionary view of women as being only useful for reproduction (Valeriano ch.I.3). Marinetti advocated for the abolition of marriage and monogamy, but only so that the race might be able to procreate more efficiently. The veneration of male virility and racial natalism which became fascist policy through institutions like the asylums is visible first in Marinetti's work.

If one might say that the Futurists represented an extrapolation of the industrialist and radical aspects of the Fascist Party, then the converse extrapolation of the party's reactionary exaltation of tradition might be seen in Julius Evola, an Italian philosopher, artist, esotericist, and occultist. In "Ur-Fascism," Eco identified Evola as "The most influential theoretical source of the theories of the new Italian right" and "one of the most respected fascist gurus" (5, 6). Evola went beyond conservatism to theorize that society had continually been sliding into degeneracy and involution since its peak in ancient civilizations and searched for essential truths and spiritual wisdoms in the ancient utopian traditions he constructed. He was openly hostile to Christianity, instead being interested in Hinduism, Buddhism, alchemy, and occult magic. Legend has it that Mussolini "stood in considerable awe of Evola's 'magical powers'" (Evola x). Evola believed that those who were imbued with a more transcendental spirit naturally had the right to rule over those more mired in the material world, whether that manifested in the form of the Indian caste system, the patricians and plebeians of Rome, or the continued supremacy of the

white race and men over women (Evola xii). For Evola, physical difference was a marker of spiritual difference: men were born in male bodies because their spirit was “transcendentally male,” white people born with white skin following their transcendental whiteness, and so on (158). Individuals could only experience spiritual fulfillment by following the conditions befitting their spirit. To confuse their roles could only lead to suffering in the individual and further social decay (Evola 159). He predicted that the advancement of women’s liberation and the loosening of gender roles meant that “modern woman will be affected by neurotic complexes and all the other complexes upon which Freud constructed a ‘science’ that is truly a sign of our times” (165). Despite his contempt for psychology, the Italian asylums contemporary to Evola held a rather similar view of the cause of mental illness in women. Deliberately avoiding pregnancy was considered a precursor to the development of nervous disorders (Valeriano ch.III.3). His conception of “spiritual racism” was endorsed by Mussolini and integrated into the state’s racial ethos in addition to the more biological racism of eugenics programs.

In many ways, Eco is right to call fascism a “fuzzy” ideology at best and a non-ideology at worst (3). Mussolini personally often seemed to have somewhat malleable beliefs that changed depending on what institutions or constituencies he was trying to court. The Party’s influences ranged from the pseudo-progressivism and avant-garde art of the Futurists to the occult Traditionalism of Evola. Similarly, Benjamin’s concept of aestheticization is also a valuable perspective in understanding this apparent incoherence. In many ways, fascism is the politics of the sublime, perpetually struggling and killing in the name of the state, a singular body of incomprehensible greatness beyond the sum of its parts. However, ultimately, the results were always the same, especially for the most marginalized: the violent disruption of strikes, the strengthening of gender and racial hierarchies, the confinement or murder of targeted groups, etc.

The women's asylums represent one example of this. Through the stories of these largely poor, rural women who were deemed a danger to the race, one can observe the destructive nature of Italian fascism and the broader forces undergirding it, including patriarchy and eugenics.

Literary Influences and Genre

As with any piece of fiction, the list of potential influences on "La Balena," conscious or unconscious, can go on endlessly. However, one particular guiding influence from the earliest stages of the story's development was the genre of horror, particularly Weird fiction.

Weird fiction is a subgenre combining elements of horror, science fiction, and fantasy, eschewing traditional folkloric monsters in favor of god-like, often tentacled aliens and the unearthing of the sublime hidden beneath the quotidian, inspiring awe as well as fear (Miéville 510). The genre is most often associated with the writer H.P. Lovecraft. Though he received little recognition during his life, Lovecraft has since become a titan of American horror, cited as an influence by writers such as Stephen King, Neil Gaiman, and Joyce Carol Oates; filmmakers such as John Carpenter, Richard Stanley, and Guillermo Del Toro; and countless other artists (Miéville 513). Lovecraft's existential, cosmic horror and grotesque aesthetics have become a mainstay of modern speculative art across mediums. However, almost as well documented as his profound influence is his personal bigotry. He harbored racist, antisemitic, misogynist, and homophobic beliefs which were vile even for his time, bordering on pathological (Houellebecq 106). These views cannot truly be separated from his work. As writer Michel Houellebecq argues in his biography of Lovecraft, his stories often act as a sort of masochistic ritual, with reserved, Anglo-Saxon academic protagonists victimized by racialized aliens, their barbaric, nonwhite cult worshippers, and "half-breeds" (109). Stories such as "The Dunwich Horror" and "The Shadow

Over Innsmouth” evoke horror through the interbreeding of aliens and humans, which can easily be read as an anxiety surrounding miscegenation and the violation of racial categories.

Pairing Weird fiction with antifascist historical fiction accomplishes several things, both for deconstructing the Weird’s reactionary past and representing fascism. This project seeks to appropriate the aesthetics and themes of Weird fiction, but to apply them so that the true object of horror is the imposition of white supremacist and patriarchal hierarchies rather than those who transgress those hierarchies.

Fascism, in many ways, is a perfect object of Weird horror. As discussed previously through Walter Benjamin’s concept of the aestheticization of politics, fascism can be understood as an attempt to render the sublime in the awe-inspiring state and the beautified violence which is carried out in its service. The sublime is also foundational to Weird horror. In his essay “Notes on Writing Weird Fiction,” Lovecraft himself writes that his attraction to the Weird stems from “a burning desire to escape from the prison-house of the known and the real into those enchanted lands of incredible adventure and infinite possibilities which dreams open up to us” (Lovecraft). Mixed with the horror of the Weird is awe at the sheer overwhelming, incomprehensible nature of the object of fear. From the perspective of those subjected to the fascist state, its seeming omnipotence and emphasis on aesthetics, including penchants for ancient symbols and runes and black uniforms, may seem just as arcane and formidable as the alien pantheon of Lovecraft.

Fascism and Weird fiction also share a fascination with time. Lovecraft calls time “the most profoundly dramatic and grimly terrible thing in the universe” and conflict with time “the most potent and fruitful theme in all human expression” (Lovecraft). As scholars Scott Cutler Shershow and Scott Michaelsen write in their book *The Love of Ruins*, the Weird is “a discourse that always looks both backward and forward” (158). Lovecraft’s work is populated both by the

ruins of impossibly ancient, monstrous civilizations and meditations on the insignificance of humanity and the inevitability of its demise and replacement by equally strange new lifeforms. Fascism, like those nonhuman civilizations, represents both future and past. With one hand, it offers industrialization and revolution, while with the other, it offers tradition and reaction.

Finally, both fascism and Lovecraftian horror are distinctly post-war phenomena. As China Miéville, himself an author often associated with the so-called New Weird, argues that Lovecraft and other Weird authors of the time “are responding to capitalist modernity entering... a period of crisis in which its cruder nostrums of progressive bourgeois rationality are shattered” by the mass carnage of the First World War. He goes on to say that “traditional monsters were now profoundly inadequate” to portray this shattering of pre-war reality, giving way to “the burgeoning sense that there is no stable status quo but a horror underlying the everyday” (513). Perhaps no monster is better suited to embody the destruction of modernity and rationality than its actual historical result: the anti-rational, anti-modern movement of fascism.

La Balena is distinct from Lovecraft’s work in a number of ways, purposefully rather than incidentally in most cases. For instance, the bride is a profoundly un-Lovecraftian protagonist. Not only because she is a poor immigrant woman, but also because her unreliable narration and psychological development are uncharacteristic of Lovecraft’s own style. While madness is a somewhat common result of witnessing the cosmic horrors of Lovecraft’s mythos, the reader is very rarely made to doubt the existence of those monsters in and of themselves. In this sense, Lovecraft’s horror is materialistic, not psychological (Houellebecq 46). The bride, meanwhile, experiences hallucinations and delusions following the traumas she endures at the asylum. This more subjective approach traps the reader in her social position: marginalized and traumatized by the fascist social hierarchy, but also able to integrate herself into it as a white

Italian citizen, as she does by collaborating with the blackshirts and pursuing a traditional marriage. Breaks with Lovecraftian convention were necessary in order to subvert its baggage while maintaining its compellingly grotesque aesthetic and profoundly human existentialism.

There are limitations to this approach. For one thing, it ascribes fascism to a supernatural source when in fact it was conceived and its worst crimes carried out by humans. I tried to limit this by ascribing supernatural characteristics only to certain characters, rather than the fascist-supporting public at large, and by suggesting that the seemingly supernatural elements were perhaps only reflections of the bride's hallucinations and individual perspective. It also, arguably, concedes the sublime to fascism, though it is mixed with horror. Since fascism draws strength from its aesthetic, one might say the most powerful form of antifascist art is satire, which denies it the dignity of the sublime. However, it is my belief that there is also space for artistic representation of the horrors which fascism perpetrates on its victims, and that the Weird is uniquely positioned to accomplish this.

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