



Girl Reading

KATIE WARD



virago





Simone Martini

Annunciation, 1333

She arrives glowing from the effort of running, strands of red hair coming loose from her kerchief (she tucks them in), marks on her neck like bruises on fruit. A few minutes late but not enough for anyone to mention it. Is almost surprised to find herself in the wards once more amid illness and suffering (on an evening such as this). Her mind is elsewhere. She accepts a dish, a spoon, instructions to feed a patient who rasps with each breath, whose sores stink, who has for eyes one piercing brown bead and one sagging black hole. Familiar and strange, ordinary and violent.

She does not smile encouragingly at the invalid to finish her meal, does not add to the whispered hubbub of the stone halls. They labour together in silence. The crone chews and swallows slowly despite the impulse of her body to reject what it consumes; the girl holds the spoon out, withdraws it, rests it; the food on the plate scarcely diminishes. Candle flames are





skittish in the draught, creating the impression of hasty movement.

The old woman speaks; the girl is roused from her private thoughts. Who are you?

My name is Laura Agnelli.

That is not what I asked.

A patient in a bed further along screams with pain. There is a disturbance. Some run to her aid, some are disgusted and afraid to be close by.

Laura offers one last mouthful to her charge, wipes the remnants from her bluish lips. I am a daughter of Santa Maria della Scala hospital.

You are a foundling? What is your history?

I have none.

You have a name though.

The rector himself named me Agnelli. It means 'lamb'. He is over there. Laura indicates, without pointing, Rettore Giovanni di Tese Tolomei, a man as wide as he is tall, his thumb tucked into his finery as he makes his inspection of the wards.

The woman swivels her eye towards him, then back to the girl. You were plucked from a crop of innocents by that man?

He showed me compassion because I was weak. He held me in his own arms and gave me his blessing, so I am told.

I am surprised he did not mistake you for a ham.

Laura frowns at the crone. He saved my life.

Did he?

And the lives of many foundlings, before and since.

But he bestowed his favour on *you*. It is not an honour I would wish for a daughter of mine.

The patient's pillow needs rearranging, the bedclothes have slipped down; Laura sets them right, noticing as she does so how cold are the limbs beneath.





The old woman winks her eye. What else do they tell you?

That it was Our Lady who inspired him. The rector heard me crying, held me and foretold that I would take religious vows – and that one day, I would bring rewards to Santa Maria della Scala hospital and the whole city of Siena.

The woman raises her good eyebrow, exaggerating the unevenness of her face; Laura covers the marks on her neck, uneasy.

What do the other children make of it?

They never say.

How did you come to be called Laura? Did your mother call you this?

I know not.

Maybe when she could provide nothing else, she gave you this name – Laura – hoping you would like it?

Yes, you might be right.

She did what she thought was for the best, like all mothers who bring their babes here and turn them over to Signor Rettore. *Suffer little children to come unto me.* (The woman shuts her eye, while the other socket hangs open still.) Yes, I can see her perfectly, even though she is doing her best to hide. Her head is uncovered, she lets her hair hang about her shoulders like the fallen woman she is. Pitiful. But we should not be too harsh on her; it is only because she is using every fragment of cloth to keep the infant warm. She is giving it her blessing before she parts with it: *I hope you will be spared the pain I knew.* Is that all? Such a small request, for such a small wriggling bundle! And yet it is worth a dozen of Signor Rettore's grand pronouncements. She looks tired . . . poor thing has not slept in days. She should sleep now, I think.

Laura counts the lengthening spaces between the woman's breaths, stays by the bedside for many hours until it is over.

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What pretty feet you have. Like two pigeons with their wings folded and their heads tucked in. Do you dance?

Not often. Not well. When there is music, and I am moved to.

I imagine you bouncing and bobbing like a wheat stalk in a breeze, and afterwards I imagine you rosy and out of breath. What pretty knees you have too. There is no doubt about it, God intends you to be a bride. *My* bride.

You are making fun of me.

I would swear to it. Pretty legs. Where the heart goes, the body has to follow.

What did you say? What are you doing?

The magnificent cathedral is the envy of every city state. It matches the ambitions of those who built it, and the saints themselves would nod their appreciation. The Duomo is absolutely Siena's, and Siena is absolutely the Virgin's. How they flourish under her protection.

A man stands before the high altar but he is not here for mass, and he has no awe in his heart. He is inspecting something he has seen hundreds of times before, his objectivity strained. Wealth does not impress him, for he is wealthier than most. Lavish decorations hold few surprises these days. His arms are folded across his chest like a farmer's, his gargoyle features contracted in a scowl; a short lump of a man. Were it not for the fine weave of his tunic, the opulence of its colour, the ornate trim, he might be mistaken for a pilgrim or even a beggar. He senses a presence in this marvellous place (how it glitters, how it is still!) but it is no angel or deity: it is the laughing ghost of a man he knew extremely well in life.

The altarpiece is the *Maestà*, the enormous panel showing the Madonna and Child upon a throne, adored by a host of angels and saints. It is surrounded by smaller storytelling panels and drenched in gold. For the faithful, the *Maestà* is a channel to the





Virgin: she sees out of those very eyes, hears their pleas through it. On the day it was installed in the Duomo, there was a procession led by the bishop, the priests and friars around the Campo, attended by the Nine, the entire Commune, the citizens of Siena. Resplendent, it passed through the crowds. Bells rang, alms were given to the poor, prayers were made to Our Lady, our advocate. It is Duccio's (old master, old rogue). Simone Martini snorts.

Simone Martini? I've heard of him! He was Duccio's pupil.

This is the best accolade he can hope for now. One wants to be trained by the greatest living artist, and then to transcend him. That will not happen.

Simone examines the icon, trying to see it as a peasant would, as a monk would, as a lord, a foreigner, a child, a dog. He tries to see it for what it seems to be and for what it is. He tries to see its multiplicity in order to see its truth, but the truth eludes him like incense. It is before him, around him, above him, but vanishes into air. He is morose.

A new commission for Siena Cathedral. Something *different*. He is getting what he wants, and he does not like it. He does not like the serpent of his vanity being provoked by a bishop's crozier.

Vescovo Donusdeo dei Malavolti glides towards the artist, extends his hooked hand for Simone to kiss the episcopal ring. The bishop has an ancient face but his frailty comes and goes. Sometimes the sharp edge of his willpower is visible, which can be dangerous; sometimes he is as meek as a kitten, which can be lethal. When the formalities are over, he extends a trembling pat of reassurance to the artist's arm and wheezes, It warms me, Maestro Simone, to see that you have begun your work. That is what I like about painters, they always have their most valuable tool on their person: their imagination. You cannot help it, can you? You are making lines and filling shapes with pigment even





as we stand here. If I were a betting man, which naturally I am not, I would say you have made up your mind what the finished piece will look like. But I must reign in your impulses, though it grieves me to, for I would be intrigued to know what the farthest limits of your creativity can do. It is the Opera del Duomo, you see. You know what they are like. Some of them can be resistant to innovation. They mean well, of course, but it would be remiss of me not to repeat, for appearance's sake, the prescriptions they have made.

Prescriptions?

Prescription, guidance, what you will. You know best, and I trust you will interpret their expressed wishes suitably. They are not as brave as you and me. Were it my choice, I would say go and do your best, give to the cathedral whatever your genius can conceive of, and be as radical as you dare. They ought to listen to me, but they do not. I am too lenient with them. I sympathise, Maestro Simone, I do. Having someone restrict what you can paint must make you feel as I would feel if someone restricted my prayers.

I would not want my prayers inhibited either. What are the instructions?

Hardly worth mentioning. As I have stated already, you are to paint a functioning altarpiece which celebrates our principal protector, the Virgin, and represents an episode from her life. In due course there will be four new altars in the cathedral, each dedicated to one of Siena's auxiliary patrons, starting with Saint Ansanus – and then Saint Savinus, Saint Victor and Saint Crescentius. Each altar will feature a moment from Our Lady's history. Yours is the first commission. I insisted to the Opera del Duomo that you should have the honour.

You flatter me, Vescovo. So far, these are reasonable specifications.

I am glad you think so. The next point is one I am sure your





expert eye has already discerned: that the new altarpiece must be in harmony with Duccio's *Maestà*, and naturally in keeping with the traditions of the faith. How do you fellows say? The spatial relationship, the style, must not depart from his. There should be accord.

Simone takes some steps away from the bishop, and faces the spot where his altarpiece would be installed relative to Duccio's: to the side of it; smaller in size than it; dedicated to a relatively obscure saint instead of the Virgin herself; replicating his old tutor's hand. Vescovo Donusdeo is correct; the artist had indeed guessed as much. Simone says, What if I am engaged in another commission? I am in great demand.

The bishop laughs. Who in Siena would put his own interests above the needs of the Church? Tell me the name of the man who is attempting to commandeer you, and I shall personally intervene. It must be at the preliminary stages of negotiation in any case – I spoke with your brother-in-law, and know you not to be under contract at present.

Simone remains rigid, and silently curses Lippo.

Besides, the patronal altars of Siena will become supremely famous. After the first has been dedicated, artists will flock from miles around to beg for the next commission. People will expect it of you, Simone, as Siena's famous son, to make a panel for the Duomo. The question is not whether you paint one, but *which one* you will paint. I suspect that you would prefer to be the pioneer, and to have the freest hand. Have I not said, moreover, that what the Opera requires of you is something quite new?

You wish me to create an icon that maintains tradition, and yet is entirely original?

I am relieved you understand. You are capable of it.

The artist gazes at Duccio's legacy.

The bishop shares his contemplation briefly and sighs. It is a





remarkable object, a singular tribute to the majesty of Our Lady. Do you think I am blind as well as old, my dear Simone? Do you think bishops arrive in office fully formed? Every day I walk in the footprints of my predecessors.

Have the Nine been informed of this project?

I am sure somebody has conveyed the news. You know how easily these things get about.

Are they aware the Duomo is appropriating some of their imagery?

Their imagery . . . ? I am not sure I follow.

Well, you say there shall be four altars dedicated to Siena's patrons – and citizens will come here to the cathedral to petition the saints through prayer, and the saints in turn petition the Blessed Virgin Mary and she in her turn is their advocate to God. True? I am simply wondering if the politicians could view this arrangement as – evocative.

You amuse me. What a cynic you have become. You have such a low opinion of people, and for what reason? I am sure such a misplaced and petty notion would not occur to any of the Council of Nine. And if it did, shame would prevent them from saying it aloud. And if they said so, I would answer, the Church is staking a claim only to that which she already owns.

Simone senses the bishop's enjoyment in being able to rehearse his argument.

But let me explain something to you, in strictest confidence. I know you will appreciate the spirit of it. Siena is a beam of marble supported by three columns: the Town Hall, Siena Cathedral and Santa Maria della Scala hospital. If one of these cracks or weakens, the other two must take more of the strain, so all is kept stable. Coincidental that you and I should visit this topic now, when I was debating it with Rettore Giovanni di Tese Tolomei just yesterday. He and I have had many productive conversations on this matter . . .





He notices how the bishop leaves the ribbon of his remark hanging in space, inviting someone to tug it. You have concerns about the Nine?

Certainly not. The oligarchs do a fine job. Legislating, scrutinising decisions, collecting taxes, arbitrating – how shall we say? – *disputes* regarding boundaries and livestock, and so on. Custodianship of these mundane matters is, I suppose, a necessity. And yet, even the ruling classes must acknowledge that truth is to be found not in the letter of the law but in the Word of God, and that the richest currency is not vulgar struck metal but what is scored into men's hearts. You count real wealth by good deeds and by saved souls, by charity and by faith. The Council of Nine, through no fault of their own, do not understand how transient they are. Their world is unstable, fickle. When the government of fair Siena has fallen twice-twenty times, the poor will still seek respite at her hospital, and sinners will still pray for salvation at her church. *These* are permanent. *These* endure. I know it absolutely, and Signor Rettore is of the same mind. It is our moral obligation as Christians to act in accordance with what a perfect God has decreed, not with what imperfect and fallible men have frivolously decided. *Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.* (The bishop pauses, waiting for the other to concur but Simone remains dispassionate.) I hear unsettling rumours.

Rumours are rarely of the reassuring kind.

I ought not to repeat them, because I do not believe them, they are too ridiculous. But you are a well-connected man and they will reach your ears sooner or later, so I really might as well tell you; apparently the Nine are planning an assault on the hospital and the cathedral. Not one of physical force, you understand – one of diktat. For Siena's hospital: a meticulous inventory of their assets and a regimen limiting their tax-free





entitlements. For Siena's cathedral: the creation of a new 'official', a secular bureaucrat who would mediate between the church and the Nine, and be ever present. Well, it is very far-fetched.

And devilish?

Must you be so glib, Maestro Simone? I do not concern myself with the little schemes Siena's government might or might not be concocting, I have no time for it. But Signor Rettore and I agree that our institutions, or rather God's, could cooperate much more. We acknowledge that we can be of unique help to one another.

There. The bishop has all but told the artist he and Rettore Giovanni di Tese Tolomei have formed an alliance. No, Simone sneers inwardly, more than an alliance; they are in cahoots. He pictures the handshake: one hand gnarled and sinewy, covered in the spots of age, clasping the other, plump and pink, the jewels on their knuckles knocking together. What Vescovo Donusdeo dei Malavolti says next confirms his suspicions.

I understand you are planning a trip to Avignon, Maestro? If you manage to have a private moment with the Pope, please convey my personal greetings to him as his humble servant, admirer and brother.

You are misinformed. I have not yet made up my mind about going to Avignon. If I make the journey, I will of course pass on your message.

I hope you will also consider putting in a good word for Santa Maria della Scala hospital. The Holy Father is able to bestow favours on the agencies performing God's works, you know.

Yes, I am aware.

I was holding a light aloft for you. Our Lady would want you to remember Siena's hospital to the Pope, I guarantee it, and I shall entreat her to speak to your better judgement.

The painter re-examines the sallow features of the bishop,





and wonders what precisely the rector of the hospital has offered him which has him so enthralled? Something more than mere strategic advantage. It has a filthy-dark quality to it, and moves Simone to change the subject. Tell me, Vescovo, when does the Opera del Duomo expect their new altarpiece?

By the feast of Saint Ansanus, on the first day of December.

That is less than two years hence, but not inconceivable.

Considerably less than two years. They want it by this coming feast of Saint Ansanus.

Simone Martini stares at Vescovo Donusdeo but does not speak. The acquisition of materials, carpentry and gold-beating alone would normally take at least a year.

If the bishop perceives a problem, his face does not betray him. He waits serenely for Simone's reply.

The artist's mind turns to the wife he will neglect if he accepts this commission, and intuitively he recalls her birthday and the gift he gave, her intake of breath when she saw it, the gratification to have chosen a present she adores . . . and his annoyance when she insisted on having her fortune told (it was her birthday, he could not refuse her whim) . . . A card was turned over for him, *La Papessa*. He says aloud, I have a condition before I agree.

A condition? The bishop crosses himself and mutters a prayer. Maestro Simone, I am not a well man. I cannot vouch for what will happen if you presume to make demands. But you may make a request, and I shall take the matter to the Opera for discussion.

I want to do an Annunciation.

He recoils. Oh, my dear Simone. Extraordinary. I am amazed. What an idea. Oh, I am struck by your audacity. Are you sure this is what you want me to tell them?

Do you not think the Opera will approve? Did they not specifically request something new?





The bishop's serenity appears to have deserted him, he succumbs to a vicious cough.

The artist does not enquire after the bishop's health, remarks instead, Funny that you should approach me now, when I am actively considering retirement from painting – did I not mention it before? – in order to spend more time with my wife. She tells me I have made my mark on the world. I take her views very seriously.

Vescovo Donusdeo puckers his dry mouth and draws his hairy eyebrows together, two caterpillars meeting on a leaf. Eventually he says, Can you do it?

Simone does not need to look at Duccio's *Maestà* any more; every inch of it is committed to memory. He nods.

The bishop throws up his hand in surrender and agitation. I do not know. I shall have to make a very thoughtful argument. Some may call it controversial, but if it were done correctly, if it conveyed Our Lady's obedience and piety . . . on balance I am cautiously optimistic that the officials of the Opera del Duomo could be – how shall we say? – *persuaded* to take a risk on a talent as unique as yours. After proper consultation and prayer, of course. An Annunciation, then! Congratulations, Maestro Simone, we are thrilled to have engaged you for this commission. There is one further detail I ought to tell you, although it is of such little consequence.

Three girls, including Laura Agnelli, kneel or crouch by baskets of almonds, shelling and grinding. It is hard, repetitive work. Imelda calls it peasant work, and moans that the land labourers should do it, not the daughters of Santa Maria della Scala. The almonds they have done are paltry in number, while the almonds left to do seem hardly to have reduced in volume. They will be at this for hours, aching and numb afterwards, sick of the sight and smell. The time would pass better were talking permitted.





The noise of the scraping makes discreet conversation difficult; nonetheless Imelda manages to mutter some of her complaints into Gisila's ear.

When I am married I shall have servants, and if they displease me I shall not flog them but make them grind mountains of almonds, then I shall feed the almonds to the pigs.

Servants and pigs? Almonds to dispense as punishment? What a daydreamer you are, Imelda.

Why should I not? Look at what they make us do. We are no better than slaves. As long as we are here, they own us body and soul. What have I to lose by indulging my dreams, when they take practically everything else?

We are the fortunate ones.

Are we? Do you think they love us as God's children? We embody our parents' sin. We are the offspring of harlots, beggars and adulterers – and they treat us as such.

What happened to Guido? I thought you liked him. He certainly fancied you. Or is a boy raised at the hospital not good enough for you any more?

I can do better than Guido. There are plenty of men outside this compound, you know. You just have to make sure you are not caught. (Laura quickens the rhythm of her labour to drown out Imelda's nattering.) Guido is immature, and his breath smells horrible. Is it too much to ask for a husband who has whiskers and a kiss which does not suffocate me? I expect at least that of a man – and that he will have a legitimate lineage and a fat inheritance coming his way.

Gisila laughs at her friend's bad temper. Then take comfort in your dreams. Think of the servants you will have one day, and how you can mistreat them, if it cheers you up. Think of your fine furs and your enormous house with a balcony, and your own mare to ride. Think of what your husband will look like, whether he will be dark or fair, whether he will be lean or broad. And





think of your father-in-law, who will be elderly and who will dote on you.

I do, every day. If God loves me, he will send a rich man to save me from this hell. And when I am married, I shall definitely have a big—

Imelda stops short of naming the thing she will have, for the rector himself is visible in the passageway speaking to a gentleman neither of them recognises. The stranger is distinctly handsome, with black hair and brown eyes, dressed in a plaid kirtle and a red chaperon, with a buckle on his belt that gleams. Gisila cannot resist it and whispers, Your prayers have been answered, Imelda; here he comes now to take you to his mansion.

Imelda presses her attractive mouth to stifle the giggle, and permits herself a look of admiration at the man in conference with the rector, surely here to make a donation and so avoid paying unwanted duties. It is the rector's method to show off the charity and industry of the hospital, to emphasise the spiritual benefits of generosity to Santa Maria and to make people part with more than they initially intended. He is as skilful as a market pickpocket.

Then he does something surprising. He abandons his visitor momentarily in order to come over to the three girls (there is an increase in speed and purpose under his gaze). He clears his throat. Laura Agnelli, come with me, please.

Laura obediently wipes her hands on her apron, stands, follows.

Behind her back, the malign eyes of Imelda and Gisila meet, then separate. It is not unheard of that a man comes to the hospital and points to the young woman he wants as though selecting fish for the dinner table. Usually there is some semblance of paying court and an opportunity for the girl to refuse, followed by a wedding. *Usually*. However, Rettore Giovanni di





Tese Tolomei is fond of saying the well-being of the hospital is more important than the well-being of any one individual – many times his actions have demonstrated the sincerity of his belief.

Imelda murmurs savagely, I thought she was going into a convent.

The rector presents Laura to the visitor, who looks her up and down and answers yes, she will do. The rector continues, Laura, you are to go with this man to his master. You are to do whatever they ask of you for as long as they have a use for you. They will give you your meals when you are there. You will be submissive, patient, meek and conduct yourself as though the Blessed Virgin were standing at your side. This is a privilege and a test, and it will be a shame upon us all, not to mention a personal offence to me, if your behaviour is not immaculate. In fact, it may have serious repercussions for your future. Do you understand?

Yes, Signor Rettore.

And Laura goes with the stranger. Perhaps, she acknowledges inwardly, into danger.

They do not walk far, up and down the city slopes, through the narrow streets, the stalls and relative safety of the Campo. He does not speak. It is when they go into a house and ascend a stairway into a private room (the door locked behind her) that Laura's heart jumps and she sends silent prayers to the Virgin to protect her, and if she cannot protect her then to limit her pain and suffering as far as possible, and if she cannot do that, then to grant Laura the strength to endure whatever is to take place.

The room is sparse though large, like a tradesman's workshop or rented storeroom, with enormous windows letting in Siena's glorious sky above and commotion beneath. It is occupied by a second man, significantly older, a hunched gnome who does not acknowledge them nor interrupt his inspection of documents. Laura looks for a bed, but there is none, just commonplace





wooden furniture, scrolls and tools as though a great plan were being executed, a military campaign. That is Laura's impression. The ugly man is the general, the handsome one his lieutenant.

The younger man says, Maestro, will you see if you approve?

Simone Martini answers with a growl and puts down his parchment. As before, Laura's face and bearing are scrutinised, but this one pinches her chin to turn her head in profile and appears displeased with what he sees. To his subordinate he says, I have begun to think this is a terrible idea.

Signor Rettore was . . . um . . . quite *specific* that the girl ought to come every morning after Lauds and not return home before dusk, unless called for.

(Laura blinks at this news.)

We must have her here all day, every day?

Except the Sabbath.

This is unacceptable. You did not counter him, Lippo?

(Laura notices the assistant's fingers crossed behind his back.)

Well, it was not easily done.

Simone Martini is exasperated. Lippo, the keen and insecure patron will be constantly at your elbow, interfering, finding defects which do not exist. And now we have, in effect, *two*.

Lippo Memmi replies with more conviction, It is not too late to refuse the commission. I for one will not care about displeasing the bishop. We can go to Florence or to Venice, where your genius will be appreciated.

Simone grumbles indistinctly and returns to his plans, which Lippo interprets as a direction to continue.

For Laura, Lippo has further instructions, picking up the rector's refrain: You must sit in complete silence, for your very presence disturbs my master's work. You must let no one in without the master or myself being present, and ensure always this door is locked. Do you fear God? I said, do you fear God?





Yes.

Do you fear the flames of hell and the trident of Lucifer?

Yes.

I hope so, because I am about to make you swear an oath of secrecy. If anyone enquires about our panel, or asks you to report what has taken place in this room, if anyone – the rector, the bishop, anybody from the Commune, the Nine or the Opera del Duomo – asks you what is happening or is spoken about within these walls, you will cut out your own tongue before answering them and rot in hell when you do. Do you so swear?

Laura wavers. A promise of this kind is an extremely serious matter. If what you say is true, Signore, then what answer may I make to men such as these?

You may say the master works hard, and it appears to be going well, and that what you have seen of his design is extraordinary and confounds your understanding. You will furnish any details which distract from the substance of what they seek to know – describe the shoes my master is wearing, say whether it rained on your walk here, or that you had a splinter in your finger. You will tell them *anything* which protects the panel and my master from their scrutiny. Now, do you so swear?

Laura stammers, Yes, I swear –

Good.

– but there must be a mistake.

Child, they will all seek you out; yours are the most valuable eyes and ears in Siena. But remember, you belong to us. And while you are with us, you shall not chatter nor venture unnecessary questions; in fact, you would do well to make yourself invisible. Hush now, this is serious business.

A small chair has been set aside in the corner, and Lippo gestures for Laura to sit down. Uncertain what exactly is required of her, Laura Agnelli does so tentatively.

The two men turn away to confer in lowered voices. They





discuss names and plot dates, and estimate quantities and measurements and sums of money, extravagant sums of money (initially she thought she misheard), the kind of money Laura has never seen and will never see. She waits to be given another instruction, has nothing to occupy her except to sit alternating her attention between the gentlemen and the bustle outside which, unhappily, is out of sight unless she strains in her chair to peer over the sill. The older man is agitated, his fury sinks and rises over some problem or other, some unreasonable behaviour that maddens him. The assistant is unruffled by the master's shouting, suggests a solution, a different solution then, a compromise. Then he makes a note of their decision and does calculations.

At midday, a maidservant brings a basket of bread and tomatoes. Laura lets her in. The maid greets Signor Martini and Signor Memmi – this is how Laura learns their names – leaves the food and to Laura's dismay, departs forthwith.

Later Laura is sent home, unaccompanied.

And this is how the second day passes.

By the third day, Lippo Memmi is not present, sent away to procure materials and appoint workers. Simone Martini spends the day reading his books. The boredom makes Laura weary, but she does not complain. She has ample time to ponder how much longer she will be required to come here (a whole week? two?) and if her role is simply to sit quietly and observe, or if there is more to it that will be revealed later. At dusk, when Simone Martini lights a candle, she rises from her seat.

Maestro Simone, it is time for me to go, unless you have further use for me . . . ?

(This would be sarcasm if spoken by another girl, but Laura Agnelli does not mean it that way.)





The artist drags his attention from his research and appears startled to find her there. Yes, you may go.

She makes a small bow of respect.

What is your name child?

Laura Agnelli.

Indeed, you are like a lamb, one that does not bleat. Tomorrow bring your spindle. You should not be idle.

Simone Martini has begun preparatory drawings, with each one his humour deteriorates further still. He sketches them out with a pen and red and black inks, bent like a monk in a scriptorium, his back giving him pain. Sometimes the modelli are more elaborate – he goes as far as making meticulous scale paintings. Laura watched with curiosity the first time he broke an egg into a cup, the familiar sound causing her to look up. He slithered the yolk in his fingers, pinched it, pierced the sac with a tiny blade, let the yellow liquid run out to mix with ground pigment. These are Simone's experiments in colour and design, but Laura knows them only as a flourish and a blur when he casts them aside as inadequate.

In the absence of Lippo, he finds reasons to bellow at Laura – for staring at him when she drifted off into a meditative state; for her stomach groaning the day she missed breakfast; for the clatter when she dropped her spindle on the floor. She begins to dread her next misdemeanour.

At noon, Laura rises to let in the maid but instead it is an elegant young lady, hair like the feathers on a rook, slim and exquisitely dressed, carrying an armful of cut lilies and a basket. Laura withdraws to her corner.

So this is where all the yarn comes from! I did not truly believe one person could make so much in a day.

Simone Martini huffs and Laura does not reply, assumes she is not meant to. The young woman lays down the bouquet, the





heady aroma of the lilies overpowering the warm space, and unpacks the basket: swathes of lavish fabric and wrapped parcels, which Simone stirs himself to sort through. He frowns. Why did you not send the maid, Giovanna?

Because Antonia is busy. And I wanted to come myself. To see you, my lord. To eat with you.

And yet you have brought no food.

Giovanna tilts her head in reproach. I thought I would bring the things you asked for first, then go to the Campo to buy some. If it is not too distracting for you, you can tell me what you would most like to eat.

Laura expects this tartness to be answered in kind, but Simone Martini's expression softens into paternal indulgence.

Figs, Giovanna, should do very well.

Figs. Then I shall bring you some. How is your work?

Simone sighs, waves the question away.

Giovanna picks up some of the studies – figures and triptychs – and looks them over. What is the matter with all these? Why can you not make a decision?

Do not concern yourself with it. Only one of us needs to be troubled.

Giovanna pouts, examines the sketches more closely, briefly glances at Laura, then murmurs, Not one of these Virgins is in the act of spinning.

Simone Martini takes them from her and shuffles the sheets together, grunting, I am getting to it.

My lord, the panel is within your reach. Your greatness is more than equal to this task. When it is finished, it will undoubtedly be the jewel of Siena. And yet . . . I must protest, if it is affecting your health, if the sacrifices you are making are too much for you—

Simone kisses Giovanna on the forehead and she leaves the rest unsaid. Laura senses this is a longstanding family argument,





that he has mastered the girl's grievances and has gently reminded her of it.

Then I will go to the Campo for you. Would you like to come with me?

The question is not to Simone but to Laura, though he answers for her, *She* has instructions to stay.

The lady's voice has a note of weariness to it, Yes, from the rector, I know . . . but he did not mean to trap her here, to deny her sun and air every now and then! What do you think?

Again this question is thrown to Laura rather than Simone. Laura forms the impression Giovanna often gets her way.

The gradient of the square slopes down to the Palazzo Pubblico. People are at work on

the construction of the impressive tower, specks moving on the scaffolding. Laura waits to be addressed by Giovanna, who is preoccupied with the wares and produce on display. Finally she says, This must be strange for you. I expect you ask yourself why you agreed to do it.

I did not agree to it, I was commanded.

I see. Yes, that makes more sense. I suppose you are indebted to the people who raised you?

They saved my life, and gave me everything.

No doubt you are often reminded of it. Do you like it at Santa Maria della Scala?

The hospital is all I know.

It is your home but not your family, maybe? Do they tell you anything about your parents? Do you know whether yours are alive or dead?

No, they do not, and it is for the best, otherwise people would always be running away to try and find them. We have enough problems of that sort as it is. Oh dear, perhaps I should not have said that.





You do not need to worry, I shall not betray a confidence. You have been put in a position of trust while you are with us, so we must treat you in the manner we wish to be treated. Please feel free to say whatever you like, and be assured that I for one will not abuse you, and shall prevent others from doing so if it is within my power.

Laura Agnelli raises her eyes to Giovanna properly for the first time, notices her companion is a little older than herself but not by much, and despite her cool voice has a face which is not unkind. She also perceives a personality like a set of scales, reliable and balanced, speaking the truth. Laura licks her lips and continues: I used to try to feel whether or not my parents were alive. I would shut my eyes and let my mind wander through Siena and the contado and beyond, as far as the sea. I gave up when I was nine or ten. I am now quite convinced my parents are dead, and have been for a long time. I have made peace with that, but I should like to know who they were, where they came from.

Yes, I would want to know too. Tell me, what becomes of you orphans when you are grown?

We have some tuition. When the boys are old enough they can go into a trade. And the girls are given a dowry of 50 lire to marry or enter a convent with. Some stay to live and work in the hospital their whole lives. Some want to.

Not many, I expect. And what will you do?

Laura has the sun in her eyes, so she raises her hand to shade them. It has long been my intention to take vows and dedicate my life to God.

Giovanna does not reply – she is either struck by this revelation and covers it well, or is genuinely unmoved. I guessed before today the commission was faltering. My lord cannot hide his moods from me. He is struggling with the burden of choice. When a man has a decision to make, it becomes a great and weighty matter; yet if you or I behaved the same way, we would





be accused of dithering, would we not? They would say, Woman, make up your mind! Excuse me, now you think I am being disrespectful. My poor husband gives me licence to say what I think, and I use his grace to make complaints. At least I am being consistent. I have spoken my honest opinions to him on many occasions.

Is your husband an artist too? The words are out of Laura's mouth even as she realises she has made a mistake.

Giovanna is amused. No need to feel embarrassed. After all, he is older than me. You let slip an innocent remark because you know no better; others are malicious about my marriage behind my back, which is far worse. You have not offended me.

Nonetheless, I profoundly apologise. It was thoughtless.

If it pleases you. But you are curious now, are you not? You think maybe there can be no genuine affection between an attractive woman like me and an old rich man like him? That the exchange must be one of convenience, not love?

Laura's face burns.

Convenience is not the worst reason to marry. It happens every day. Tell me, are the marriages of girls leaving Santa Maria della Scala all love matches? To many men, 50 lire is a lot of money, and maybe they wish to be looked after and to have children. For that, they need a wife. And I doubt many young women would choose a nunnery or servitude at the hospital over having a home of their own. Not you, I know. You are the exception which proves the rule.

Laura presses her temples as though to absorb Giovanna's words, as though this will make them fit comfortably in her head. I am not unsympathetic. To some, matrimony is an attractive proposition. To some, it means if not freedom then at least a preferable sort of bondage. The rule of a husband might be gentle and benevolent compared to the rule of a religious order.

That is not always true!





No . . . it is not always.

Are you all right, Laura? You look dreadful.

Yes thank you. I am relieved to be outside for a while. It was kind of you to invite me.

Giovanna answers it is her pleasure before continuing, I suppose all the children of Santa Maria are instilled with a sense of duty – a family one, or a vocation. That is the commonality. Duty is a powerful influence on people's lives, and would be a valid reason for my marriage to Simone, perhaps. So would you be scandalised if I said duty played no part in our betrothal? What if I told you that on our wedding day he gave me a generous financial gift? I am not teasing you. I am trying to show you how sometimes appearances are one thing and the truth another. And the truth is this: my brother Lippo was Simone's student, Simone came to our house on several occasions and was kind to me, and I grew to love him as though it had been written. He feared for my reputation. He said if we married, people would always gossip about us – and they do. He tried to put me off. I am extremely lucky to be his wife. If he were not wealthy and not a genius, I would still love him and I would still be extremely lucky.

Then yours is a good example to follow for those who are the marrying kind.

We are not perfect. There is an empty space in our lives, can you tell? We have no children yet, and it saddens us. I have tried various remedies and I have prayed my hardest, but so far we have not been answered. Money cannot buy everything—

Giovanna breaks off to buy the figs and some oranges.

They are over halfway around the Campo and Laura realises her time left alone with Giovanna is probably short. When they walk on she says, There is something which has been bothering me. Your brother told Maestro Simone I was instructed to attend his studio every day by Signor Rettore. But that is not strictly





true. He did say I am to be obedient and present when I am required; however, since then the rector has expressed some surprise at my being needed so very often.

Giovanna flattens her lips together. I am afraid that was my doing.

How can it be yours?

I am sorry. I admit it: I made Lippo tell my lord this tiny white lie. Please try to understand, my husband is not very good with new people. It takes him a long time to trust someone. He needs to get to know them first. He has his method when he paints, and what they have asked of him is utterly unreasonable. And he is getting very . . . this commission is the worst I have ever seen him. It is affecting his health and his inspiration . . . and it makes me so angry! I rarely meddle in his work, I assure you, but we are living in strange times. I was certain your presence would hasten the conclusion, whatever that might be, *good or ill*. In fact I was convinced of it. Yet here we are, still waiting, still unsure what will happen.

Laura shivers despite the heat, hugs her arms across her body.

Giovanna puts her hand on her hip. Tell me, Laura Agnelli: how is he when he is working?

I hardly know.

Does he exhaust himself? Does he rest? I know about the promise you made my brother, by the way, but a wife should know about her husband's welfare no matter what the oath is.

No, he never rests.

What of his temper? Is he content? Is he calm?

Laura hesitates before she replies. Generally his concentration is given over to his work. He goes for hours at a time without speaking, so I cannot comment on whether or not he is content. He is industrious, as you saw, makes many pictures. When he does speak, it is to scold me for disturbing him.

Does he shout at you?





I ought to be more careful.

You are afraid of him. I am right, he frightens you. This is very bad. (Giovanna takes an orange out of her basket and rolls it between her palms before continuing.) It does not matter how fate brought you to us; you are here now. Being afraid of someone is a terrible condemnation of his character. With Simone, you should know the dog that barks does not bite. He is a good man, and he needs your help.

I do not know what help I can possibly give.

He will need your assistance soon with the panel painting. At some point he will come to acknowledge it, and then you must be prepared. More than that, he needs you to be a friend because he does not have many. It might seem odd to you – he is so esteemed in Siena – but being admired and having friends are not the same, and even the greatest men need friends. Will you promise me that you will not judge him too harshly and, when the time comes, you will do whatever you can?

Laura is reminded of the promise she has already made to Giovanna's brother, struck by how alike the siblings are. She gives the lady her word, then ventures, *Why me? Why not someone else?*

Well, it was up to Signor Rettore to choose, and he chose you. He must have lots of reasons: your piousness, your gentle nature, your dedication. It is an enormous privilege, you should be pleased.

It is indeed a privilege to meet Simone Martini. But for what end?

Giovanna halts at this, then looks incredulous. To be in the . . . Wait. Tell me why you think you are made to come to the studio?

Laura shrugs. I sit while Maestro Simone works, and I spin to pass the time. I think I am his witness, or something like that. Signor Memmi said people would ask me about their progress





and he was quite correct – Signor Rettore wants to hear news practically every day. Do not worry, your brother also told me how to answer, and it is basically the truth, so there you are. Today I will say I met Maestro Simone’s wife and you brought us lunch from the market. This is what happened, and to say so is not a violation of my oath.

Giovanna shakes her head in disbelief. You actually do not know. Well, I did not think I should be the one to tell you, but if you are truly unaware, I feel must. My lord and my brother Lippo have been commissioned by the Duomo to make a panel dedicated to Saint Ansanus celebrating the Annunciation. You know the story of Saint Ansanus?

Laura beams. But of course! His nurse, Saint Maxima, baptised him in secret and brought him up as a Christian. She was martyred through flagellation, but he survived and went on to convert and baptise many people here in Siena. Eventually he was martyred on the orders of Diocletian.

Yes. At the same time, the Duomo and the hospital have formed – how shall we say? – a partnership, because they are both anxious about the interference of the Nine in their affairs. The story of Ansanus is pertinent because he was raised to be a Christian and do God’s work by his *nurse*, not by his own parents, who were members of the Roman ruling class. It therefore has a certain resonance. Through the altarpiece the Duomo will be, to an extent, restating its relationship with Santa Maria della Scala to show how the spiritual works of the cathedral and the charitable works of the hospital are joined, and are favoured and blessed by Our Lady. Siena’s citizens will look at it and be reminded of how the Virgin bestows her protection on the faithful and the charitable.

How clever, I would not have thought of it.

It will encourage people to be loyal, and generous, to both institutions. It is also a veiled message to Siena’s oligarchy, who





will be capable of reading it quite clearly. Do you see? Government has been left out of the picture. And just for emphasis, an orphan of the hospital has been chosen to be a part of it: *you*. The politicians would have expected a daughter of one of the noble families to be given that honour. It is a snub. The Nine will be furious when they find out, and yet it will be unseemly for them to criticise it.

Laura considers. I do not understand politics. If it is as you say, I am sure the rector and the bishop know what they are doing. But what have I done that could possibly make the Council of Nine so upset?

I am not explaining myself very well. Your *likeness* is to be in the altarpiece.

Giovanna said it plainly and sensitively, concerned about how a young girl who has led a sheltered life might react to such news.

Initially, Laura Agnelli does not respond, except for her deepening frown and narrowing eyes. Then she mumbles she is hot, feeling dizzy; she sways on her feet.

Giovanna leads Laura into some shade, makes her sit and drink from a flask of wine until she has recovered her wits.

When the incident is over, Giovanna offers to take her home, but Laura is adamant that it is not her wish.

I apologise, Laura. I honestly thought you knew.

No. No one saw fit to tell me.

And you did not guess it?

Something like that would simply never occur to me. It is too unexpected.

Laura Agnelli offers a silent prayer, feels it leaving her and flying up into the sky beyond her reach, beyond even the reach of the new tower and the stonemasons tapping the stones with their hammers and chisels, the clicks answered with echoes.

*





Laura returns to the hospital while most are still at Vespers. Some have duties which excuse them from attending; some are sly and find ways to avoid it when it suits them. Laura rarely misses the evening prayer service, and to have been kept from it for days in succession is a trial for her. She needs these renewals even more than she did before.

In the dormitory, Laura finds Imelda and Gisila sitting on a bed, their heads close together in conference as they wind laundered cloth strips.

Imelda whispers to Gisila, whose uncontrollable giggle turns into a pig-snort.

Laura almost pauses to greet them, but even as she slows her pace their laughter dies. Suddenly they are absorbed in their work.

It would not hurt Laura, not normally. She would take solace in her prayers and think about the life she will have at Santa Marta. She is finding this more difficult of late. Because she is in halves.

A word, Laura Agnelli!

The shouted demand is from Rettore Giovanni di Tese Tolomei, whose pompous girth has appeared as abruptly in the girls' quarters as if he had followed Laura there. She turns to go with him, passes by the other two but a few steps before their joke resumes. Imelda sniggers into the back of her hand. Gisila drops her head on to her friend's shoulder, limp with laughter, tears forming on her lashes.

She has had enough practice at finding her way through Siena's streets in the dark, and takes the precaution of covering her head so that her red hair does not give her away at a distance. She knows from experience which entrances will still be unlocked and, once inside, which are the quietest passageways leading back to the dormitory.





The hospital is never entirely asleep. Individual candles are kept lit in alcoves; oblates keep watch in the wards and the pilgrims' hall; voices are still audible though fewer, muted, more urgent. Night is a dangerous time for the weak.

Laura traces her way close to walls and peers around corners before moving on. She has not been seen so far, but is not complacent either. She has tried to imagine what would happen if she met Imelda, or one of the other orphans, creeping around out of bed, too . . . and done her best not to dwell on the consequences if she were caught by a sister or Signor Rettore.

She listens. Blood thuds in her ears. Footsteps ahead send her back in the direction she came from and towards a main corridor. Rather than risk it, she is compelled down a stairway and when she hears them approaching once more – whether or not her mind is playing tricks on her – goes deeper into the underbelly of the hospital. The swinging flare of a lamp sends her hurrying away.

She tries to dampen her tread as she traverses the labyrinthine passages hastens down steps behind pillars makes stealthy progress. The tunnels are twisted and unfamiliar here.

She stayed out longer than she intended; it is so late it is almost early. Fatigue and fright and frustration and the need for prayer like thirst. She stops. She leans against an archway to steady her nerves, to get her bearings, to console her heart. It is futile to feel distress, or indulge unwanted thoughts at this particular moment: getting back to the dormitory undiscovered is what matters; ignore the rest of her troubles if she can.

Laura Agnelli looks about her. She decides on reflection she has been here before, years ago, can find a route which will bring her close to the girls' quarters from beneath. Here at least is one solution.

As to the rest (Laura summons her strength), I will try again soon.





And it is when she resolves this that she realises she has arrived almost at the door of the hospital's oratory. She lingers; turns away from it; is instinctively tugged back.

The rules are plain: the oratory is out of bounds.

Is it possible that a benevolent hand has steered her here? that a few minutes of solace and solitude will provide Laura with the guidance she needs?

She peeked within it once, when she was small, but has never been inside because she was never invited – or desperate – and remembers the ghost stories they told each other about the place, as children, for the cemetery and the charnel house are right next to it. These features made it fascinating and forbidding.

But the terrors are real enough now. And Laura Agnelli enters the oratory at last.

It is unlike any space in the sprawling warren of Santa Maria della Scala. Hewn. Enclosed. It exudes a dim glow of its own, a pulsation, a palpable intention, is ancient and potent as though the very walls had cognizance. This power presses upon Laura Agnelli, compresses her, makes her tingle. Is it evil? Is it sacred? Is this awe, or ecstasy?

The oratory is a stone vault with a simple altar, relics, bones, skulls, fragments of wood set in cases and embellished stands. A smaller doorway in the opposite wall is partially open. Beyond it, luminous and inviting warmth, an angelic figure retreating into the next chamber – its brilliance makes Laura shield her vision briefly.

Laura is lowering her head and following before the folly of disturbing the room's occupant prevents her—

She is in a narrow recess wide enough for a single person, a niche of several yards and there at the end is a woman kneeling at a second tiny altar. A stranger. Her presence is somehow wrong, impossible, as if she does not belong here but has come for a special purpose. It is arresting.





Absorbed in her meditations, it takes minutes for the woman to perceive Laura. When she does notice, she does not speak. Instead the lady symbolically covers her mouth . . . then makes confusing movements with her hands, as though they contained a message.

She has fire in her. Laura can see the flames in the blacks of her eyes, can feel the heat emanate.

If this is a spirit sent to warn her, or a saint sent to comfort, then Laura is unprepared for it and baffled by the whole encounter. She leaves the oratory without uttering a single word of prayer, without the answers she craves.

Dawn rays find the edges of feet suspended in midair, fingers curled and stiff, a shape like a rag draped over a branch. Dew forms on the skin like stone. There she is, surprisingly small, discovered first by the sun, then by birds to be pecked at, then by a cart, then a staring multitude. The act was done with a red cord, it becomes apparent. There is one just like it tied around a curtain in the women's chapel of the hospital.

Laura opens her eyes, wakes without so much as a sigh, the vision still vivid. In the dark, the familiar outlines of sleeping girls huddled together and the sounds of their breathing flowing like a river. A stab of panic: which one of them did she dream about? In the haze of partial sleep she forgets. As she drifts off with the swell, she remembers; it is only herself, and there is no need to warn anyone.

Out of breath, she climbs the stairwell and pauses outside the room – tries the door, squeezes it open without the hinges squeaking.

The artist is standing by the window eating olives from a small dish, the people of Siena going about their day below.

It confirms her anxiety to find him thus, because each and





every day previously he has been at work with his back to the world and paid her no heed. But now he watches her secure the lock with unabashed interest. There is a moment . . . maybe while she waits for him to summon his rage, or he waits for her to volunteer an apology. He breaks the silence first.

I bought us some olives from the Campo. I had to buy some eggs to make paint because I tend to run out without Lippo around to remind me. I am very fond of olives. Are you?

Laura Agnelli nods faintly, yes, she is.

Then it is good you came when you did, or I would have eaten them all, then there would have been none left for you. Here, you had better have some.

She cautiously takes one without eating it.

Simone pops another in his mouth making a noise of pleasure at the flavour, takes the stone out, drops it on another plate. He wipes his finger on his tunic.

You did not come yesterday. (It is a statement of fact, and he declares it that way.) I waited the whole day for you to come, but you did not. It was disconcerting. In fact, I got no work done. I was going to send someone to Santa Maria to find out why, in case you had been taken ill, you see? Giovanna talked me out of it. She said if you were indisposed, someone from the hospital would have been dispatched to tell me about it and there was probably another explanation. That made sense. I said, then Laura is surely missing, and we should raise the alarm so she can be found! I was adamant.

Laura lifts her horrified gaze.

But Giovanna said we should not do that either – that if your absence was for a different reason, I ought not to draw attention to it in case it caused you difficulties. She said you would probably turn up in your own time if we left you alone. And look . . . she was right. Giovanna knows much more about girls your age than I do.





Laura exhales, closing her eyes. I am sorry, Maestro Simone, to have caused you inconvenience.

Giovanna calls me *prickly*. She says I do not inspire confidences from the young. Huh. Eat your olives.

Simone gives Laura what is left, beckons her to take a seat, not in her usual corner but beside him for a while.

You disappeared for an entire day. I am not cross about it, but a child whose whereabouts are unknown is a cause of concern for any Christian.

Ashen, she apologises again.

At least you are here now, and your behaviour has been impeccable so far. I dined with the good rector at his palace last week. He artfully conveyed to me that he has a small mouse who squeaks all the newsworthy events into his ear every evening. He has really asked you, then . . . ?

Regularly.

I thought so. What a rascal. And what an appetite, for food and for intelligence. Somehow he has heard I am considering travelling to Avignon. He is trying to persuade me to petition the Holy Father for privileges for Santa Maria della Scala. He thinks I would make a good ambassador, and he has now offered as an incentive a new commission, to paint an exterior fresco for the hospital. A grand artwork, outside, where everyone can see it and admire it all the time.

It sounds marvellous.

Bah! – Simone flicks his wrist in a noncommittal gesture – he is appealing to my vanity. The hospital, the cathedral and the Nine are as bad as each other, what with their sumptuous art and their colossal architecture. They are all posturing schoolboys. Sometimes I think the wars we make with Florence are a blessing in disguise because if we did not fight the Florentines, we would descend into war with ourselves. However, he was vague on the details of the altarpiece, which I am pleased about, Laura,





especially when he was trying to create the impression you were his informant. You have done well to resist his coercion to reveal what you know.

I have an oath in heaven. It was not difficult, anyway, as I know so little.

Are you curious to know more?

Signor Memmi said I was not to ask questions unnecessarily, so I have not.

I see. Keeping your word is important to you.

I think it is important to anybody who is God-fearing.

I hear you are to become a nun someday?

Yes, Signore, at the convent of Santa Marta. At least, I hope so.

Ah – Abbess Emilia Pannocchieschi d’Elci.

You know her?

A very strict woman. Very devout. Extremely kind. You are fortunate if she takes you under her wing. She thinks novices should know scripture. Do you know scripture, Laura Agnelli?

How can I answer without sounding proud? or ignorant?

Be truthful. Do you read it regularly?

Laura fidgets. Ye-es. Some, at any rate. My Latin is not good, but I can usually identify the passages I need and have committed many more to memory. I often recite. I – cannot write.

Assuredly a woman has no occasion for writing?

No, I suppose not.

But many nuns are literate. If it holds a genuine attraction for you, perhaps you will have the chance to learn reading and writing at Santa Marta? Hmm?

Laura’s blush deepens.

I think the rector unwittingly did me a favour when he inflicted you upon us. My wife tells me you are troubled at the prospect of your likeness being in the painting. I did not take it seriously before. Now I have talked with you, I understand a





little better. You are naturally closed like a bud. (Simone Martini brings his hands together, fingertips pointed upwards as though in prayer, palms cupped as though protecting hidden contents.) I wish I could dispel some of your concerns. If you would care to look, I can show you some aspects of the panel, although you will have to use your imagination for some of it.

She frowns. Are you not worried I will betray what I see to the rector?

No. Neither should you be.

Simone retrieves some of the vellum leaves from the rest, studies of figures and objects, definite shapes and contours and pigments. I have settled upon these elements. Here.

She hesitates.

Go on, it will do us both some good. I would like to share the fruits of my creativity with someone trustworthy, for a change. Tell me what you see. Think of it as practice for when you are discussing theological questions at the convent.

Laura leans over to examine them. White lilies in an ornate gold vase.

Yes. Why?

White lilies are a symbol of purity and virginity. They are an obvious choice to represent the Blessed Virgin.

Quite right. A peasant could understand that, and it is a painting as much for him as for the bishop. They are pretty to look at as well, do you agree?

Yes. Very pleasing.

Do you have any other thoughts on the subject of lilies?

Laura says she does not.

They are a symbol of virginity, innocence and heavenly purity, as you mentioned but some would say that lilies are . . . naughty flowers, that they suggest illicit passion and temptation. Have you heard that before?

No. People who say that are wrong. It is a flower of Our Lady!





Not necessarily. There are examples in pagan religions of this being the case, religions older than ours. Have you really smelled a lily before, Laura? It has an intoxicating and powerful fragrance, and the shape is uniquely alluring. I can see perfectly well how other cultures have bestowed it with more dubious connotations than ours. So I, as the painter, need to consider whether the lily is truly appropriate for inclusion. And I think, on balance, it is, because through Our Lady as Theotokos, sin *is overcome*. Furthermore, lilies are used figuratively to remind us to trust in God's will and providence. *Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they toil not, neither do they spin.* We are told Mary was troubled and afraid when first the angel appeared, then she surrendered herself as the Lord's handmaid. These particular flowers add this wisdom to the Annunciation story.

Laura is astounded by the artist's elaborate construction.

Then he asks her about the vase.

The vase? Is it not a pot for the lilies to go in? (She chastens herself for her rudeness.) It is such a lovely pot.

I could have shown lilies planted in the ground, or cut stems being held, but I have chosen specifically a vase. Does this not strike you?

Laura shakes her head. I see only flowers in a vessel.

Aha. A *vessel*. Follow that line of thought.

I am ignorant, Signore. I have not studied these matters.

I think you are doing yourself a disservice. Do try for me . . . ?

I suppose the Virgin Mary could be called a vessel, in the sense that God chose her to give birth to Christ.

Precisely. Capital work. I can hear the Abbess's praises already.

Laura feels a spark of gratification.

A vase also means 'treasure' in certain traditions. And at the Annunciation, God gives us the most precious treasure of all, do





you agree? The vase is a 'vessel' and it is a 'treasure' – but even an item as mundane as this can have more than two meanings. In alchemy, the vase is where miracles occur, as in the Virgin's womb. The mouth of this vase is open to God's divine influence.

Laura is taken by a new thought, one which would explain Maestro Simone's inclination towards layers of symbolism that are lost on her. Are you an alchemist scholar, Signore?

Ah, no. I find the toil of painting more than sufficiently fills my time without my attempting to purify the soul and turn base metals into gold. I do not mean to imply these things are impossible – who knows what can be achieved with enough study and luck? – only, that it would be futile for *me* to attempt such goals. I leave that task to those who are more fit for it. Although, being able to conjure gold would be useful just at the moment. You heard me and Lippo discussing it, of course, on the first day?

A lot of it went over my head.

I have charged Lippo with a difficult mission, to procure me a large amount of gold leaf in a short period of time. It is expensive but, believe it or not, affording it is the easy part. Finding an adequate supply and the gold-beaters who can make it fast enough – well, he has not let me down yet.

An altarpiece for the cathedral needs to be decorative.

This is true, and a man like Vescovo Donusdeo expects it. Nonetheless, I have the idea that I would like my Annunciation to *shimmer*. (Simone slides one of the sheets out from the sheaf and lays it on top for her to see. It is the angel kneeling to deliver his message in yellows and golds; the patterned cloak swirls and curls as though lifted by air, wings raised, mouth open mid-speech.) The Angel will go on the left of the panel and face Our Lady, who will be here on the right, the figures set against a background of pure gold. I will not show a room as such, because in effect it has been swallowed up by ethereal light.

(Laura recalls her experience in the oratory – was it a dream?)





Aspects of it feel distant and unreliable, when she turns her mind's eye towards the memory all she can see is light.) He is bearing an olive branch for peace. And for . . . ?

Victory, among other meanings. Have you heard this . . . ?

Simone Martini lifts a book from his collection. He wants to get it word for word.

*God is the Light of the heavens and the earth;
The similitude of His Light is as if there were a niche;
And within it a Lamp: the Lamp enclosed in Glass;
The glass as it were a glittering star;
Lit from a Blessed Tree;
An Olive, neither of the East nor of the West;
Whose oil is nigh luminous, though no fire has touched it;
Light upon Light; God guides to His Light whom He will.
And God strikes similitudes for men, and God has knowledge
of everything.*

Do you like it, Laura?

It is beautiful.

I was recently reminded of this passage, and I had to look it up again. The light, the star, the olive: all of it is in harmony with what I am trying to do . . . even the niche. The triptych will be a sort of niche, will it not? And the painting is itself a similitude. I like it a great deal.

Where is it from?

A book called the Koran.

Laura opens her mouth in shock. The Saracen text? That is heretical.

First, they are not Saracens, that is a name which we have erroneously given to a people who do not use it themselves. Second, what is considered heretical is largely subjective, and we should be careful how we apply such an accusation. And third,





you yourself just called it beautiful when you did not know its origin.

Laura bites her lip, burning at her inability to argue her point of view. He is too clever for her. Signore, I simply meant, what can that have to do with the Blessed Virgin? Theirs is a different god to ours. It seems to me you do not have time for these investigations. You should be concentrating on the commission for the cathedral, the church of our faith.

On the contrary, it has been extremely useful. I will leave aside the question of a 'different' god, or we will be here all day, and simply tell you this: Our Lady is exalted in the Koran; indeed, she has a whole chapter named after her. I have learned more about her here than from the entire New Testament.

Laura is uncomfortable with this conversation, and wishes to avoid more disagreement. Will the Virgin also be dressed in gold, Signore?

If she were, it would be troublesome to distinguish her at a distance on a background of the same material. No, she will be in a red gown with a night-sky blue mantle over it. I have a first-rate colour especially for this purpose. Her form will recede into the brightness, the eye will be irresistibly drawn towards her.

Laura leafs through the images. There is a preparatory sketch of a tondo for God the Father, and four more circular designs for the great prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, to be placed along the top of the triptych.

Simone explains that Lippo will be responsible for the side panels of two full-length saints, Saint Ansanus to whom the altar will be dedicated, and Saint Maxima his nurse. After Lippo's hard work, he should at least be allowed to paint something.

Laura lifts the last sheet, which is blank. Where is she . . . ?

Simone Martini laughs. You understand my problem.

But you have been working for all this time, I have watched you for hours. I thought you had made numerous pictures of her.





I have. None is satisfactory, none I can use.

The artist picks up an object wrapped in cloth, one of the items Giovanna brought. He uncovers it, a luminous codex bound in red leather, pages edged in gold leaf, thin black straps with intricate gold fastenings, the illuminated manuscript within.

This is my wife's own *Book of Hours*, which I gave to her on her last birthday.

Laura receives it, rests it carefully in her lap.

I know at least that my Virgin will be holding this, to show her as pious and wise – I knew it almost instantly when I was approached. As to the rest – the old man shrugs – how will her face be? How does one paint her receiving this strange and wonderful news? What can I paint that will be truthful?

Laura's heart aches, the guilt at her absence as fresh and sharp as a thorn, Simone's kindness in spite of it, and that he did not press her for an explanation. His need for friends precisely as Giovanna described; the position of trust in which she has been placed; a desire to do good. Laura feels these desperately.

What can I do?

It is a problem for me to worry about, young lady. I will solve it.

When? How?

Ideas are not rainbows which appear in the sky, at least not often; they can be worked on, planed like wood, improved with friction. Have I worn you out? You look quite unwell. Would you like to go home and rest?

I do not need rest. I want to be of service.

Simone taps his mottled cheek. Are you sure you want to offer your help?

Laura Agnelli insists she does.

Very well, then.

The painter gives her folded garments belonging to Giovanna, and bids her put them on behind the screen. The rich fabric, blue





and red, is heavy in Laura's arms, the clothes cut slightly too big for her. Simone organises his materials: pen, brushes, ink, new parchment. Arranges chairs: One for you, and one we will pretend is the angel. He gives her the codex.

Laura is pinched by self-consciousness. How should she sit? How should she hold the book?

The man mutters for her to do whatever she thinks best.

Laura forces herself into stillness and grasps the *Book of Hours*. It is the most fabulous object she has ever held. Maestro Simone, is there a difference between a closed book and an open book?

A vast difference. (Simone breaks an egg and separates out the yolk, neglects to tell her what the difference is.)

Laura opens the book, then closes it. Open, it ought to be open. Randomly – it is a page from the Penitential Psalms, and what Laura recognises as *De profundis*. It used to be a favourite passage of hers. Her mouth dries. *De profundis clamavi, ad te Domine. Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord.* She sits upright, using her backbone in a pose she hopes is both modest and resolute.

Simone Martini commences a new Marian modello, the first he has made led by the instincts of an orphan. The novelty of the experiment reignites his enthusiasm.

They fall into a half-trance.

Time is measured for Simone by his progress, outline correction face hair feet chair blue gold. He is transfixed by the delicate doll which materialises – she has a sweetness, a primness and a restlessness – as though the figure on the page would drop her book on the floor, stand up, walk away. His experienced eye discerns it is not exactly right for the altar (it lacks drama, narrative, presence). He did not expect immediate gratification, but senses this is the closest yet he has come to his Virgin. He is on his way at last.





For Laura, it is oddly similar to sitting in private. She soon realises the painter is consumed by his work. Though he concentrates on her appearance so intently, he is barely aware of her person as long as she does not move. She finds this easier than the hours she endured when Simone was trying to ignore her and she so frequently irritated him. It is a relief. It is an opportunity to think, to untangle some of the mess.

De profundis clamavi, ad te Domine. Domine, exaudi vocem meam. Fiant aures tuae intendentes in vocem deprecationis meae. Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice: let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications.

Laura, you are slumping.

The girl straightens, her muscles aching. Maestro Simone – her voice cracks a little – will your wife, will Giovanna, come today?

No, she is visiting her parents.

I should like to see her again.

You had a pleasant conversation, did you? I shall ask her to come by next week.

I should like to see her again very soon.

I am sure she would like to see you too.

Laura trembles. As soon as she can, please.

Simone Martini raises his gaze to her. Whatever is the matter?

Her skin has turned to a dreadful pallor.

The artist sets aside his tools and goes to her. He asks whether she is sickening, and she does not deny it. Should he send back to the hospital for a physician?

She refuses. It is true that Laura has the urge to cry, but she does not want to shed tears on anything which does not belong to her, least of all the precious *Book of Hours*. She rests the codex with her thumb to mark the page (it might be important for it to look the same when the study resumes).





I will be all right soon. I think we were doing well, Signore. We ought to continue.

No, we will stop. There is a burden weighing upon you, Laura Agnelli. Why not tell me what it is, and I shall see if I can help?

Laura mutely shakes her head, makes a brief and artificial smile.

It is why you want to see Giovanna, you want to confide something in her, I think. Regrettably she is away for several days. Whatever it is, can it wait for so long? To me, it seems not. To me, it seems you are suffering now.

It is unimportant.

Is someone hurting you? Are you in trouble? To confessor, doctor and lawyer, do not hide the truth.

Laura wrings the folds of the fabric with her free hand but does not, now, avoid his gaze. Which are you being, Signore?

Whichever you are most in need of. Just a friend, if it pleases you. I thought we had become friends today, you and I?

We have. We have.

Then tell me what ails you. Tell your babbo.

Laura's reply is a whisper. I am in despair, Maestro Simone. I have been robbed.

Who has stolen from you? What have you lost?

I have been seeing a man outside the hospital, and now I am sure I am with child.

There is a flicker of astonishment in the artist's face, and a glimmer in his eye like the breaking of day which fades as his features rearrange themselves into the mask of deep thought. Then your demeanour and your recent disappearance are finally accounted for. What can you tell me of your young man?

Laura fixes her suspicious stare on him. Why? What are you going to do?

Nothing. Not anything. Not one thing, without your express wish: you have my word.





At this, she relents. His name is Bartolomeo Pavoni. He is a citizen of Siena, I think. I had not considered marriage until I met him and he began paying me attention. He was very charming at first.

Yes. I see. Now I must be indelicate for a moment and ask a necessary question: are you absolutely certain that what you and this Pavoni did together can cause pregnancy? Because if you just held hands or merely kissed and touched one another—

Laura cuts across this speech. Yes, she knows what took place is the thing that causes pregnancy.

I had to make sure. Can you tell me the way this occurred?

We had a special place only we two knew about—

No, not that. I wish to be clear about whether or not this person physically harmed you. Did he force you?

Once again, Laura looks ill and for a minute is tongue-tied. He said he loved me. He made promises. He said I was too good for a convent, and he wanted me for his wife. I tried to reason with him, to put him off, but he was eager and impatient with me.

Was he cruel to you . . . ?

Laura covers her mouth, then composes herself. He was persistent, and I was deceived. He was kinder afterwards, and assured me no one would find out.

And no doubt he seemed mature to you. Did you see him again? Does he know about the pregnancy?

I did not wish to see him. I wished to break it off. I intended to do my penance and, God willing, to go to Santa Marta as I originally hoped. When I realised, I sought him out and told him. I said I accepted, I said I wanted to get married and to raise our child together. I thought he would be pleased because he had asked me often enough, but he just stopped coming. At first I thought he needed to get used to the idea, but I have since heard he has gone to Ravenna and I think it might be true because it is a city he talked about, and I have searched everywhere else I can





think of. In my heart I acknowledge he does not want to be found, but I do not know what to do without him.

Do you love this fellow?

You will think badly of me if I say it was his honeyed words which affected me most, the thought that someone cared for me and found me desirable. I have lost the life I might have had for *that*. (Laura's voice cracks.) I have been trying to think precisely which of my sins has merited this treatment. I have been trying to understand why God is allowing this to happen to me, and yet denies you and Giovanna the child you both yearn for.

Because God is either not as benevolent as we would like to believe, or not as powerful. Or maybe he has his own reasons.

I would have married Bartolomeo even though I do not love him, even though he would have made me miserable. I would have tolerated him and made do. (Laura covers her face.) I am on my own now.

Despair is also a sin.

If I bear this child and raise it as a bastard, we will be destitute. I have no income, nor the means to make one. We will be ostracised. I will never find a man who is prepared to marry me and take care of someone else's child. Shall we live on alms from Santa Maria della Scala until we are found dead in the street? Shall I become a prostitute like my mother probably was? I know I am complicit and I could have avoided this if I had behaved better, but why must I alone be punished when two people have sinned? Is it because I am the vessel? I am remorseful, Signore, but I am also angry. You will not tell anyone . . . ?

No. But nature is going to give your secret away unless you take your destiny in your own hands, young Laura. Clear-headedness must prevail over desperation.

Laura rises to pace to and fro.

Simone Martini sits with his fingers linked across his belly.





Would it be so terrible to entrust one more foundling to the care of the hospital that raised you? It would give both of you a chance.

A chance . . . it has not occurred to me before that my own mother might have been a daughter of Santa Maria della Scala, that I might be but a link in a chain. I always imagined I came from outside the walls, from somewhere else, was taken there out of misfortune. A chance? I might still go to a convent, then, perhaps not Santa Marta, but another may still take me. If not, I suppose I could marry, although it has never held much appeal. Eventually I may even be able to have the child back. (To Simone's surprise there is amusement in Laura's face.) We call that 'the lie'.

What do you mean?

It is the sentimental promise made by women when they bring their babies to the hospital. They give the infants tokens and trinkets to identify them by later on; engraved coins, rings, pins, buttons, embroidery – you would be amazed at the variety. But it has never happened, not once. The objects are disposed of and the women never come back.

You could stay on at the hospital and watch your child grow.

They would not allow it. Only one of us would be permitted to stay. But then, in all likelihood, only one of us would survive.

My child, do not think such morbid thoughts.

You have not seen it, Signore. You have not seen how many women and babies are killed by childbirth. By starvation. By sickness. So many horrible ways to die. When disease ravages the wards, the smallest and weakest are the first to succumb. It is accepted, which is the same as saying it is acceptable.

You have lived to adulthood. Why do you doubt your offspring would?

Maybe it will. Maybe it will be a beautiful youth. Maybe one of the hospital's benefactors will take a fancy to it. You must have heard the rumours, Signore? I expect that you would





recognise one or two men from your social circle who are regular donors. Quid pro quo—

A hooked hand springs to Simone's mind; it repulses him momentarily, he forces it away.

I have been spared. If anyone's eye fell upon me, the rector steered them away because it was assumed I would be a nun and should be kept chaste. But some are too pretty for their own good. And stubborn. They draw attention to themselves. But I can see perfectly well why women who bring the children they cannot keep to the hospital believe it is for the best, for the slim chance you speak of.

What is in your prayers, young Laura?

That God will take this thing away. I know it is awful, but I would count it a blessing.

It is a risky strategy, simply to hope. Have you considered fully all your choices, or are you going to be a victim of fate?

She darkens, catching his meaning. I cannot undo one sin with another.

Not 'undo', but potentially limit the damage. It sounds to me that you are in a position where you must pick the lesser evil.

It would be wicked. I would be excommunicated if I was found out.

I am old now, but I was young once. Ought I to believe the thought has not occurred to you? Are these accidents new or unusual? There is nothing new under the sun. You are not the first young woman to be in this predicament, and you shall not be the last.

But to harm an unborn—

Tell me where in the Bible it says that a woman shall not end a pregnancy if it appears the least harmful course of action?

Thou shalt not kill.

Simone Martini nods. Yes, it does say that. I cannot deny it.

The artist gets to his feet and turns his attention back to the





plate of olives. He takes one and offers them to her, which she refuses once more. He eats the olive and spits the stone back into the palm of his hand and holds it there.

Whenever I eat an olive I discard the stone. When you eat an olive, what do you do with the stone?

I discard it too.

Yes. It would be strange indeed if everybody attempted to plant the seed from every single olive fruit and grow a tree from it. The olive tree is sacred, you know. Myth has it that a goddess called Athena quarrelled with the god Poseidon, and won a competition against him to be the patron of a Greek city by giving its people the first olive tree. I like the idea of another great city with a powerful protectress like ours. Even if it is not true, it is a good story. It would be extremely destructive to cut down a fully grown olive tree without good reason.

It would be wrong . . .

Quite wrong.

But Signore, we are not talking about seeds and trees. We are talking about immortal souls. Your analogy does not hold.

I admit I do not have the flair of a bard, but I want to know whether you genuinely believe the cutting down of a tree and the discarding of a stone are of *equal* severity. Are they?

A simile is not reality.

But you agree that a grown tree and a dormant seed are not the same as one another? If you believe they are the same, have the courage to say so. *I* do not think they are. I think that one is life fulfilled, and one has the potential for life requiring soil, water, sunlight, time to grow and be actualised. That is my opinion. And I say these things to you because you have suffered much in isolation, because you have already been misled, because you have no parents to guide you. And a student of scripture really ought to know that on this specific matter, the Bible is silent. Why? Well, that is anyone's guess. Perhaps the





authors do not pronounce judgement because they believe it to be a private matter, or a matter for society to decide. The Bible tells us *thou shalt not kill*, and yet we do, when there are sufficient reasons. Rather often, as it happens. What about defending one's city in war? What about the execution of a guilty man? Our *church*, on the other hand – the one that you and I are members of – is indeed vocal, and would call it a crime. But that is not the same.

Your words are hurtful.

I am sorry for that, Laura Agnelli. You ask God, why has this happened to you? I ask myself, why did God ensure you and I met? I believed at first it was for the painting, but now I am not sure. Be wary, Laura Agnelli, of anyone who claims to know what is in God's mind and what God wants us to do. *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.* Whatever you decide, young Laura, is up to you, because it is you who will have to reconcile your conscience and live with the consequences of your actions.

Laura murmurs, Graves are filled with after-the-fact wisdom.

Simone throws up his hands. Giovanna says that all the time, it is her favourite expression. My wife is a know-it-all.

Poor lamb. What shall we do with you?

Laura lays her head on Giovanna's lap. Giovanna rubs Laura's shoulder, pulls back the strands of Laura's hair so it does not fall into her face, tucks them behind her ear.

You know what I want most is a baby son or daughter, given to me by Simone. I still have hope that God will provide us with one.

Laura closes her eyes.

But I believe we can help you. We have connections.

*





If the Blessed Virgin gave but a moment of her attention to the prayers of the citizens of Siena, what might she hear?

A voice as thin and as sharp as a needle: Thank you for the new altarpiece. Let it bring to the Duomo many worshippers, regardless of its controversial design. Please do not be too displeased with it. Artists are wayward and unpredictable, and need your leniency . . .

A voice guttural and well fed: Ensure successful representations in Avignon on behalf of your beauteous hospital, and the privileges to guarantee its continuance and prosperity . . .

(These entreaties, and thousands more besides.)

A lady who renews her request every month: I know my life is rich, but give me this one blessing more and I shall never ask for anything else . . .

A girl whose pretty face is wrinkled with effort: Please bring me a husband who will take me away from here! Let him be talented in music so he can write me songs, and wealthy so he can buy me presents. Most of all, let him come quickly! I do not even mind if his breath smells . . .

(Not all requests shall be granted.)

Bless the new novice who has come to us, who seems troubled, who reminds me of myself . . .

Help me to be worthy to live here for the rest of my life . . .

What of the numerous pleas which are made without words, and to no one in particular? Does the Blessed Virgin distinguish between eloquent prayer and an infant's caterwauling? Would her eye fall, fleetingly, on a humble cot? Does she know one undersized baby from another? Recalling its history, is she moved to extend her protection to this one? Would a whisper from her to a flawed human heart be enough to save its life?

Many details go unrecorded.

