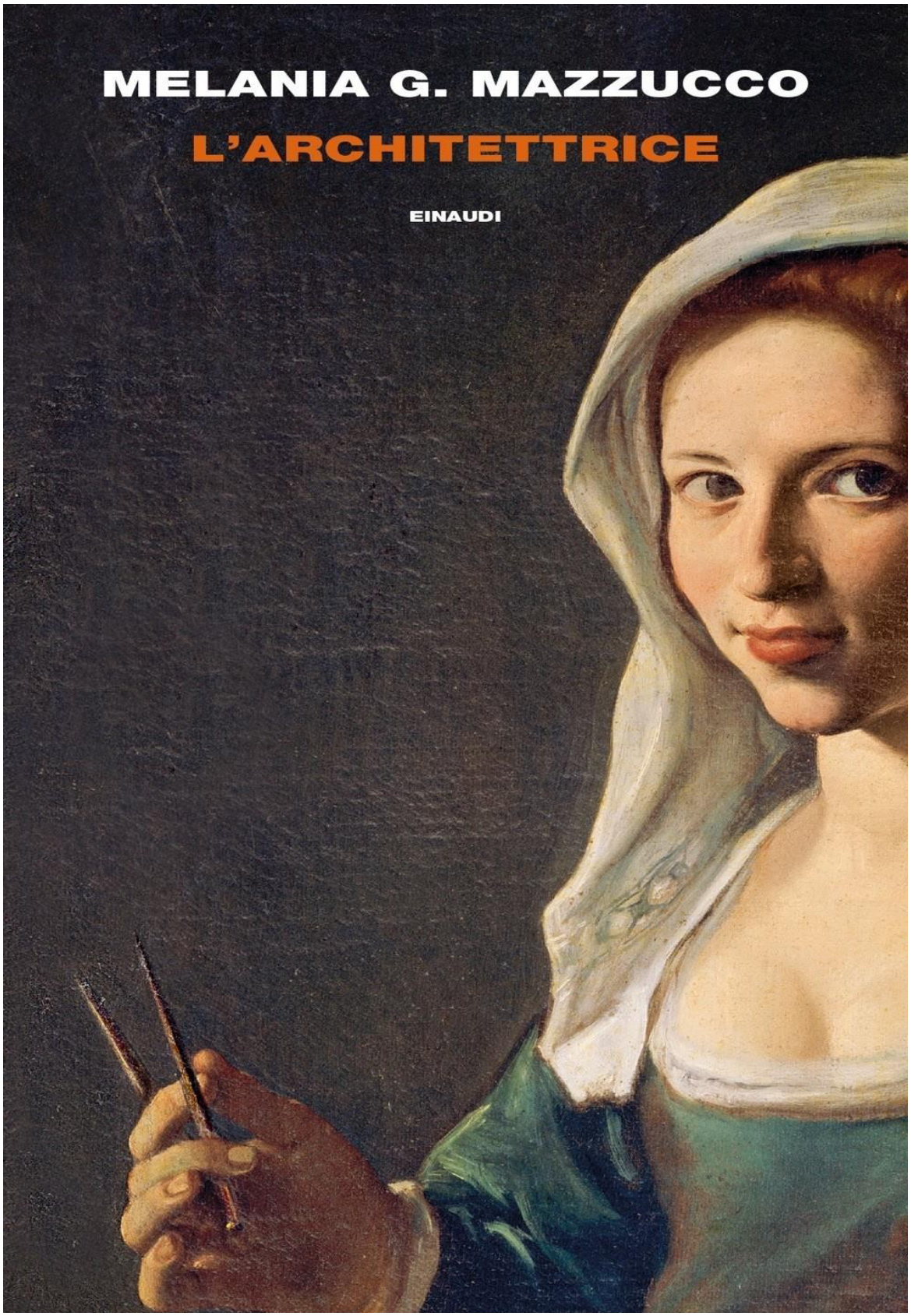
MELANIA G. MAZZUCCO

L'ARCHITETTRICE

EINAUDI



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About the novel

Melania Mazzucco's sweeping historical novel L'ARCHITETTRICE tells the extraordinary story of Plautilla Briccia (1616-1705), a poor, narcoleptic girl from Rome who becomes the first female architect in modern history.

The bulk of the novel unfolds in the first-person voice of Plautilla, who, from the solitude of her room in the years before her death, records her long and eventful life. Ferrante fans will appreciate the intimate narrative style as well as the unusual education of the protagonist, whom we follow from childhood to old age. Her vivid recollections about seventeenth-century Rome are one of the joys of the book: Plautilla portrays the city in all its splendor and squalor. Nearly a century of Rome's tumultuous history is seen through her eyes: papal processions and the plague; the flooding of the Tiber and the death of a whale; humble funerals and the extravagant Jubilee celebrations of 1650; dark alleys and the dramatic illumination of St Peter's dome; the successes — and failures —of Gian Lorenzo Bernini, the era's greatest artist, as well as the machinations of the popes who commission his work. Bernini's celebrated creations, along with those of Francesco Borromini, Pietro da Cortona, and Artemisia Gentileschi figure prominently in the narrative and provide a colorful backdrop to Plautilla's own artistic endeavors. In addition to her architectural accomplishments, she becomes a talented painter and a member of the Accademia of Saint Luca, the first artistic association of its kind to enroll women.

Plautilla's life is powerfully shaped by two men. The first is her father Giovanni, the son of a mattress maker who becomes a painter, playwright, actor, musician, collector of odd artefacts and scientific specimens. A restless, eclectic dilettante who repeatedly moves his family (Plautilla's mother, sister and brother also figure large in the narrative) from one cramped apartment to the next, Giovanni seems more interested in his own career than in his children. Yet he recognizes Plautilla's unique talents, which seem somehow related to the strange sleeping fits that set her apart from other children. He decides to teach her everything he knows—to make her, in other words, into his greatest creation. The possibilities her education provides are circumscribed, however, by the myth he creates about her. When Plautilla struggles to finish a painting, he claims that a miracle occurred—that it was completed by the Virgin Mary herself. This captivating story launches her career as an artist, but it also seals her fate as a woman. Rather than marry like her sister, Plautilla will remain a virgin. Spared the burden of childbirth, she is also deprived of the pleasure of marriage. But not, it turns out, of love.

The other dominant figure in her life is an aspiring writer named Elpidio Benedetti, an ambiguous and ambitious character who is bound to celibacy by the religious vows he takes for his own career enhancement. Plautilla and Elpidio are literally thrown together during a boating mishap as they cross the Tiber River—the murky, serpentine waterway that flows through the heart of Rome will unite and divide them in other ways throughout their lives. Elpidio, a protégé of Cardinal Barberini, becomes the primary art agent in Rome of one of the era's most powerful men: Cardinal Mazarin (Giulio Raimondo Mazzarino). Mazarin is cleric, diplomat, and politician who serves Pope Urban VIII, Cardinal Richelieu, and the Kings of France Louis XIII and XIV. Though Plautilla only leaves Rome once in her life, and then only to go see a whale beached on the nearby shore, this

Rome-centered novel expands well beyond the Aurelian Walls thanks to Elpidio's travels. The lovestory—never public, always fraught—between Plautilla and Elpidio draws her, and the reader, into the fascinating political intrigues and intellectual debates, both secular and ecclesiastical, of her day.

A vast array of other characters is woven into Plautilla's narrative, including Popes Urban VIII, Innocent X, and Alexander VII, and Christina, Queen of Sweden, who comes to Rome after her abdication in 1654. The shadowy presence of this remarkable woman, who renounces her throne for her faith, illuminates Plautilla's own choices as a woman and an artist.

Epic in scale—and nearly 560 pages in length—the novel nevertheless maintains a striking intimacy, largely through Plautilla's relationships with other women. Mazzucco traces the tragic yet all too common plight of Plautilla's beloved sister Albina, who, after numerous pregnancies, dies in childbirth. In fact, none of her numerous children will survive—an erasure that will haunt Plautilla and drive her to make a lasting mark on the world. Another traditional female destiny is dramatized in Plautilla's best friend Eufrasia, a cloistered nun and Elpidio's sister. Always separated by an impenetrable grate, these two virgins strive to understand themselves and each other through—and despite—their shared love for Elpidio. In these and other characters, all of whom actually existed, Mazzucco deftly paints myriad shades of sacrifice and fulfillment available to women and men in seventeenth-century Rome.

At the heart of this engaging narrative stands the villa that Plautilla designs: Villa Benedetti, which was built between 1663 and 1665. Better known as il Vascello al Gianicolo (the Vessel on the Janiculum Hill, so named for its resemblance to a ship), it is the architectural offspring of Plautilla and Elpidio, who, in Mazzucco's account, together create the only sort of child that their highly regimented world will allow them. Unlike some of Plautilla's paintings, which are still visible in Rome, this extraordinary architectural accomplishment—for which Plautilla invents the term "Architectress" or Lady Architect, and which becomes the title of her memoir—alas no longer stands. Mazzucco recounts the destruction of Villa Benedetti in a series of *Intermezzi* or Interludes—a strategy that casts the whole novel as a sort of Baroque theatrical spectacle. In contrast to the main narrative, which spans nearly a century, these shorter, interlude chapters all unfold in the summer of 1849, during the final months of the short-lived Roman Republic. A fascinating and bold step in the longer journey toward Italian unification and an attempt to liberate Rome from papal and foreign powers, the Republic was defeated by French and Spanish forces aligned with the papacy. We witness the final fighting through the eyes of another artist, the painter Leone Paladini. (Paladini's painting of the Defense of Rome, with Plautilla's villa in the background, as well as works by Plautilla and her father are included in the novel.) Paladini is one of the many idealistic youths who fight alongside the famous Risorgimento heroes Garibaldi and Mazzini. As fate would have it, Paladini and his comrades make their last, heroic stand on the Janiculum Hill. They take shelter in the Villa Benedetti, which as a result, is largely destroyed by French artillery. Plautilla's creation dies together with the Roman Republic, its massive structure decomposing along with the dead soldiers' bodies—like the body of the beached whale in the first chapter. Thus the novel moves in two directions simultaneously: the remarkable path that leads to the construction of the architectress's villa intersects with that which brings about its destruction. Yet both paths chart daring attempts at liberation and the forging of new identities.

It is fitting that Plautilla, whose accomplishments challenge and unsettle the norms of her day, lived at the same time as Galileo, whose theory that the earth moves around the sun was, as Mazzucco notes, so recent and so controversial that the Church had prohibited all discussion of it (p. 94). Plautilla's father is fascinated by Galileo's ideas, and he imagines the earth moving through space, like a man walking down the street. "If not even the earth is fixed, then nothing is…If everything moves, everything can change." His observation encapsulates the daring energy of Mazzucco's novel, which, through the author's diligent research and powerful imagination, retrieves the forgotten story of woman who sought to change herself and her world.

Points of strength and interest:

- **The context.** Seventeenth-century Rome, recounted with all its uniqueness and contradictions. From the slums crowded with penniless artists, gypsies, foreigners, actors, beggars who live off relics and smugglers, to the palaces of the court – the popes, cardinals and their protégés. Violence, misery and hunger coexist with stunning luxuries and riches, and instability dominates. You can move from one condition to another – in both directions – during the same existence.
- **The art.** In her long life, Plautilla encounters painters and architects today admired all over the world – like Pietro da Cortona, Gian Lorenzo Bernini and Francesco Borromini. The architect captures them in the daily labors of the trade and in their illusions of glory.
- **The great theater of the world**, not just the setting but one of the novel's protagonists. Told as it transforms and becomes the magnificent city that we all know. Among other things: the adventure of building Saint Peter's Basilica, Piazza del Popolo, Piazza di Spagna and the Gianicolo, the floods of the Tiber… Rome explored and lived in every corner – alleys, palaces, villas, convents – so much so that readers will feel like they've been there or will want to come back.
- Plautilla Bricci and Elpidio Benedetti live **the great events of 1600s** (wars, plagues, earthquakes) alongside the protagonists: Urban VIII, Mazzarino, Louis XIV, Christine of Sweden. And Leone Paladini, a volunteer defender of the Roman Republic of 1849, who fights with Garibaldi and Mazzini.
- **The story of a couple unlike any other**. A bond that was not foreseen by the commandments. One that will bind the artist and the cleric until death – amid repression, imposed chastity, passion and lies.
- **The character of Plautilla**. The portrait of a forgotten painter (though some of her works can still be admired today) and of an elusive and secret woman who, with apparent meekness, audacity and will, was able to take possession of her destiny.
- **The first female architect** in European history or maybe even in the world.

  The author. Appreciated for her novels and commitment to the theme of migrants and refugees, she is also known as a storyteller and art writer. She has written *Il museo del mondo*, recounting 52 paintings over the course of as many weeks for the newspaper *La Repubblica*, to which she contributes about art and culture. She was instrumental in the reevaluation of Venetian painter Tintoretto and his daughter, Tintoretta, also a painter, with a novel (*The Angel's Long Wait* translated into French, Spanish, German, Finnish, Danish, Bulgarian) and a fundamental biography (*Jacomo Tintoretto & His Sons: the History of a Venetian family*), followed by the Tintoretto exhibition at the Scuderie del Quirinale (2011) and the documentary film *Tintoretto*: *a Rebel in Venice* (2019), produced by Sky and distributed by Nexo worldwide. With *L'architettrice* she has launched the rediscovery of Plautilla Briccia. Forgotten for centuries from the annals of official culture, she recently aroused the interest of restorers, art historians, and historians of society. Various conferences have been dedicated to her. Due to the exceptionality of her case, she will increasingly become the subject of international attention.

- **The exhibition**. The National Galleries of Palazzo Barberini organized at Palazzo Corsini alla Lungara in Rome the first monographic exhibition ever dedicated to Plautilla, born thanks to *L'architettrice,* which opened in November 2021 and brings together all her known works.
- **The success.** With more than 100.000 copies sold in hardcover, paperback, e-book and audiobook *L'architettrice* has become a longseller.

Praise from the press

"An extraordinary novel." *Tuttolibri*

"Necessary and important." *La Lettura*

"An incredible Rome in the Seventeenth century: alive and overflowing, stimulating and corrupt, cheerful and sad." *la Repubblica*

"A journey through Rome, the journey of a free woman: this book has everything." *Il Foglio*

"This book makes you want to walk around Rome and see Plautilla's work." *Internazionale*

"Mazzucco has the great ability to explore history." *L'Espresso*

"Melania Mazzucco is the great architect of contemporary Italian literature." *Doppiozero*

"Mazzucco doesn't remind you of anyone else." *The Art Newspaper*

Praise from the booksellers

"A masterpiece." Stefano, a bookseller from Sorrento

"Melania Mazzucco's new novel is powerful and important. You will need to read it and remember it." Stefania, a bookseller from Turin

"I hadn't read such a beautiful and exciting book in a very long time." Annalisa, a bookseller from Macerata

"I loved it. I liked the setting, Rome with its popes and intrigues, and this female character, so apparently mellow and compliant who is actually very determined and passionate about her extraordinary endeavour." Serena, a bookseller from Pescara

"Melania Mazzucco is an architect of the words. She doesn't only write a story for you to read, she builds a whole world you will want to immerse yourselves in and never leave." A bookseller from Genova

Praise from the readers

"Melania Mazzucco pulls her story out from the hat of the past by reconstructing the life of a child prodigy who imposed herself on her ti me with extraordinary strength and courage."

"An enchanting, surprising historical novel. A beautiful discovery."

"A dense and fascinating story of women's emancipation in the Rome of the Popes."

"Mazzucco is able to masterfully tell a feminist story ante litteram, skilfully alternating historical facts with deeper and still – unfortunately – current issues."

"Among my readings, these days, *L'architettrice* by Melania Mazzucco. I am overwhelmed by admira tion. Here it is worth using a nice superlative."

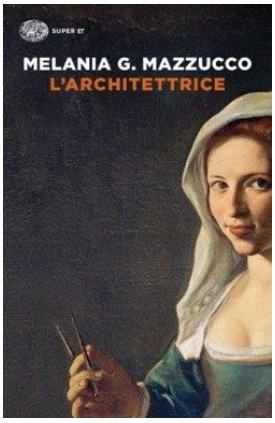
"Among those novels that embrace you and never leave you. And you wish they would never end."



Melania G. Mazzucco
L'architettrice

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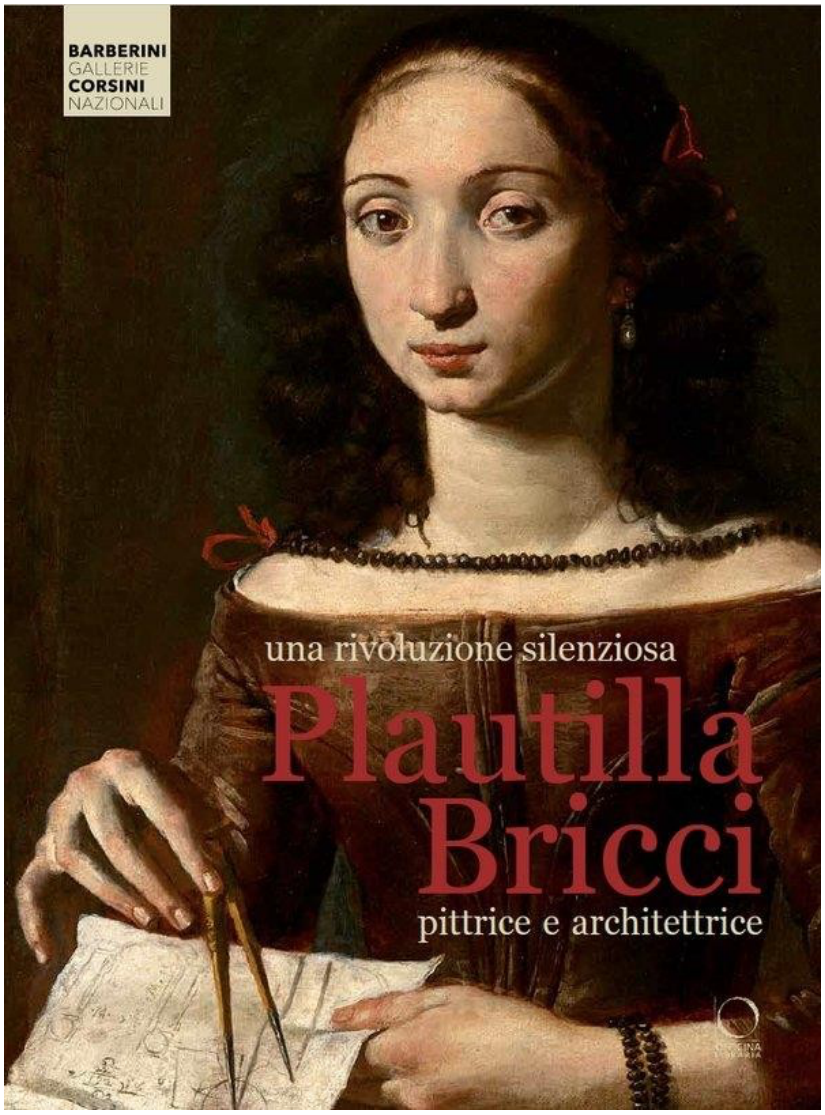


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Una rivoluzione silenziosa (A Silent Revolution), the first monographic exhibition ever dedicated to Plautilla Bricci, inspired by *L'architettrice* and organized by the National Galleries of Palazzo Barberini at Palazzo Corsini alla Lungara in Rome, opened in November 2021.

About the author

Melania G. Mazzucco was born and lives in Rome. She is the author of *Il bacio della Medusa* (1996), *La camera di Baltus* (1998), *Lei così amata* (2000, Premio Napoli), about the writer Annemarie Schwarzenbach, *Vita* (2003, Premio Strega, *Globe & Mail* Book of the Year, *New York Times Book Review* Editors' Choice, *Publishers Weekly* Top Ten Books of the Year, International Prize Arcebispo Juan de San Clemente – Best Foreign Novel), *Un giorno perfetto* (2005), on which was based the movie with the same title by Ferzan Ozpetek, and two works about the Italian Renaissance painter Tintoretto: the novel *La lunga attesa dell'angelo* (2008, Premio Bagutta) and the essay *Jacomo Tintoretto e i suoi figli* (2009, Premio Comisso). In 2011 she received the Premio letterario Viareggio-Tobino as Author of the Year. Then, she wrote *Limbo* (2012, Premio Elsa Morante, Premio Rhegium Julii, Premio Matteotti, Premio Bottari Lattes Grinzane), *Il bassotto e la Regina* (2012, Premio Frignano Ragazzi 2013), *Sei come sei* (2013), *Il museo del mondo* (2014), in which she narrates 54 works of art, *Io sono con te* (2016, Rai Radio 3 *Fahrenheit*'s Book of the Year), *L'architettrice* (2019, Premio Capalbio, Premio Alassio "Un autore per l'Europa", Premio Dessì, Premio Corrado Alvaro e Libero Bigiaretti 2020, Premio Io Donna, Premio Stresa, Premio Mastercard, Premio Manzoni, Premio Righetto, Premio Friuli Venezia Giulia, Premio Silvia Dell'Orso), *Fuoco infinito. Tiepolo 1917* (2021), *Silenzio. Le sette vite di Diana Karenne* (2024). In 2020 she won the Premio alla Carriera John Fante. She created and wrote the docu-film *Tintoretto. A Rebel in Venice*, a 2019 Sky Arts original production distributed in cinemas all over the world. She wrote for the theatre, the cinema and the radio and she is a contributor to *la Repubblica*. Her books are translated - or in translation - all over the world.

Melania G. Mazzucco

L’architettrice

First two chapters translated from the Italian by Virginia Jewiss

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The Whale

The thing was dusty grey and curved, like an alchemist's retort: rounded at the base and tapering toward the top. Less than half a handbreadth high. It appeared, out of the blue, on my father's desk, atop a stack of papers covered in his frenzied handwriting. I thought it was a paperweight, a broken bit of some ancient statue. My father, despite my mother's strident protests, had begun collecting all sorts of things, whether made by man, by nature, or by chance. Finds he dug up, or traded for with other treasure hunters, or sometimes even purchased, so that his room came to look more like a junk dealer's shop than a painter's studio.

Inside small pearwood boxes he kept bits of martyrs' bones, dead divinities' big toes, and kidney stones that his brother-in-law salvaged from his patients' chamber pots. He'd pile them on the shelves, alongside bizarre books in Hebrew and Latin, anatomical drawings of dissected cadavers, and even—sealed in glass bottles—skins of *ytzquinteporzotli* and *xoloitzcuintli*, in other words, dog and Mexican wolf. That room, always dimly lit and smelling of glue, burnt wood, and old paper—my father's world when he was not my father—exerted over me a power as irresistible as a magnet over a sliver of metal.

My father didn't want to be disturbed, but he never bolted his door, perhaps because, all things considered, he rather enjoyed seeing me poking around amid his marvels. My sister Albina had no interest in his drawings and dried flowers. Barely lifting his head from his paper and holding a finger to his lips, he would gesture to me to keep quiet. Then he would dip his pen in ink and forget about me. Perched on the stool, my feet whirling in the air, I would watch him write, write, write. Who knows what. At that point I barely knew how to sound out words. And I didn't understand why a painter had to use a pen so often.

That thing wasn't a piece of sculpture, though, or even a stone. It gave off a pungent smell of sea and rot, as if it had been—and still was, partly—alive. The February cold forced us to keep the windows closed, and the stench quickly became so strong it made you sick to your stomach. The first day my mother, disgusted, ordered him to get rid of that stinking thing immediately. My father shot her a condescending look. "Quiet, you foolish woman," he grumbled, "you don't know what you're talking about. That 'stinking thing' is more precious than everything else here," he admonished. My mother livened up. "What's it worth?" she asked, holding out her hand. My father slapped it playfully. "Some things are so rare they don't have a price, I wouldn't sell it even for a thousand scudi," he declared. "For a thousand scudi I'd gladly sell my husband," my mother laughed, winking at me. "My man's not worth that much though, unfortunately." But then, with surprising tenderness, she added, "Giovanni, make it disappear, it's contaminating the air, I wouldn't want the children to catch some disease."

The thing did not disappear, though. It went on diffusing the smell of sea and decay in every corner of the apartment until, over time, it dried out, becoming as desiccated and inert as a mineral.

It wasn't a mineral, though. Or a stone, or even volcanic ash. It looked like ivory, or horn. The surface was spongy, riddled with minuscule holes. There were whitish bristles on one side, like

those of a wild pig. My father warned me to handle it with care, because it came from the body of an animal you never see in our waters. A creature from another world. A whale fish.

On winter evenings, when rain or sleet trapped him inside, my father would stage performances of the *Orlando Furioso*, choosing the most adventurous episodes of Angelica, Astolfo, and Ruggiero; or he would improvise comedies, playing Pantalone, Zanni, and the Captain while babbling in Venetian, Bergamasco, and Neapolitan. He'd try the scenes out on us, his first audience. Albina and I could never go see his plays, not even in private homes—only married women were allowed. But he performed them gladly for us, his daughters. We, in our fierce innocence, were his most impartial critics. If a joke didn't make us laugh, he would cut it. True comedy, he insisted, has to work even on idiots.

His little domestic spectacles had another purpose, though. He wanted to entertain me, shake me up, cure me of my defect. He had taken on this obligation himself, without being asked, almost as a form of penance for some wrong he'd committed. I had begun lately, and for no apparent reason, to drop off to sleep suddenly—I would slide off my chair, or fall face-first in my plate, in a state of torpor and unconsciousness. My mother suspected that some sort of spell had turned me into a fool.

I would laugh, but my gaiety lasted as long as a summer storm. The discovery of my defect changed me. Afraid of everything, most of all myself, I no longer dared to venture beyond my familiar surroundings: it could happen again, and strangers would take me to the hospital, or abandon me somewhere. I preferred to stay home and look after my little sister Antonia. I would bathe her in the tub, and invent little songs and stories for her. I was desperate to grow up, to become a mother myself.

I was already a little woman, silent and obedient. And that's what I still would be, had that thing not appeared on my father's desk.

Of all the stories he told me, none fascinated me as much as the one about the whale that washed up on the rocky shore near Santa Severa one February evening in 1624.

Night was already falling when a sentry on duty at the fortress caught a glimpse—about a mile away, toward Civitavecchia—of a dark outline in the sea. A floating island of debris from a shipwreck perhaps, or an enemy craft. Barbary pirates approaching for a raid? He sounded the alarm immediately. The soldiers rushed onto the beach. But it wasn't an island or a boat. It didn't even look like a fish. It was so huge they thought it was some sort of diabolic apparition. In the torchlight, they realized that the sea monster was lying a few fathoms from shore. The water was freezing. But that wasn't the reason the soldiers were hesitant to wade out to it. They were afraid the leviathan was still alive. At dawn's first light, a daring fisherman rolled up his breeches and ventured out toward the large greyish mass, which by then was lifeless.

The soldiers called their superiors, who called the commanders of the Santa Severa fortress, which, as with all the surrounding lands, was under the auspices of the Hospital of the Holy Spirit. In the light of day, the monster turned out to be an innocuous whale. But before then, no whale had ever come to swim in our sea, not in human memory.

The learned folk recalled a dead whale off the coast of Corsica four years earlier, but never on Italian shores. This one must have come from the ocean. Chased by an orca perhaps, it escaped into the Mediterranean and ventured so far that it lost its way. It was a female, and alone. There was no sign of a whale calf.

According to some scientists, it was quite old, which is why it didn't have any companions. According to others, it was abandoned by her dux, the long white fish that accompanies the whale, clinging constantly to its snout. The dux helps the whale, pushing the tiny fish it feeds on into its mouth, warding off dangers, and—with the touch of its spiny tail—piloting the whale through the currents, as if it were a rudder. Which is why it is called a dux. In exchange, the dux receives food and protection: during storms, the whale holds it in its mouth, keeping it safe. One cannot survive without the other. If a whale loses its dux, it can't go forward or turn back. All it can do is die.

The carcass had become ensnared on the rocks that punctuate the coast, and on which galleons and tartanes, driven by the waves, would often smash apart. It was more than ninety-one hands long and fifty hands wide, and so heavy that thirty men weren't enough to haul it onto the sand. They decided to chop it to pieces there where it had run aground, climbing on its shiny back as if it were a hill. Its light grey skin was as thin and delicate as taffeta.

The beach, which was usually deserted, filled with people, and in the course of a few hours the crowd was too big for it to hold. Caravans of carriages conveyed scientists, zoologists, dilettantes, priests, poets, and painters. Some wanted to study it, others simply to see it, still others to draw it so that some memory of it would survive. It was a prodigy.

But many wanted greedily to possess it. Local peasants and fishermen were paid to remove the tail, the fins, the flesh, the vertebrae. The most ingenious among them were already dreaming of making thrones and stools out of them. Using poles and beams, they pried open its mouth, which was so big that a man on horseback could have ridden inside. They even tried to untangle its innards, but the intestines were thicker than a man's body. The meat was red, like beef. The layer of lard on its spine was so heavy that it took three carts to haul it all away, and the oil it produced filled nine barrels—enough to keep the lamps burning for an entire year. Its teeth, some as tall as a man, decreased in size, like organ pipes, toward the back of its gums. The smallest was only slightly larger than an alchemist's retort. It was the one my father had on his desk.

Friar Luigi Bagutti, the architect at the Hospital of the Holy Spirit, had given it to him. He lived a few doors down from us and had become my father's best friend: they used to get together every day to discuss the latest building projects in the city. His superior, Friar Leone, had provided him with some of the bones, meat, and fat, and Friar Luigi, who knew my father to be the most curious man in Rome, hungry for novelty and knowledge, showed them to him. The object that I was so fascinated by was the smallest tooth of that mysterious whale.That night I dreamt about the whale. Lost, it roamed the waves, drawn to the lights of the fortress. But when it came closer, the sharp rocks lacerated its belly. Jets of water as tall as buildings spouted from its blowhole, but its dux had abandoned it, and no one came to free it. I woke up in tears. "It's dead, Plautilla," my father said. "There is nothing we can do for it." "I want to see it," I pleaded. "Take me to see it, Father. It will never come back, and there won't ever be another one."

"I wanted to go, too, Plautilla, and I would have taken you with me, I swear, but it's too late now, we can't. The stench of putrefaction has fouled the air all the way to Civitavecchia. We have to wait for nature to run its course."

To console me, he took a piece of paper, dipped his pen in cuttlefish ink, and drew the whale for me, its mouth open in a sort of smile, happy in the shallow waters of the Tyrrhenian Sea. A made-up, fairy tale whale, because my father only got to know the real one when Bernardino Radi, who oversaw the factories at Civitavecchia and went to see it immediately after it was beached, engraved the sketch he'd made and sold it in every bookstore in Rome.

"But when it doesn't stink any more, will you take me, Father?" I begged. He nodded distractedly. Only four days after the sighting, with a frenzied swiftness, he had finished writing *An Account of the Whale,* and a few hours later had sent it to the printers. It was already for sale at the book seller from Bologna's shop in the Borgo Vecchio, across from Cavalletto's. The first printing sold out, copies circulating all over Rome, passing from hand to hand in the taverns, and lots of people congratulated him on the vividness of the description. My father had already lost interest in the whale. He preferred things that hadn't happened yet.

The whale of Santa Severa haunted me for years. I don't know why that lost creature, fantastical and solitary, disturbed me so much. I would caress its tooth—dried out now—on my father's desk and weep, thinking about the queen of the sea who had been torn apart on the rocks. My mother made fun of me. "Save your tears, my dear," she would laugh, "you'll need them."

But in the spring, my father made arrangements with the friars at the Hospital of the Holy Spirit, and he allowed me to go with him. The coach was packed, and I had to perch on his knees. We left Rome through the San Pancrazio gate: my nose pressed against the glass, I peered in astonishment at the greengrocers, dozens of them, their wheelbarrows and rickety carts filled with baskets of peas, lettuce, and purple-headed artichokes, waiting to enter the city. They humbly removed their hats as we went by.

Right outside the walls, Rome ended. Suddenly. I had always lived in dark alleys, and I could almost touch the wall of the building across the way through the window. It seemed unimaginable to me, this endless expanse of countryside, an undulating geometry of dark, high walls that edged invisible properties, and green squares as far as the eye could see, divided by rows of vines, or ruffled by trees and shrubs. Back then, there weren't any villas on that plateau scored with valleys and ravines stretching all the way to the sea. I couldn't have imagined that my destiny would be fulfilled right there among those vineyards, woods, and fields of artichokes.

It was the first time I'd ever ridden in a coach. All the jolting and shaking and rocking made me nauseous. I vomited on my father's shirt before I'd had time to warn him I wasn't feeling well. "Sweet Jesus," he protested resignedly, "I don't have a clean one! Pardon us," he said to the friars, who held their noses in disgust. My presence was already sufficient cause for embarrassment. The coachman stopped next to a fountain, to allow my father to rinse out his shirt and me my mouth. My father remained bare-chested. At age forty-five, he was as delicate as a chaffinch.

After the tavern at Mala Grotta, towers and farmhouses became increasingly rare, and soon the coach was moving through a cloud of dust on an empty road. We didn't even encounter anyone on the bridges that crossed the ditches. The only creatures who lived in those unhealthy marshes were water buffalo. My eyes couldn't find anything to settle on. I dozed off, my head against my father's downy chest, rocked by the slow beating of his heart.

I was awoken by voices and the stillness of the coach. I leapt down. A gust of wind ripped the white veil from my head. I tried to chase it, but then stopped, breathless. It was the first—and only—time I ever saw the sea. Blue, with frilly, silver lace embroidered by the waves. A blue that grew increasingly dark toward the horizon, eventually looking like a sheet of metal. Water, as far as the eye could see. Separated from the light blue sky by a crisp line, as if it had been traced with a ruler. My father placed a hand on my shoulder and said that on the other side—but far, far away— was France. It was the first time I'd heard that country named.

The soldiers at the fortress, whom the prior of the Hospital of the Holy Spirit had informed of our arrival, escorted us to the spot. But the whale was no longer. All that remained were the skull's long bones, the dorsal fin's bristly stumps, and the rib cage's elliptical stumps. It reminded me of a capsized hull. But the bones were so white they seemed of marble, making the wreck look more like the ancient ruins scattered along the Appian Way: heaps of broken capitals, rickety pilasters, cornices reaching into the air, leaving you to imagine what the original building was like.

I wasn't disappointed, though. The size of those remains conveyed the same sense of grandeur and magnificence as the ruins of ancient Rome. I could see that the whale had been a wonder. "Eyes as big as cart wheels," my father said enthusiastically, "and pupils like ebony bowls." He didn't rattle off abstract measures, he made you see them. And to help me understand what I didn't know, he made comparisons to everyday objects: the teeth were as close as those on the combs for treating hemp, the bottom lip as full and round as the row of travertine at the base of the fortress walls…. My father was like a wizard: he had the gift of evoking things with words. He was a writer, but I didn't know it at the time. And soon I stopped listening to him. I stared at the ridge of vertebrae, over which the foaming waves were breaking. I squinted and scanned the horizon in hopes of glimpsing the spray of another whale. But all I could see on the surface of the water were the fishing boats from Santa Marinella and, further out to sea, the white sails of a ship heading for Porto Ercole.

"There aren't any whales in our sea, Plautilla," my father said in a meditative voice. "But that

doesn't mean they don't exist. Which is why that tooth is so precious to me, and why I will always keep it. It's a promise, understand? A promise that the things we don't know really do exist somewhere. And that we have to search for them. Or make them."

"Yes, Father," I affirmed, even though I hadn't really understood what he wanted to tell me. It was the first time he had treated me like an adult, even though I was a girl, not even eight years old. He had never paid much attention to me. I was the superfluous child. The second girl. Defective, not even beautiful, and special only because of my lifeless sleep. Timid, too obedient to liberate my secret desire to be something different. A heroine, a princess, a warrior—a being endowed with an irresistible will to better herself in this world, earning glory and honor. My father placed his hopes of artistic lineage in my little brother Basilio, and he had already given his love to my mother and my sister Albina. He didn't have enough for me.

But I was the only one who had listened to the story of the whale, who had understood what that tooth meant to him. And perhaps to me as well. In that old female creature, courageous and alone, I recognized something that both attracted and terrified me.

My father took off his shoes and invited me to do the same. He advised me to be careful because the sand was scattered with broken shells, as sharp as knives. Then he took me by the hand and we ventured out into the shallow water. The remains of the whale weren't even twelve feet from the shore. But we couldn't reach them. After just a few steps, the pain already brought tears to my eyes. Something had pierced my feet. And my father was swearing and moaning. Those rocks, covered in slippery seaweed, were infested with sea urchins. Their spines stuck in our heels, our toes, the soles of our feet. The soldiers had to come and get us and lead us back to shore even though we both protested proudly that we wanted to keep going.

Numb with cold, we climbed back in the coach, our clothes damp as the May sun had not dried them, and our bare feet wrapped in oil-soaked bandages. The Hospital attendants spent hours extracting sea urchin spines from our skin—tiny black grains, like pepper—and my mother reproached her husband for weeks for the madness of his bizarre mind. How did he get it in his head to take his daughter to Santa Severa? What did it get me? Ruined feet and a high fever. But my father and I knew that it had been worth it to pay homage to the remains of the whale. And nothing that we said to each other in the remaining twenty-one years in which we lived side by side was as profound as that conversation on the beach.

I have the whale's tooth right here, on my desk. I had to forfeit all the rest, but I would never give up that tooth. It has lost all its smell and color. The bristles have fallen out, and dust has infiltrated the pores, giving it an ashen-colored patina. I look at it every day. My father has been gone for almost sixty years. I don't remember his voice any more, or even his features, since I gave away the book that contained his portrait. And yet I'd like to tell him, wherever he is, that I have kept my promise.

No one knows about me. My name lies in the virgin earth, three hands deep, buried in the heart of the hill known as Monte Giano. Giano—Janus—is the god of the threshold, the genius of this city. And had I been born in some other century, he would also be the god of my destiny. That solitary hill, caressed by a fresh sea breeze, stands on the wrong side of the river. And yet it dominates Rome. That's not the only reason we loved it, though. The abbot used to say to me: "From up here, my friend, every evening at sunset, I can contemplate the shadow that, little by little, gently cancels the beauty of Rome. Cupolas, trees, buildings, piazzas, fountains, bell towers, crosses. Everything disappears, like in a dream. And I am reconciled with my disenchantments."

My name is etched on a sheet of lead, in the same elegant lettering found on ancient monuments. The workers set it there one October morning. The laying of the cornerstone is a solemn ceremony, but also joyous, like a baptism. One never realizes that a beginning is also an end, and that achieving something includes the possibility of missing it—that success is also failure, accomplishment a disaster. And sometimes, it's both.

But I didn't know that then. My heart was racing and my mouth was dry. I was overwhelmed at being simultaneously the officiant, the godmother, and the mother at this baptism. Where others saw only an enormous hole and a pile of dirt with torn-up roots, I could already imagine the terrace with the fountain, the balustrade with its colonnettes, the façade, the statues, and the windows on which the sun's rays would break.

The carriage had stopped on the edge of the property. When I raised the blinds I saw them all, already lined up: the workers off to one side, clustered around the foreman under the stonecutters' shed; the abbot at the rim of the hole, as tall and thin as an evening shadow; his secretary with his horn rimmed glasses; the uniform crowd of priests, their black tunics swelling in the wind; the Governor's official with his plumed hat; the prior of the nearby convent of San Pancrazio; the ambassador with his wavy wig and pointy mustache, surrounded by the young men in livery who made up his retinue. The horses were left to doze under the pergola: the stood there, motionless, only their tails flicking, to chase away the wasps that were drawn to the grapes.

When the footman opened the door for me and I rested my shoe on the footboard, the murmuring suddenly stopped and a bewildered silence fell over the entire construction site. The workmen hadn't seen me yet. The strangest rumors had been circulating about me. The mere word "architectress" set them dreaming. I smiled, knowing they imagined someone young and beautiful. The veil that covered my face kept them from confirming their fantasy.

"May we begin, Signora?" the foreman asked, approaching me. "Are we waiting for some other architect, Master Beragiola?" I replied in the fatuous tone I always had to use with him. The foreman gestured to his workers, and one of them hesitantly came over to me.

The foreman was a taciturn Lombard, brusque and reserved, his leathery skin cured by the sun. His serious face allowed no expression to escape. He had to obey me, because he was my underling. The abbot had had to write it clearly in his contract, so as to avoid disputes or misunderstandings. The Lombard had accepted. Reluctantly, I fear. Or perhaps he lacked sufficient imagination to evaluate the implications of his submission.

The workman took the trowel, dipped it in the bucket of lime, and affixed the lead to the stone. The abbot sprinkled grains of salt in a tub of water and then poured it into the hole, to invoke the stability of the building. "*Adiutorium nostrum in nomine Domini, qui fecit coelum et terram*," the monsignor recited, making the sign of the cross. "*Exorcizo te, creatura salis, per Deum vivum, per Deum verum, per Deum sanctum*." The foreman handed me the stone. A perfect parallelepiped with bright white edges. I would have liked to feel its roughness, but I was wearing gloves. It was surprisingly light, this angular cornerstone of my life. As I hesitated, holding it in my palms like an offering, I realized that it was the size of a painting. I couldn't hold it for long, though. Custom required that I pass it to His Excellency the Ambassador of France. He would have gladly forgone the honor, but there was no avoiding it: he was the most important person present. He was astounded that I was the one to hand it to him: ritual demands that it is the architect of the future building who presents the cornerstone. The abbot must not have told him about me. The ambassador handed it off immediately, as if it had singed his fingers. One of his retinue kindly dusted off his gloves with a handkerchief.

The lead sheet had been prepared by the smith at the Borgo foundry. It's a tradition that goes back to Biblical times, and I hope it continues: it is an indispensable propitiatory rite. Cornerstones are made of clay on more modest building sites, and of marble on more important ones. But a marble slab made me think of a tombstone, like those that emerge from the belly of Rome every time a vintner plows a trench or a farmer turns over a field. The necropolis of the past does not let the city of the living forget about it. I preferred metal, and in the end, I chose lead because that's what the curses that the ancients tossed into the well of the nymph Anna Perenna were carved on.

A friend of my father's told me about it, when I was a little girl. They called him Toccafondo. Of all the painters who used to visit our home, he was my favorite. His face was disfigured by a scar—from a sword blow that nearly sent him to hell, I remember—but he didn't scare me. On the contrary, he fascinated me, like the ogre in a fairy tale or the bandit in a popular ballad. He had an awful reputation because he had been in prison many times, he'd even been condemned to death, and was only saved because his sentence was commuted and he was sent to row on the pope's galleys.

My father had told me that his friend was an explorer. At the end of the last century, all young people dreamed of discovering new lands and new peoples, of crossing the oceans, forests, and mountain ranges of America. Toccafondo, on the other hand, had chosen the hidden continent in the bowels of the earth. Invisible to all, close at hand, and yet as unreachable as the pole. Just as the voyagers to the Indies or the New World would return with feathers from strange birds, poison arrows, statuettes of idols, and snake skins, he would bring to the surface loads of discoveries from his incursions, which were usually illegal, in subterranean Rome. The sacred finds—bones of Christian martyrs, or those he passed off as such—he sold. The pagan ones—which he found almost by chance—he would give to friends. Fingers from statues, bits of marble sandals, perfume bottles, dice, terracotta figurines of deer, dogs, rabbits, and cats that parents had buried, centuries before the era of the martyrs, in their children's tombs. He gave me dozens of them when I was four or five, and I played with them until they crumbled in my hands.

But the sheets of lead carved with mysterious writing, those he came back for. Ignoring my father's protests, who had been using them as paperweights, he took them away. An erudite client of his maintained that he had deciphered them, and that they had something to do with magic curses.

Toccafondo had thrown them back in the well where he'd found them. He wouldn't even say what part of Rome the well was in—for fear of arousing the ire of that dark pagan divinity. For good luck, my father took us all to be blessed by the Madonna of the Miracles. Toccafondo didn't come, and he died shortly thereafter.

I would have liked to imitate the ancients. Engrave on that sheet of lead threatening words that would strike fear instead of celebrating rhetorically the peace found after a war that was not mine. This is what I would have written: May whoever touches even a stone of this villa of delights be damned…

The actual inscription was brief. And in Latin. It recorded the year, 1663, and the circumstances that lead to its construction, namely the peace that was reestablished between the nation of France and that of the Church. Which were the abbot's two nations: that in which he was born, and that in which he ended up serving. I don't remember the exact words. I never liked studying Latin, because I never thought I would need it for anything.

Usually, the owners of the future building turn to a famous poet for the inscription on the cornerstone, even if his verses are destined never to be read by anyone. Unless the building constructed above them collapses, either because of an earthquake or the ground giving way, or because the architect made a calculation error, or it is demolished, either because it is derelict or because a change in taste renders it antiquated and ridiculous to look at—something that obviously neither the person who writes the verses nor the one who requests them wishes for. There must be hundreds, thousands under ever home. An anthology of epigraphs that will never see the light of day as long as Rome stands.

I had asked an acquaintance, someone the abbot, my brother, and I knew. A lawyer. His name is Carlo Cartari, and I think he's still alive. He counted for something, in Rome. I could say he was a friend, but I prefer to guard that word like a jewel, and I don't hesitate to admit that in my long life I have not had more than two. In 1663 we were neighbors—we lived in the same building—and we used to visit together: Cartari would gladly poke around our library, borrow my father's manuscripts, lend us his carriage, discuss politics and ecclesiastical intrigues with my brother, and I would converse with his wife about embroidery and perfumes. But then when his daughter, to whom I had taught the basic principles of painting, got married, he didn't even invite us. I asked him to compose some auspicious verses, which would bring our Villa good luck. Which I—we—greatly needed.

The consistorial lawyer enjoyed writing, as did everyone else. Rome has always had more writers than residents. They read each other's work, praising and flattering their friends and pouring poison on outsiders. They wrote about everything. In prose and in verse, in Latin and in Italian. From the details of their lives to events that shook the world, from popes and liturgies and saints to the weather and death. Of clocks, angels, the properties of birds—song birds in particular—of the desires of the fetus in the womb, of beer and the nature of wine, and whether it is better to drink it hot or cold, by melting snowflakes in it. They would set absolutely anything to rhyme, even without inspiration or talent. My father taught me to recognize true poetry. I knew the lawyer wouldn't write anything good, but it didn't matter. The poetry was merely a convention. All that mattered to me was the last line. My name.

My Christian and my family name. My brother insisted on not taking a wife, and I began to worry that no one would carry our family name into the next century, into the future we would never see.

Basilio and I had remained children of our father for too long, but strangely we never believed in the natural heredity of lineage. Children can die, or renounce you, disown, disappoint or betray you. Maybe even we suspected that we had betrayed his teaching, and that if he were allowed to come back to life, even for one day, he would not have recognized us. We dreamed of leaving a work that would last longer than our own blood—as unique as the comet that appeared in the sky over Rome right as we were building the Villa, and that my brother and I had admired from the windows of our house, noting how, as the weeks passed, the shooting star's tail grew longer rather

than shorter, and wondering what message it was trying to tell us. I placed my name in the foundations of the Villa, which was mine even if I would never live there, not even for one day, or sleep there even for one night–so that the memory of me would remain somewhere.

The abbot showered coins into the abyss. Spanish doubloons, Hungarian florins, Venetian ducats, silver scudi, Roman sesterces. I don't know when the custom began, there's something irresistibly pagan about it. But everyone does it, even when the building being celebrated is a church. The monsignor recited the benediction and then set out along the excavation perimeter, sprinkling holy water on the spot where the chapel would be. We followed him, forming a procession behind the acolyte swinging the censer and murmuring prayers. Mine, in truth, were somewhat unusual. "Please, let me not have calculated wrong," I recited in my head, "please let it be strong and beautiful, bless this house for as long as it lasts." The smoke—valerian, cinnamon, and myrrh—rising from the incense boat overpowered for a moment the smell of damp, of resin and rotting earth. The workman, in the meantime, had climbed down into the dirt and was laying the stone. The hole was deep because the foundations had to support a very tall building. We couldn't even see him from where we were standing. But it was then that I slipped from its chain the obsidian pendant I'd worn around my neck for forty-three years.

I had read in the Book of Revelations that the Jews had set into the walls of Jerusalem jasper and sapphire, agate, emerald, onyx, ruby, chrysolite, beryl, topaz, turquoise, jacinth, and amethyst. Precious stones, in other words. Me, an obsidian pebble that was only worth a few pennies. And yet it was my richest jewel. Because I had waited all those years for the prophecy to come true, and now it finally had. The others were absorbed in the litany or distracted with boredom, or perhaps they just didn't notice. I dropped the obsidian pendant into the abyss, on top of the lead sheet, so that it would stay there forever.

My eyes were bathed in tears. The thick lace veil that covered my face hid my weakness. If the foreman noticed, he didn't let on. The ceremony was over, and the guests were already hurrying to their carriages. The abbot, unaware, took me by the arm and guided me to the winch, to explain how it works. He talked about concrete and bricks, pleased at the good quality of the sand being used. I couldn't follow what he was saying. Or even look at him. The powder that whitened his face could not hide the wrinkles that radiated around his eyes.

I didn't want to cry. I was happy. I thought this was the highpoint of my life. I never could have imagined being granted a moment like this. And how could I have? Before me, no woman had ever conceived of a work such as the one I was about to build. I don't know if any woman had even dared dream of it. I was grateful for the privilege and yet convinced I could prove I deserved it. I had no reason to doubt that the world would know who had designed, planned, and built the Villa. It was small compared to what people much more important than us were building on all the hills of Rome. And yet this Villa could change history. It would be the symbol of a momentous change, a departure point for all women.

All those who labored in the arts, hidden in the shadows of their rooms, and those who had yet to be born. It was our creature. The abbot and I were like proud older parents, blessed by an unexpected grace.

It was a sin of vanity to write my name, defining myself as "*architectura et picture celebris*." But I have to be forgiven for that. The lead plate was not destined to be read by anyone once it was laid in place and covered by tons of damp, fertile earth from Monte Giano. I didn't do it to conform, though, or to wearily repeat a custom. I did it for love. The mothers who abandon their children at the xenodochium tuck an amulet, half a coin, a sign of recognition in the swaddling. So that they can find them again someday. I believe that's why I did it. I deluded myself that if things went wrong, if the Villa, my beloved child, were torn from me, I could be found again.

Today I ask myself if the letters etched on that sheet of lead still exist, or if rust has eaten into them, erasing them. I even ask myself if the Villa still exists. Sometimes I fear I merely dreamt it. But I can't go and check any more. I never leave this room. I even eat my meals at my desk—the stairs down to the street are too steep for me.

Last week a priest came to see me. Someone had spoken to him about me, and he wanted to see if I was still alive. Surprised, I received him. It had been ten years since someone paid me a visit. He brought me news of the world, and the confusion he caused took my breath away, as if breaking my heart. I couldn't find any peace until the woman who helps me brought me pen, ink, and sheets of paper. If I am now writing these memories, it is because of him.

The priest had been on the Janiculum Hill, at the church of San Pancrazio, and he was intrigued by the tall building shaped like a ship that rose nearby, on the other side of the street that encircles the villa that Lorenzo Corsini had recently built. The farmers had told him that the Villa was abandoned. The duke who owns it has not set foot in it for years. The gardener, who is paid regularly, cares for the grounds, harvests the grapes, and makes wine. But the loggia is rotting, and damp is crawling up from the foundations, which perhaps, along with the loggia, were built poorly. The stucco ornaments and pilasters are crumbling and broken, and on the interior, saltpeter is blooming in arabesques, cracks are growing wider on the decrepit walls, the rotting ceilings are falling in, the soaked beams are peeling, and plaster is raining onto the paintings and scrolls.

The abbot, whom everyone has always considered an ambitious liar, proved his loyalty, leaving the Villa to the duke. His fidelity may be a form of rectitude. But it is also true that he could not do otherwise. He had never been a free man. Everything he had—that we had—never belonged to him. It was not ours. Yet the Villa would never have existed if not for us. It's strange, presumptuous, audacious—it looks like what we wanted to be, and what, by creating it, we were.

I don't know where you are. But I would like you to see it. Then you would understand that everything is possible.

A SELECTION OF FOREIGN EDITIONS

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UN GIORNO PERFETTO















