

excerpt from the novel

Ternitti

by

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SALT

(pp. 57-70)

“The reef is distinct from modern man.” That’s what Federico was thinking on the white ridge of the Ciolo, the deep, enormous gorge carved into the Adriatic coastline near Leuca. The Ciolo is a narrow gray cliff, set off by pointy spurs and prickly pears.

Federico made his way down the stony path, the rocks dry, sharp and scalding, his feet bare. Federico came from Corsano, the village of *carcagni tusti*, heels rough and coarse as pumice stone, hardened from generation to generation since the salt smuggling days.

Federico climbed down in long, slow strides like a cat in the night. He flew into the blue, choppy sea from twenty meters, disappeared in a socket of white foam, and re-emerged shouting with joy.

Paolo, on the other hand, hugged the edge of the path and picked his way down in clinging steps; he wore rubber aquatic shoes that fit his foot like a glove, so that it was almost like not wearing any. He could feel the hard, fiery rock burning beneath the sweaty soles of the thin, slippery rubber. The Swiss young man would never dive from the natural springboard on which Federico had clambered, but went instead to the bend of the inlet where the sea didn’t crash and where the rocks were smoother. Even children dived in from there. *Only* children. Paolo hit the water with a splash, slapping the surface with his back and making the sea explode.

Paolo and Federico ended up face to face, but they weren’t looking at one another. Their eyes were turned to the sky, or rather, focused high above, toward a point on the eastern face of the Ciolo where lavender bushes swayed. It was from there that Arianna was making her way down. “I’m blind!” she shrieked, waving her hands. Arianna looked like a film star: the gold bathing cap on her head accented her slim figure. She dove from the most crowded rock and swam towards her two friends with vigorous strokes. “That bathing cap!” they yelled, slapping their hands on the water and scaring all the swimmers. They hugged in a close circle and looked at each other: in their eyes they were beautiful, all wet like that, with their awkwardness and their

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intimacy. There amid the rocky projections of the gorge, with the scent of sea salt and lavender, they thought that they had never been so happy.

A woman in red sandals and a muslin sarong was strolling along the walkway of the viaduct, the iron bridge that connected the two sides of the rocky cliff, north and south, that reached out into the Ionian and the Adriatic. The view was stunning from up there and the woman with the sinewy legs, her eyes squinting against the sun, holding her sunglasses on her head with two fingers, stood there trying to make out the minuscule dots in the sea that had become Paolo, Federico and Arianna.

Arianna looked up and saw the woman with the red sandals waving at them amid the small crowd on the viaduct's observation deck.

"Mama!" she shouted, "come in with us, it's like a warm bath!"

Mimì Orlando shook her head, gave a smile that no one could discern from down there, then turned and went back to the farallon's snack bar, sat down on the smooth ledge where some were stretched out, sunbathing, and waited for the three to come back up. Sixteen years had passed since Arianna had been born during a harsh December in Zurich.

A lifetime ago, and yet Mimì was still a young woman, still beautiful; by the fine lines on her forehead and the two deep creases around her mouth, some might think she was a few years older than she was, but the skin of her legs was smooth and firm as an unripe *brunellone*, the wild plums of the Cape. The men lounging in front of the wooden counter at the bar pretended to be gazing at the mass of prickly pears behind the ledge: the flat, green oval pads clung to one another like origami, projecting curious shapes on the white limestone walls. But very few took in the natural spectacle: they were all staring at a statue of muscle and sinew riveted to the wall, they were all watching Mimì posed there, her neck twisted, its angle following the orthogonal lines of the summer sun, her legs crossed and shiny with streaks of sweat, a shadowy vision against the light.

Mimì had returned to Tricase after the two years spent in Switzerland; she lived in a village called Lucugnano, a place of white *iusi*, low stone houses, set among olive groves and wheat. In the center of the village there was a large library and in it the ghost of a poet named Girolamo Comi, one of the many specters with whom Mimì dwelled.

Once a year, on the feast of Sant'Antonio Abate, two weeks before the late-January days of the blackbird, a huge woodpile was raised in the central piazza and a bonfire was lit as a propitious omen for the coming year, to ward off evil spells and gain the good graces of the saints. In the fifteen years since her return from Switzerland, Mimì had often found herself admiring the majestic spectacle with joyful, teary eyes, and it was one of the few moments when she felt content. On winter nights, with the scent of wood-smoke from chimneys and olive branches crackling in the fire, Mimì went to the piazza where the votive pyre burned. Arianna had always accompanied her and each of them, in her own way, was moved by the warmth and by the flames that lit up the village like alien lights.

One night some years ago, nonna Rosanna had been with them as well, when she was still able to be outdoors on winter nights, before the cold had begun to make her bones ache. The bonfire looked like a large red and orange tempera painting, the fiery tongues leaping out at them, and the three Orlando women huddled together, Arianna and Rosanna clinging to Mimì in the middle, moving to a music that only she heard.

"*Ci teni friddu?*" are you cold, Rosanna asked.

“No, mama, *voglio ballare e fare fanoia*”, I want to dance and have a good time. To celebrate the saint.”

In the crackling of the flames Mimì was able to make out sounds: it wasn't just the sound of the wood being burned to ashes that scattered, leaving a gray trail in the dark sky, but the notes on a musical staff that stirred and possessed her. Her alone.

Arianna's ID card bore the same birthplace as a number of her peers and fellow villagers: Zurich. Her skin was pale, her eyes the color of clay, her hair brown, yet her body's tones changed over the summer: her hair turned the color of wheat and her eyes came to resemble the sea-green of certain sunny mornings; her skin, instead, turned to coffee-and-cream.

When she was only ten years old she had begun working at the refreshment stand of friends near the seaside at Tricase Porto, where the small fishing boats went out to catch mullet. She had spent her summers growing up with two children as uprooted as she: Paolo and Federico.

Paolo was skinny and pasty. He was a true Swiss, though every village on the Cape had kids who were called “Swiss”. They were the children of fathers who had remained on the other side of the Alps, had married foreign women and sent their sons to enjoy the good salt air along the Cape's cobalt sea.

Federico was the son of Voipe, the man who years before, in Zurich, had spied on Pati and Mimì as they lay together. He had moved to Corsano with his father and mother, a small village near Tricase known for socks and bicycles. Sturdy and tall for his age, he was dark, always tanned even in winter.

Each day during the summer Federico and Paolo rode their bikes to the kiosk where Arianna worked. They tackled the descents lifting their hands off the handlebars, pitched against the blue horizon, then they came to the great three-pronged breakwater and from there they flew into the sea. When Arianna finished her shift, they went to the viaduct at the Ciolo to go cliff diving.

The rare times that Mimì came, it was a treat for Federico and Paolo. Mimì took them to the bar, bought them ice cream and then supplied the tokens for a game of *calciobalilla*, table-soccer.

That day too all four of them found themselves gathered around the table for a round of foosball.

The rods glittered, the little red and blue plastic men flecked with black spots waited to be manipulated, the green formica field sparkled independently of the sun.

“Arianna, you play with me,” Mimì declared, though in all those years she had always played alongside Paolo.

“But Paolo and Federico together are very strong,” Arianna objected as she shook out the bathing cap she had worn shortly before while diving.

“And I'm stronger than them,” Mimì said confidently.

Paolo and Federico, still wet from diving, stood to one side as they listened to the discussion between mother and daughter about how they should team up. Paolo forced himself to stand up straight and hold his belly in; as a child he had been sent to swim because he was afflicted with winged scapulas, though to him that deformation had never appeared all that noticeable. Often he would look at himself in the mirror and nervously tense and relax the bones

that stuck out of his shoulders. They looked like the cartilage of a baby angel as yet undeveloped, though destined for a brilliant heavenly future.

“Arianna’s mother is so hot” Federico said simply, tapping Paolo’s puny shoulder.

“She’s not hot, she’s beautiful.”

“Still, I’d do her a thousand times over.”

“I prefer Arianna.”

“You don’t get it, *nun capisci nenzi*, Paolo, Mimì is a woman, Arianna is a kid.”

“È *bona pure mo*,” she’s sexy even now.

“I don’t raise them, I want them all grown up. And in my opinion Arianna’s mother has raised quite a few around here.”

But even as Federico talked like that, he was smiling at the daughter, not the mother.

“One twice three shoot” Arianna chanted in a singsong waving her closed fist in front of Federico who was doing the same. A few seconds later they lowered their hands and called out the numbers.

“Three.”

“Two.”

“That makes five. Odds, we go first.”

Mimì inserted a token and pulled the lever. The little white balls came pelting down.

Arianna counted them.

“There are nine.”

“We can’t have a tie!” Mimì exclaimed, confident.

“You’re thinking of a tie, signora!?”

“Call me Mimì, Federico, and keep your eyes open.” A different expression crossed her face, a warning sign that as long as the game lasted she was no longer their friend’s kind and generous mother, but an opponent.

The players took their positions, Mimì carefully chose the first ball, squeezed it between her thumb and forefinger as if it were made of rubber, tapped it on the edge of the table and launched it.

Mimì was holding the midfield and attack rods, as soon as the ball ended up in the opposing attack zone Federico got control of it, aimed, shot, scored.

“Arianna, you’re weak today.”

“I can’t play defense, Mama.”

“Keep the goalie taut and still, and just move the defenders, don’t pull or you’ll leave the door open, let me do it.”

But Mimì’s suggestions didn’t seem to stick.

At 4-1 she became a dictator.

“*Ne scambiamu, figghia mea*, we’re switching positions. *Non si buona oggi*, you’re no good today.” It came out in dialect, and brusquely besides; Arianna was hurt.

Mimì found herself as goalkeeper. Paolo on the other side of the field was also a little weak, all she had to do was overcome Federico’s army of players. An army is right, since there seemed to be dozens of them, that’s how tough, swift and ruthless they were. But Mimì had a secret move. After trying a couple of spins whose only result was to stir up Federico’s midfield, she made a slow, sweeping arc with her own goalie. Almost a pass, but with the ball spinning around on itself. Federico was surprised and let the ball roll by to allow Paolo to play it, but the ball had been spun so hard that Paolo wasn’t even able to graze it. 4-2. After two more spun

parabolas and as many goals, Mimì bent over the black slot in the table where the last white ball was rolling. She picked it up, kissed it and placed it on the edge.

“*A ci segna vince quai, ne sciuchiamo qualcosa?*,” whoever scores wins, shall we bet something?

“A beer, Mimì, will you buy us a beer?” Federico said elbowing Paolo to get his approval though the latter didn’t move.

“And what will you give me, since you haven’t a lira in your pockets?”

“We’ll give you an I.O.U.”

“*Venite a fatigghi da meu per nu giurnu*, come and work for me for a day. I have a bunch of things for you to do.”

Arianna launched the ball with a curving trajectory, Federico caught it in flight and shot with all his might against Mimì’s goalie as she gripped the rod firmly, passed the ball forward to the defender and fired a slow, spun shot. But this time Federico was not taken by surprise and pulling the rod toward him, blocked the ball against the side of the table. But the movement was too abrupt and the ball darted against Arianna’s little men. She let fly a shot that bounced against Paolo’s defenders and the edge of the table, two, three, four times, over and over again, and the ball shot off like a bullet.

Paolo, Federico, Arianna and Mimì turned their heads in unison to follow the flight of the little white ball and saw it zoom off toward the cliff, landing in the bushes.

After barely a moment, Federico’s figure appeared in the scene, leaping onto the wall. He gleamed like bronze against the mid-afternoon summer sun. Arianna ran after him yelling that she had seen where it landed, but Federico had seen it too.

Federico scampered among the rocks, barefoot. “It’s over there!” Arianna said pointing to one of the many clumps of fig trees. Federico turned toward it, narrowing his eyes until the orbits became two dark ellipses.

“There are snakes around here.”

“Snakes, at the seaside? What are you talking about?”

“Arianna, let’s draw to see who goes.”

“Why, are you scared, Federico?”

“I’m not scared.”

“So then go and see if you find anything.”

Federico, goaded by pride, walked over to the clump of fig trees and with the tip of his toe moved aside the undergrowth. There was no sign of the little ball. He turned to Arianna and met her gaze: those brown eyes that in summer, with the sun, became as pale as aquamarine. Her angular face was exactly like Mimì’s, her body small and lean; she stood with her hands on her hips in a pose midway between reproach and expectation. A fierce desire to kiss her swelled in Federico’s blood.

Paolo looked out towards the sea at an indefinite point on the horizon, as if glimpsing a boat in that expanse, but the gesture was simply shyness. Mimì watched him, curious, pouting a little to get his attention.

“Eat, Paolo, are you trying to disappear?”

“All right, signora...”

“Mimì.”

“Yes, Mimì, I’m sorry, *mi scusi*.”

“*Scusa*, not *scusi*, don’t be formal.” And she gave him a caress on the side bruised by Federico’s nudging.

Federico did not kiss Arianna.

He didn’t even try to. He did not find the little ball. On the other hand, he realized something. Arianna must always be there. At that moment, talking a blue streak in an attempt to divert her, to cover his timidity, just then, when he had begun to see her in a new light – a girl to court and not just a diving companion or someone to play games with – at the very moment when he was stirring up seditious feelings, shouts rose up.

Dozens of shadows stood up from the rocky projections in the sea, their hands shading their eyes as they scanned the horizon. In the sea two boats, as yet undetermined, were struggling as they made their way through the waves. They weren’t normal fishing boats, but two crowded vessels; they looked like a sculpture by Arcimboldo, but instead of bunches of fruit, clusters of people hung from the old crafts. After an initial crescendo, the shouting on the rocks had subsided; it was as if all activity, all talk, the sounds of the wind among the waves and seagrasses were suspended. Arianna and Federico crouched in a cleft in the stony coral, beside one another.

“Heck, who are these people?”

“Who knows, Albanians?”

Mimì Orlando had returned to the ledge from which she had seen her daughter swim and now, with the sun less hot and the shadows lengthened, she awaited the landing of the boats at the mercy of the sea.

For months now dozens of them kept arriving, carrying men, women and children. It was inevitable that Mimì should recall her trip of almost two decades ago, the distrust of the Baresi and those suspected of cholera, the Sunday afternoons when the Swiss disappeared to make room for them, the “*cingoli*” as the Swiss called them, with their light-hearted music and Mincuccio’s harmonicas. She remembered the train to Switzerland gradually reducing its speed as it entered the stations, the screech of brakes rising until it was unbearable, and, when it entered the Zurich station, the clanging shrieks reaching their culmination, then suddenly dropping to a whoosh.

Every night men and women in wet clothes knocked at the doors of people living in the typical stone *pajare* near the Ciolo, the Serra and Tricase Porto, seeking help and comfort. Mimì often thought about what she would do if wet men with sea salt in their hair were to show up at her house in Lucugnano in the middle of the night.

Usually the boats appeared in the sea late at night: alongside the lights of the fishing vessels, small red lights like those signaling aircraft in flight, were the electric eyes of the rubber dinghies and small boats about twenty meters from shore, dropping the immigrants off in the dark waters. In recent months they had begun unloading them further and further out, or near the rocky reef where it was harder for the port authorities to spot them.

That landing too followed standard procedure: the boats began to empty quickly a few meters from shore, the sea churning with white foam as if some had been shoved in. Right away the boats went back to being what they really were, motorboats not flatboats. Two men at the helm made a u-turn among the heads floating in the sea, tugged at a dark strap hanging from the multicolored pilothouse, a blast was heard, and they sped off, vanishing in the blue-green mist of the horizon.

In front of the kiosk the barista, a broad man with just a hint of a white mustache on his red face, sat down on the ledge beside Mimì.

“That isn’t right. You don’t do that”, she said to herself, thinking she wouldn’t be heard.

“Signora, I once took some of them in, be careful, they even carried off the faucets from my sink.”

“Thank you for the information, it might come in handy.”

“You’re welcome.”

“If a couple of these voyagers should knock on my door some night, I’ll unscrew the bathroom faucets for safekeeping before opening up.”

“If you have time to do it ...”

“Sure, I’ll let the unexpected guests wait a little, but they’ll find the house all ready for them.”

“Don’t forget now, even the soap, the toilet seat cover, the towel rack. These people are like locusts.”

“Right. Of course, I wouldn’t know where to hide them.”

“Listen, don’t keep any money in the house, otherwise you’re offering them a gift.”

“So why did you take them in then?”

“Because I’m a Catholic.”

“Kind of you.”

“And how did they repay me? They cleaned out the house.”

“How come they came to you in particular?”

“Because I have a house here. Also because a fellow who’s been coming to this bar since he was running around on a tricycle in short pants gave me two million liras to put them up.”

“An act of Christian charity.”

“Yes, he’s really a good Christian.”

“Not as good as you, who lost all your valuable faucets and fixtures.”

“Not valuable, no, but it gets my goat.”

“Signor...”

“Giuseppe.”

“Ok, Giuseppe.”

“You may address me informally, signora.”

“Thank you, no, I’m still a girl.”

“But you have a grown daughter.”

“True, but I use the formal ‘you’ with people who are older than me and seem to know so much more than I do.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. You gave me a precious suggestion.”

“About the money?”

“That too, but especially about the faucets. I’m going to remove them.”

Paolo watched in silence. Mimì had not for a moment lost her wry smile of condescension. Paolo hadn’t understood all the nuances of the conversation, but he was fascinated by it. There was something more to Mimì’s words: as the barista responded she sought Paolo’s eyes and smiled sardonically.

Then the sea began crashing, and the voices of the people on the rocks urged the swimmers to shore. A couple of those in the water couldn't seem to make it; from their screams they appeared to be girls or children.

No one seemed to notice them amid the commotion of surf and shouting, their screams drowned by the confusion. Each year Our Lady of the Assumption took someone with her on the day of Ferragosto, August 15; on that day tradition advised staying away from the sea. But Ferragosto was still far off. Arianna and Federico were well aware of it, and after exchanging a quick look they dove off the furthest point. It was a long, powerful flight, maybe a dozen meters: they plunged straight down, feet together, squeezing their noses, then they surfaced and began stroking furiously toward two little circles of ivory foam. By now a number of swimmers had reached the shore except for the two waving desperately. Federico was swift and headed for the one who seemed to be in the greatest difficulty, who was also the one closest to shore. Arianna reached the other one, and when she got there she was surprised to find a child, a little boy who was trying to float on his back, as he had perhaps been taught during the crossing, only he couldn't do it. Federico, meanwhile, was struggling with a woman, perhaps the boy's mother, and as he grabbed her around the neck he saw the mountains and landscape configurations disappear, everything disappeared, and he had to rely on his ears, follow the sounds and swim toward the noises, the voices that were his salvation. Thrashing about with the woman, he ended up sinking beneath the surf. Tiny waves lapped at his eyes, the sea opened up and the marine forest swayed underwater: pink trees, velvety filiform anemones and orange algae laden with berries. Struggling to keep his eyes open, Federico could also see stones on the seabed: one of them moved and under it a black tentacle gleamed. A blue creature passed between his legs and disappeared.

When he managed to make it to shore he felt his chest bursting. He felt like throwing up, his knees gave way, the muscles of his thighs ached, but his mind raced to Arianna, and when he didn't see her and heard only strange voices around him, many of them speaking the unfamiliar words of a distant language, it was then that, despite his aching body, he felt very close to despair. With the roar of the sea around him and the cries of the girl he had saved – she was being slapped, her lungs filled with air by artificial resuscitation – he realized that he could not live without Arianna, if he lost Arianna he would lose his mind. Federico turned toward the sea and saw a girl holding a little boy by the hand, walking along as if they were coming from a normal swim. The stony shoreline biting into the sea filled with people who surrounded the girl and the little boy. It was Arianna and she didn't even seem tired; she ran a hand into her wet hair then squeezed it, wringing it out.

Federico, though his legs felt heavy as lead, ran toward her. Breathing as deeply as he could, through his mouth and nose, he kissed her full on the lips.