From Chapter 1

Riposto

When I was four or five I wanted to be ugly, and got very angry when people said I was pretty.

"I'm ugly, *brutta*, say that I'm ugly."

But no one listened to me.

"*Che bella bambina*, what a pretty little girl," they all said. And inevitably, they added: "*Che peccato!* What a shame!"

There was such sorrow in their voices, such an anguished look on their faces... I didn't want my being pretty to make people sad. Better to be ugly, I thought.

I especially didn't want my being pretty to make my mother sad. As soon as she heard those words, even if she had been laughing a minute before, my mother's eyes filled with tears and her face turned into a mask of agony. At those times, my mother looked just like the *Addolorata*.

The *Addolorata*, the "sorrowful woman," was the name of a statue in the church across the street from where we lived, in the little town of Riposto in Sicily. It was a statue of Mary holding the dead Christ, a Sicilian version of Michelangelo's Pietà. The mother dressed in gold-embroidered purple silk, grief carved deeply into her painted face, on her lap her dead son, red-stained slender limbs draped in lifeless abandonment.

People seemed as mournful when they looked at my mother holding me as they were when looking at the *Addolorata* holding her dead son. Sometimes I thought my mother and the *Addolorata* were one and the same. They even had the same name: Maria.

I have early memories of being on my mother's lap, as she sat outside with the town women, while my father was at work. We sat in the afternoon sun in the winter months, and in the summer we sat in the shade.

My mother told the women the story of when I was born. The midwife, *mammana* in Sicilian, was impressed that such a slight woman as my mother could give birth to such a big baby as me. She left my mother bleeding on the bed, with my grandmother tending to her for a few minutes, and rushed with me in her arms to the bakery around the corner to weigh me on the bread scale. Not even washed yet, crying loudly because my lungs were so vigorous, wrapped

only in a sheet, for it was very warm on the afternoon of May sixteenth of ‘48. Over four kilos I weighed, almost 9 pounds.

And I was growing so healthy and strong, my mother told the women, already talking, at 16 months, and walking on my own, and I was never sick, never a fever until... Until that fateful night, when *Crudele Poliomielite*, cruel poliomyelitis, invaded our happy home and stole me from my family.

I imagined *Crudele Poliomielite* as an ugly monster with a weird name, who actually appeared out of the darkness to grab me and steal me away. But how could I’ve been stolen when I was still there in my mother's arms? Could it be what got stolen was the healthy baby she’d given birth to? And what was left was a changeling, me? It took a while before I understood she was talking about my getting sick. Only then could I get over the secret fear that I might not be my parents' real daughter.

My father's name was Giovanni. He was always at work. He built houses – that was his *mestiere*, his trade. He was a master builder, *mastru.* Young men worked for him and he taught them how to mix cement and build walls with bricks.

Even when he was home, my father worked, fixing anything that needed fixing, covering up cracks with plaster, changing the color of the walls to make our house more beautiful.

I adored my father. To me, he was the smartest, strongest, most handsome man in the world. I loved it when my father picked me up and carried me in his work clothes all smeared with cement. My mother complained about me getting dirty. But I liked it. And as my father held me, I felt the muscles in his chest and arms.

“Muscles as hard as his heart is soft,” my mother said.

I liked the way my father smelled – of cement, sweat and cigarette smoke. I wrapped my arms tightly around his neck and clung to him. My father kissed me and called me *gioia*, joy.

Sometimes my father carried me on his shoulders. I laughed and grabbed on to his head to keep my balance.

“I’m falling, *papà*!”

My father laughed too and, his strong arms raised, wrapped his hands around my waist. His hands were so big they almost entirely encircled me.

"*Non aver paura, gioia!* Don't be afraid!”

But I wasn't afraid. I felt I was on top of the world. He moved his shoulders up and down in a rhythmic motion mimicking the galloping of a horse.

"Where does my princess want to go? Your wish is my command!"

I laughed and laughed.

Whenever my mother told the town women the story of my getting polio, they looked up from their knitting and sewing, and murmured "c*he peccato!*" I leaned against my mother's chest, hiding my face in the folds of her lace-trimmed blouse, and smelled the lavender she rubbed on herself when she washed.

Wasn't her story proof that my mother was blameless? She had made me big and healthy and strong. What happened to me was not her fault. But those words, "c*he peccato,*" were not just an expression of regret and sympathy; they carried the connotation of guilt. P*eccato* means "sin" in Italian. What sin could my mother have committed to deserve such punishment? And if not my mother's, then whose sin was it that caused me to be the way I was, *ciunca*, crippled?

Or was it my fate to be a cripple? Fate, destiny. *Destino*. That word was used incessantly in Riposto. Everything happened because of destiny. Everyone had his or her destiny. All Sicilians knew they could not escape their destinies.

"*Che destino!*" the women muttered after my mother finished telling her story, trying with that word to exonerate her and comfort her. "*Che croce!* What a cross you have to bear," they said, quickly moving their right hand down from their head to their chest and then from shoulder to shoulder, making the sign of the cross.

I understood I was the cross, though I didn't quite understand how or why. Was it that my mother had to carry me, since I couldn't walk, like Christ carried the cross in the pictures around the church? Was I such a burden for her, was I growing that heavy?

My mother rarely complained. She was resigned to her destiny. She knew she had to atone for the sin of having a crippled daughter. She accepted her suffering like a good Sicilian woman. After all, in Sicily all women suffered. They believed a woman's destiny was to suffer, to atone for the sin of being a woman.

Sometimes, as I sat on my mother's lap, the women talked about their sufferings: the curse of menstruation, the toil and the ravages to the body of pregnancy and childbirth, the

exhaustion of raising children, the rigors of poverty... And many of them suffered their husbands – their brutishness, maybe even their beatings.

My father never beat my mother, he hugged and kissed her. And he worked hard all the time so we could have all we needed. But because of me, my mother's suffering was greater than that of all the other women. Carrying the cross of a crippled child, my mother was the epitome of suffering womanhood. She was indeed the living *Addolorata*.

I was glad when my mother finally took leave of the women, and got up from the rush-seat wooden chair someone had brought out for her. Since she had to carry me, my mother couldn't bring her own chair out of our house. I hoped none of the women decided to hug me. But usually at least one of them did.

"*Pietà!*" the woman whispered, almost to herself, taking me from my mother's arms to hold me tight against her ample bosom.

Che peccato, che destino, che croce, all the women continued to murmur as my mother walked away with me in her arms.

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After I turned five, my mother carried me every morning across the street to the convent in back of the Church of the *Addolorata,* where the nuns ran their elementary school. At the door, she handed me over to a nun who carried me into the classroom and put me in my seat, right in the front row.

At first, the nuns were scary in their long black habits, but I got used to them. They smelled of incense and flowers. In the afternoon, they carried me around the convent. I was passed from one nun's arms to another's. They carried me into the church, bending one knee and telling me to cross myself as they passed the altar with the tall crucifix; to the vestry where baby Jesus, a beautiful doll, slept in a basket covered in lace; and out to the garden, where the palm trees were so high that, no matter how far back I tilted my head, I couldn't see the tops, and the sparrows flew in circles and sang.

I loved those little birds that always sounded so happy. They woke me up every morning with their singing.

Sister Teresina, the youngest and my favorite, even carried me into the huge kitchen where they had the biggest pots and pans I'd ever seen. Sister Prisca, the oldest, stirred the *minestrone* in a blackened iron pot with a giant wooden spoon.

But sometimes, while they carried me, some of the nuns started holding me tighter and tighter against their chests, kissed my head and whispered, "*Pietà, pietà!"* That scared me. I felt I was suffocating. Out of fear, I'd start weeping. Thinking they were comforting me, the nuns held me even tighter and rocked me like a baby – which I hated.

Every Sunday, my mother carried me into the church. My father never went with us. Before Mass started, she kneeled with me in her arms in front of the *Addolorata* and lit a candle. I couldn't stand to look at the *Addolorata*'s face, which was the same as my mother's, so beautiful but so sad. I kissed my mother trying to make her smile, but she never smiled in church. I wrapped my arm around her neck, bent my head down pressing my forehead against her shoulder, and kept my eyes shut. But though I couldn't see anything, I was painfully aware of the gazes of the whole congregation.

The nuns did their best to instill in me the sense of guilt and shame, and to teach me to embrace my own destiny of suffering.

"Offer your suffering to the Lord!" they always said to me. I couldn't understand why the Lord wanted my suffering, and what he would do with it. One day, when Sister Angelica started her "offer your suffering" routine, I rebelled.

"But I want to be happy!"

She started stroking me and kissing me.

"Oh, my poor darling, how could you be happy? *Pietà!* You can never be happy!"

I got furious. "I can so be happy!" I yelled, hitting with my small fists the nun's chest, as I struggled to free myself from her ominous embrace.

But how could I expect to be happy when I didn't know what awaited me? How much longer could I be carried? What would happen to me when I grew up? What would my destiny be?

In Riposto, every girl learned, at an early age, that "a woman's destiny" was to get married and have children. Unless, of course, she was too ugly to find a man who would marry her. Then, she could become a nun or, horror of horrors, end up a *zitella*, an old maid.

At an early age I learned getting married and having children was not my destiny. The message came across quite clear though never loud; it came in hushed tones and sighs. Since I was not like other girls, I couldn't grow up to be like other women.

The other girls, who came to our house to play with me once in a while, didn't bother using hushed tones. They played with my dolls, dressing and undressing them. They unbuttoned their own shirts and held the dolls' heads against their pink nipples, like they had seen nursing women do. I tried to do the same.

"No," one of the older girls objected, "my mother says you shouldn't play with dolls. You should give us your dolls because we need to practice. You're never going to get married and have children. You're crippled, *ciunca*."

The others chimed in. How could I argue against them?

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My father had been taking me to doctors and hospitals since I was quite small. We had been to Catania, Messina, Rome and Bologna. Rome and Bologna were far. It took many hours for the train to get there, crossing the straight on a ferry and going through many dark tunnels.

In Rome, my parents and I stayed with cousins who lived there. A few times, my father carried me to the Trevi fountain so I could throw in a coin. I liked being in Rome, though I was always nervous knowing that, without a doubt, I would be taken to a doctor.

Doctors scared me, because they always hurt me. One doctor in Messina gave me shock treatments to regenerate the nerves in my spine. The shocks went through my body like a thousand snakes on fire burning and biting me inside, making me shake all over and pee on the treatment table. I was already big enough to feel embarrassed about peeing. After we got home, for weeks my mother squeezed aloe leaves on the blisters that formed on my back.

In Rome, the doctors made braces for me, but I never learned to walk with them. My mother put them on me, lacing them, starting at my feet and going all the way up my thighs.

Then, holding me under my arms, she stood me up. I learned to keep my balance by holding tightly onto my mother's hand.

“Look how tall you are,” she exclaimed, but I didn't care.

“They hurt my legs, *mamma*.”

When I got those braces my mother, in order to hide them, made me a pair of pants. I must have been the only little girl in Sicily who wore pants. The other children laughed at me, but I rather liked wearing pants. The best thing about the braces was that, when she took them off, my mother always massaged my legs. The doctor in Catania told her massage was the best therapy. I loved to feel my mother’s cool hands moving up and down my thighs and shins. Then she tickled my feet and made me laugh.

The braces made me too heavy for my mother. She put them on me less and less frequently, and when I grew out of them, I didn't get new ones. But even when I stopped using the braces, she had me wear pants.

“This way people can't see your legs.”

My mother’s words forced me to pay closer attention to my legs. I noticed they weren’t growing as fast as the rest of my body. They seemed smaller and thinner than the legs of other girls my age. In place of calf muscles I had only soft flesh. My mother thought it best to keep my legs hidden, because she was ashamed of them. So I learned to be ashamed of them too.

If I had to choose between going to doctors or being taken by one of my grandmothers and my aunts to healers and witches, I'd choose the witches. Oh, they scared me, but it was an exciting kind of scared. All they did was say funny words, rub my legs with weird smelling herbs, or have me drink something bitter. They didn’t hurt me like the doctors.

I never thought they could make me walk, but I secretly wished they would teach me how to fly. Some people swore they’d seen the witches flying in a circle holding on to each other’s hands in the dark of night! My grandmother said that wasn’t true. But I liked picturing the circle of flying witches. What a great game it seemed. Even better than *girotondo,* ring around the rosie, which all the girls loved and the boys snubbed. Once in a while, I played *girotondo*. My mother sat me in a chair in the middle of the circle and I sang along, watching the other girls go around me.

Whether I was taken to doctors or witches, it was clear to me that I was no good the way I was, *ciunca*. I needed to be fixed. I wished my father could fix me himself, like he fixed

everything else. The people that loved me – my parents, my grandparents, all my relatives – none of them wanted me to be the way I was. Only the nuns thought I should accept my destiny and offer my suffering to the Lord. But they agreed such a destiny was a cruel one.

My father worked hard and saved money so he could take me to the best hospitals and the best doctors. Every time we went to a new doctor, his hope was renewed, only to turn afterward into disappointment.

"Italian doctors are too ignorant," he told me, when we came home from yet another trip to Rome. "They don't do research. They'll never find a cure."

Then my father smiled his big bright smile to show me he was not defeated. A new plan had been germinating in his mind. We would leave this backward town and this country where injustice and ignorance ruled. We would go to America.

In America, doctors were different. They were brilliant, and they were always doing research with money that was collected on television. "In America," my father told me, "every house has a television set, and when they show children like you, people send money to find a cure."

The American doctors, my father was sure, could accomplish what ignorant people in Riposto would call miracles. There was even a president in America who was cured of polio.

"*In America, guarisci*, you'll be cured," my father promised. "*In America, cammini*, you'll walk."

I always believed everything my father said. I wasn't sure how far America was, or how we'd get there. But if that's where my father wanted to take me, that's where I'd go.

As the years passed I started to worry because sometimes my father's plans didn't work out – the money he expected to get for building a house never came, or the *mafiosi* put their dirty hands in his business and caused him all kinds of trouble. What if we never made it to America? What if I never got cured?

As I got bigger and heavier, my mother had difficulty carrying me, and she complained about her back hurting. Sometimes an uncle or an older cousin carried me. Once in a while a big neighborhood boy offered to carry me. At first, I was happy, especially when he took me on the

main street. But then I started not liking it. He squeezed me too tight and tickled me in places where I didn't want to be touched.

I didn't mention it to my mother, because I didn't want her to get sad. I wanted her to laugh. She always laughed when my father was home. And when she outran my grandmother and got her pick of the fruit my grandfather brought. But sometimes she laughed when it was just the two of us. She laughed when the neighbor's cat carried her kittens one by one by the scruff of their necks to our house, and laughed, rather than getting angry, when I knocked over the ink bottle on the table while doing my homework. She struggled to carry me up the steps to the roof terrace, complaining about my being heavy and her aching back, then once we made it all the way up, she pretended to drop me, laid me down on the cement floor and lay beside me, both of us laughing wildly. At those times my mother didn't look like the *Addolorata*. She called me *gioia*. I kissed her flushed face, and wondered how I could be both her cross and her joy.

I knew my mother worried about what would become of me as I grew up. Sometimes she said: “I should have given you a sister who could help take care of you.”

“Oh, yes, I want a sister! Can you give me a sister, please?” And I imagined that sister, how she would play with me all the time. But then my mother got sad and said it was too late; she couldn't raise another child when she had to take care of me.

I heard there were disabled people living in the town, but I never saw them. The women talked about a man who had fallen off a scaffold, while working in Catania on a tall building, and was left paralyzed. A good looking man he was, god should have taken him, *poviru ciuncu*, the women said. His unmarried sister sacrificed her youth to take care of him.

My grandmother talked about a friend of hers who took care of her husband who had a stroke and couldn’t walk anymore. Her daughter helped out when she could. I understood crippled grownups had to have wives, sisters or daughters to take care of them, and had to stay home all the time, because they were too heavy to be carried.

I didn’t know any disabled children. I often asked my mother if there were others like me. Ever since I could remember, my mother always told me that, yes, there was a girl just like me who lived in another town. Maybe she made her up, so I wouldn’t feel I was the only crippled girl in the world. I thought of that girl as a lost sister. I fantasized that I would one day find her, and we would talk and laugh together, and hug, and play *girotondo*.