

which later on had made dancing seem to her frivolous and reprehensible; in short, my uncle pleaded so well that the prior of San Juan Capistrano grew perplexed. While gently moving the branch of a pepper tree, he seemed to be considering the extraordinary destiny of my aunt, born Thérésina Veilleux, and even the coldness there had been all through that life! . . .

Then he hinted that perhaps . . . perhaps they might dig a grave above another very ancient one; there were some dating back to Spanish days, two hundred years before - maybe even longer - thus, the prior was saying, the family of this dead person, most likely extinct, could not take offense, or the dead person either, reduced as he was to a few dry bits of bone. . . . He himself, the prior, in his white robes, seemed to imagine very well that for this dead Manitoba woman there could exist no better burial than within these walls so long baked by the sun.

And this is why, over the grave of my aunt Thérésina Veilleux, all day long the birds sing.

L'Italienne

AT THE TIME, we had on top of our Bell piano, amidst photographs of Georgianna, of Gervais as an academy student, of myself, and I know not what other pictures, but long since in the position of honor, a sort of blue pitcher with two handles and a long neck - a flower vase, I imagine, but in which we no longer put anything, to spare the poor relic, which was badly battered. Its varnish was scaling; the chipped top of the vase revealed the white, friable material - probably plaster - of which it was made. I loathed it and dusted it without giving it much heed; one day I chipped it even more by knocking it over on the piano. Maman came rushing to see what had happened. She looked at me almost angrily.

"Butter fingers!" she cried. "Can't you be careful of my Milan jug?"

I was about to answer when I realized that Maman's anger, assuredly like many people's, was no more than wearisome regret, the accumulation of many hurts in her heart. And then I recalled how the Milan jug had come into our home. . . .

In those days I was still a very small girl; it was before Alicia's death; it must even have been before Odette said goodbye to the world. Every month my father would proudly bring us what we needed to live . . . and to indulge a few notions as well. I think that we were very happy, since we had only the most ordinary worries: thus, would the fine empty fields west of our house remain so? One day or another should we not see rising there some wretched structure which would cut off our view and shut out our lovely early sunlight? Up until then it invaded unhindered all our windows on that side, and there were several of them that faced east; in those days care was taken to face the windows of a house toward the warmest sun of the day. Yes, I believe this was then our most serious worry: would we lose our sunshine!

But for the time being few people were tempted to come live in our section; it had its back toward town; its face, as it were, turned toward the fields . . . and those empty fields near

us remained open to our uses. Papa had obtained from the city hall permission to make a vegetable garden there. Farther on there was a space to play at Sioux Indians and ambushes; and beyond there was even more room, which Monsieur Gauthier, our neighbor to the east and a marble worker, employed for his own purposes: for months on end he would leave lying there cruciform stones, which the wild hay would finally half conceal, or at times cherubs and monuments of Manitoba stone, the extraordinarily pure white Tyndale stone. In sum, to the east of us there was a stretch of tilled soil, then an area of brush where stood our small children's tents made of burlap bags, and, a trifle farther, a gentle cemetery without any dead. A few of the headstones, unfinished or perhaps spoiled by Monsieur Gauthier, remained there indefinitely, their epitaphs hanging in suspense: To the pious memory of . . . good wife . . . good mother. . . . On some of them you could still decipher, upon the darkened face of the stone: Deceased at the age of twenty-two years, three months, fourteen days. Was it not odd? In those times they calculated to within a single day the span of human life!

But one evening Papa came home full of excitement, bringing us overwhelming news. "Just guess," said he gloomily to my mother.

Maman could not guess.

"The lot next to us is sold," said Papa.

And, what was worse, someone was going to build a house there. The buyer, Papa said, was an Italian, newly come to this country.

"An Italian!" cried Maman. "As long as he's no Sicilian bandit!"

The very next day, scarcely giving us time to get used to the catastrophe, men came to dig a cellar in this soil next to ours and, for our taste, too close to our house. Still, the cellar's dimensions were restrained; the house that was to rise there perhaps would not greatly cut off our sun.

We were not yet entirely reassured when there stepped off the tram linking us to Winnipeg a broad, tall man with dead-black hair, his eyes likewise black and shining, sporting a black mustache with twisted ends, a large man in blue work clothes and a broad straw hat, who came to begin building all by himself the house next door. Lumber had been delivered; in a twinkling the man with the mustache had laid out a dozen planks and begun nailing them together, meanwhile striking up

a song in Italian; Maman said it must be something from an opera. During a pause in the singing, Maman spoke to him from our porch; she learned that his name was Giuseppe Sariano, that he was a carpenter by trade, and that this time he was working as his own boss; yes, it was his own home he was putting up. Then we heard him singing louder than ever.

Thereupon Maman asserted that he seemed a fine man, and she persuaded my father to "sound out" the Italian.

"Above all, try to discover," Maman urged him, "whether he intends to build as high as we."

My father talked for quite a time with the Italian, who could not reply to the least question without jumping from one foot to the other, turning now east, now west, and agitating his entire body. Papa came back, and by his pace we could see that the news was good. And in fact, Papa was laughing to himself; he did not laugh much in his life, but that day his shoulders shook a little as he hastened to bring back to us what the Italian had said.

At first, Papa having asked him, "Do you intend to build a large house? . . ." the Italian had jumped up and down and announced: "Si . . . si . . . very fine . . . very big house!" . . . "As large as mine?" The Italian had looked appalled. "Oh no! Oh, la, la! Not a castle; I have a very small wife, not very strong, tiny, tiny. She would be lost in your *château*. . . . And then my small wife would die keeping up, cleaning so large a place. But all the same I'm building big!" Overjoyed at Papa's interest, the Italian had pulled out of his pocket the design he himself had made for his home.

Recollecting it, Papa was again seized by a gentle gaiety.

"Have you any idea," he asked Maman, "how big this house will be? . . . About the size of our kitchen, as nearly as I could judge. . . . No, come to think of it, I imagine one could fit two of them into our kitchen. . . ."

"Probably in Italy," Maman remarked, "that would pass for a large house."

It turned out in fact to be a humble and pleasant wooden bungalow, without any upper floor, and we enjoyed watching it take shape, since it would never hide from us our view or our sunlight.

Was it then, or a little later, and because he did us no harm, that all of us together took to liking the Italian?

In any case, from the very first day, and on all the days that followed, I spent almost all my time watching him work,

through a chink in our board fence; and at home no one seemed annoyed at my almost incessant reports. Indeed, up to that point our sympathy for this man was based upon very little: he was erecting a small house, he had a tiny, tiny wife who soon would be leaving Milan and would arrive when the house was completed; moreover, he sang operas. Papa, however, must have thought that this was sufficient to justify friendship, for suddenly he informed Maman: "Suppose I gave him the plum tree!"

This was a fine small tree the roots of which were in our land, but which bore its branches, its fruit, and all its upper trunk on the other side of our fence and hence over the Italian's property. And Papa did as he had said he would: he went in person to present the tree to the Italian.

On the porch Maman waited to learn how the Italian would receive the gift. And Papa reported that the Italian must be sentimental after the Italian fashion; the moment he knew the tree was his, he had fingered it, stroked its bark; he had even kissed it, saying, "I am owner of a tree! No sooner do I set foot in Canada, you may say, than I get a tree - full grown and bearing fruit! Heaven is with Giuseppe Sariano." That was the way with Italians, said Papa; they bubbled over for no good reason; they overdid things.

Did this effervescence of our neighbor win us completely? Did it set the example? Maman began to wonder whether he had brought anything to eat with him, whether it would not be appropriate to send him some hot soup. . . . I would go flatten myself against the hole in the fence; then I would come back to inform that others that the Italian had his food in a small tin box, that at this very moment, his back against our wooden fence, he was eating bread and raw onions and drinking a red liquid straight from a bottle. Once I had passed on the news, I returned to keep an eye on our man. As far as I could make out, he was rather badly shaved; not only his beard and his skin were dark, but also the tiny hairs he had in his ears and nostrils. For my inspection I had a quite adequate hole in one of the boards; as for him, I don't think he was able to see me - at most my eye glued to this opening in the fence. Right now he was asleep, stretched out on the grass, his straw hat over his nose. From the edges of his lips, shaped in something like a pout, slight sounds emerged. A bit of straw must have been tickling him somewhere; from time to time he made an effort to turn over, but he was too sound asleep to succeed, and each time

he fell back with his belly upmost. I wondered what I might do to increase the well-being of so nice a man from Italy. Papa did not seem to me to have been generous enough, for, after all, the plum tree did not have to be given; it was already there, leaning over the Italian's land. I was determined to offer far more. And then I thought of Papa's small strawberry bed.

Few people in our city, and most likely in all Manitoba, had succeeded in growing any as plump or as sweet. Yet alas! Papa knew each of his strawberries individually: two fine ones, red all over and almost at the point of perfection, another still white on the face away from the sun, five or six more not nearly ready to eat. There was no way to filch any of them without his noticing it. Not that Papa was stingy with his strawberries. He merely liked to reserve for himself the pleasure of one fine day bringing us a small cup filled with them, which he would place on the table, remarking with false modesty, "There are really not enough of them to be worthwhile, just sufficient to give you a taste!"

So that day, that I, also, might give pleasure, I shattered discipline. I went and chose the two large strawberries which were at their best, and then for good measure - because two would not do without a third! - I plucked the fruit that was a trifle white on one side. It was munificent! Three strawberries for one single person! Never had I purloined more than one at a time for myself. But our Italian was so large a man! I moved toward him, my three strawberries in the fold of my turned-up dress.

He was still asleep, and his open mouth emitted blasts of air which bent the hair overhanging his forehead. I put one berry in his mouth, then another, whereupon his Adam's apple gave an alarming jerk; perhaps he was beginning to taste the fruit, or else he had almost choked. Be this as it may, since his mouth remained open, I hastily shoved into it the third berry. This, however, was the least ripe; I should certainly have begun with it and finished with the best.

The Italian awakened completely. He yawned a little, beating the air with his arms. I was crouching in the grass, examining him from close by. When he opened his eyes, he saw mine watching him. At the same instant he surely must have tasted the last strawberry I had just slipped into his mouth. The other two, sadly enough, must have gone straight down; but this one he seemed to recognize for what it was. He sat up in the grass, laughing and stretching his arms a little. And he said, as though

it were my name, "Strawberry! Little Strawberry! Charming little Strawberry!"

I instantly liked being called Strawberry, perhaps because I so little resembled one, with my ever-drawn, pale small face, the circles round my eyes, my barked knees. Petite Misère suited me better. But how I liked this other name, as though I were good to eat! Then I asked the Italian, "Are you a Sicilian bandit?"

"Banditro!"

He roared with laughter; his belly - broad and full - shook. Whereupon, in the grass, he drew me into his arms - Papa was right in saying that Italians have a sentimental nature - and he told me that his poor, tiny wife, always ailing, could not have children, that perhaps he would never have a little daughter. . . . And with this he began to kiss me.

I did not know exactly how to confess to the theft of the three strawberries; I returned home rather sheepish and began by admitting, "The Italian kissed me."

Papa and Maman exchanged one of those looks; I mean by "one of those looks" the sort that seem to be signals between grownups. Papa got up, slightly clenching his fists.

"What's that you say?" Maman asked me.

Papa grumbled, "One's always in a hurry to make friends with foreigners!"

Then Maman spoke to me briefly about men: she told me that little girls should not let themselves be kissed by them, except on very special occasions - some extraordinary joy or emotion.

I told her that that was exactly what it had been - a fit of emotion.

All the same, they repeated that I must watch my step. I asked myself what step. The next day, though, the Italian told Papa the tale of the three strawberries; Papa in his turn told my mother, who repeated it to the neighbors . . . and steps no longer needed watching, which suited me. I have always liked to be close to someone who is at work; even as a very small child I preferred to watch someone working rather than play myself, and how fast and well the Italian worked. In short order the frame of the little bungalow was up. But we still chatted on, the Italian and I, he from above, his legs hanging down, nails clamped in the corner of his mouth; I from below, my head lifted toward the sun, and shading my eyes with my hand. And sometimes up there the Italian would commence a great

"a-a-a-a" of song - the beginning of one of his opera arias. Maman would come out on our porch the better to hear the singing. She said of the Italian, "His heart is on his sleeve." She would make a trumpet of her hands, so that her voice might carry to our neighbor, and she would ask through this trumpet, "Have you any more news of Madame Sarizano?" The Italian would tumble down, search his pockets, extract, all rumbled up, the last letter from Italy. He would read it to Maman: "I shall soon take to the seas, once more to meet my Giuseppe; I count the days, the hours. . . . Give my greetings to those good Canadian neighbors of whom you speak in your last letter. . . . to the little Strawberry. . . ."

Having read the letter, Giuseppe would clamber back again to his hammering, making up for lost time.

"Have you ever seen a happier man!" Maman would exclaim. She said it with a noble envy, neither sad nor malicious, the sort of envy you never feel for wealth or prestige - with an envy springing from the heart.

The bungalow was finished; now the Italian was furnishing it, and regarding every detail he would come ask Maman's advice. Where was it best to place the stove? Maman urged him, since his wife was small, to remember to keep the cupboards within her reach. And, indeed, had it not been for Maman, Giuseppe would have put them far too high.

At last the Italian woman must have arrived and been installed in their bungalow, but there was naught to be seen of either of them; it was as though no one dwelt in their direction, and Maman forbade me to go there, saying that both of them certainly were eager to be left to themselves for some time. But the Italian could not have been of this opinion; the next morning he came very early, calling out to us, "Are you all dead?" It was to introduce us to Lisa, hidden behind the breadth of her husband's back, whom he was gently leading by the hand.

II

She was even thinner and smaller-boned than we had thought from the photographs Giuseppe had shown us. She spoke in a soft, very weak voice; it was like a murmur. And Maman explained, "It's because of her Italian accent. The Italian tongue is extremely musical."

But, although embarrassed, she had her manners, and you became aware of it once she had a trifle conquered her timidity

and also, of course, the amazement she felt at suddenly finding herself on Rue Deschambault.

Giuseppe had daily to travel considerable distances to build houses; but before he began, he came to ask Maman whether she would try to distract Lisa a trifle. He pointed out what had already occurred to us: how far it was from Milan to the brand-new bungalow; so could Maman help Lisa to overcome her loneliness? Maman promised to do her best.

Every morning from then on Giuseppe left our street at an early hour. He would emerge accompanied by Lisa. She walked a little way with him; then he kissed her, strode on a bit, turned around again to look at her. Then he would almost always have to run to catch the tram, which was waiting, its step lowered and ready. . . . True enough, the conductor never hurried these final farewells by clanging his bell.

At evening it was even more affecting. A streetcar would halt. We saw the Italian getting off, covered with sawdust and bits of wood. His pace was that of a tired man. His body leaned forward; his toolbox looked heavy to carry. Yet soon, when he beheld the windows of his bungalow, he began to straighten up; he smoothed his mustache. Then Lisa came out and started off to meet him. Giuseppe also quickened his pace. He dropped his toolbox and lifted his wife off the ground; he would hoist her up, taking all of her in his great arms. And while he held her thus, you could see Lisa's feet, free of the ground, kicking the empty air.

Maman would be standing behind a curtain, which she raised cautiously the better to see them embrace. Then she let the curtain fall back and said, with joy, with envy, "How much he loves her!"

And sometimes she would add, "A woman's finest crown is to be loved. There is nothing - no topaz, nor diamond, nor amethyst, nor emerald, nor ruby that can better bring out a woman's beauty!"

Yet Giuseppe's little Italian wife seemed to me awfully frail and skinny! For my own part, I often went to call upon her. These were real visits, for the Italian woman received me exactly as one grownup receives another. She made me sit down in her living room, and she sat facing me. Nor did her feet quite reach the floor. She would ask me, "How is Madame your mother? Monsieur your father?" I would politely reply, "Very well, thank you." Then I, in my turn, would ask, "How is Monsieur your husband? . . ." I was delighted with these conversa-

tions patterned on those I had with other little girls when we played at being grown ladies.

Later I learned that, to please her husband, Lisa was learning French from a book replete with exactly the sort of phrases she addressed to me. No matter! She uttered them with all the requisite feeling. But I did not yet understand how she was better adorned than with rubies, emeralds, and topazes. Moreover, not one of us, not even Maman, who so frequently alluded to them, had ever seen any such stones. What on earth was love, to be better still? "Your father," Maman would say, "also loves you; see all the sacrifices he makes for you!" Yes, surely Papa was filled with love, and to the point that it constantly made him suffer, was an almost eternal torment. The Italian carried his love upon his countenance, like a sun. But this was past our envy; it was doubtless unattainable, presumably a product of Italy, as Maman herself granted. "Such a love, I can tell you, is not to be seen every day. Is there anything rarer?"

Yet we only loved the Italian woman the better for her being so cherished by her Giuseppe. Is that just? Is it just to love someone already so richly loved? I should have thought it more charitable to save our love for those who, having had none from the outset, would perhaps by the same token never know any.

"However, that's the way it is," Maman would say, "and we can't change it; does not all the world love a lover?"

Meanwhile, Lisa was none the better for it. Our Italian, his face now clouded, seemingly full of wrath, talked to Maman about her. "She's going; I shall lose her," he would say; "she has no more strength than a bird. . . . And loneliness is finishing her off. I thought a change of air. . . . But no!" he would exclaim, thumping his sturdy chest. "I have torn her from her country. . . . and it's killing her. . . ."

"Oh, not a bit of it!" Maman would console him. "She'll get over it. Don't be so hard on yourself, Giuseppe Sariano; there's no happier woman in the world than yours! . . ."

III

Nevertheless, it was he who died, suddenly, in the full light of the sun, upon the ridgepole of a house he was building, and of an apoplectic stroke. People said that it was not surprising when you thought it over, for he was a heavy eater, a wine drinker, a man of fiery temperament, his blood too rich, too

thick. . . . Such was what they said about our Italian when he was dead.

And so there remained nothing - did there? - to keep the Italian woman in our parts. She seemed smaller, more lost in Manitoba than a twelve-year-old, and she was to return to Italy, carrying with her in a casket the embalmed body of Giuseppe Sariano.

We went to pay her a visit of condolence, Maman and I. Out of respect Maman wore her heavy coat, which was black; I possessed only one dark piece of clothing, my navy-blue dress. The Italian woman seated us in her little parlor, as of old when I went there by myself in quest of news of her husband.

She stretched wide her arms to us, saying, "Dear Lady, dear Child, you were so kind to Giuseppe! . . . You whom Giuseppe loved so dearly! . . ."

Giuseppe had been noisy, demonstrative, even in sorrow; she was calm; you might have likened her to a sad, tiny brook, which wept softly as it ran. And this was good of her: gently she sought to console us for our loss of Giuseppe Sariano.

"So, then," said Maman, wiping her eyes, "it's true; we're going to lose you, too. You're returning to Italy?"

Lisa politely excused herself. "I'd like to bury Giuseppe Sariano over there . . . in the sun . . ." said she.

"Yes," said Maman, "the sun! We imagine that we know it here!"

And although it was scarcely the time to talk of it, Maman asked: "Tell me a bit more about Italy. . . . You will see it again . . . but I, shall I ever behold it?"

For this is what had happened: Maman in trying to take the Italian woman's mind off Italy had herself acquired a homesickness for that land. Still, it had been good for Lisa to watch Maman fall in love with Italy. She had shown her post cards with many Italian sights: Saint Peter's in Rome; a ceiling covered with paintings, which must be hard to look at up there above your head; a tower which leaned askew; Pompeii, where people dead for centuries had not budged an inch - there was even a chained dog amidst the ruins - and a dreadful volcano that every twenty years spewed forth lava. Maman had become interested in all these things, and especially in a wretched picture of the Milan cathedral, all pink and pale blue. Maman likewise was crazy about a kind of blue jug which the Italian woman told her she had bought from an almost blind potter on the streets of Milan. On the same occasion, Lisa had re-

counted how the potters worked in the streets and sang over their tasks; that, wretched and poor, they were, none the less, often happier than the rich. . . . Was it because of this that Maman loved Italy? And did she love the crock for Italy's sake?

The time came for us to part. Maman, standing up, scarcely knew what to do. But the Italian woman, diminutive though she might be, knew how people say farewell.

"Take," said she to Maman, "some object here in my house, which will speak to you of myself, of my late husband. I have nothing of great value; so do take, I beg you, something which may tempt you a little. . . ."

Then I saw Maman, despite herself, glance at the jug. I longed to call her attention to a lovely sea shell, in which you could hear the roar of the ocean. But, while protesting that she couldn't make up her mind to take any of the so very pretty things there were in the parlor, Maman kept her eyes fixed on the jug.

The Italian woman took the vase, which stood on a bracket, dusted it a bit, and held it out to her.

"Oh, that's much too much!" said Maman. "I couldn't . . . I shouldn't deprive you of anything so handsome!"

"Come, now!" said the Italian woman. "I'll find a thousand like it in Milan. Please take it; you'll give me such great pleasure."

So Maman yielded to her joy; supporting the crock in her hands, she held it off a little, the better to admire it, and then clasped it to her heart like a thing of price one has lost and then found again.

We went back with our jug. So real and strong was her happiness in bringing it home that Maman seemed for a few moments forgetful of the Italian woman's impending departure.

However, on the day when the taxi came to fetch Lisa, Maman, standing on our porch, watched her go; and when, at the end of our street, the dust had settled, when there remained of it no more than a powdering, such as might have been stirred up by footsteps long since passed, Maman raised her hand toward this nebulous golden spoor and said to us, "The sun of Italy . . . today . . . leaves our street!"