

out the wet handful of innards. Ready to cook. Excellent. The partridge was good luck. Otherwise it would have been more salty cheese and hard bread or snails if he could be bothered to collect them. Or wild herbs. There was a place near here where they grew. He could see it in his mind: the clear light, the slender plants shaking in the wind.

He spatchcocked the bird, cracking open its small ribcage, and cooked it over a fire of quick-burning, sun-bleached stuff. He cut the meat and ate it from the side of his knife. He ate its delicate bones and sucked at the larger ones.

Winter had been a warm time back in the village, among people, with the cold silver rain darkening the earth, feeding it. But it was good to be alone again, up out of all the clamour of talk and obligation, families and rivalries and wrongs. The other shepherds missed home but he was young still and without a wife. There was loneliness, of course, and when he was a boy he'd hated it, feeling himself a prisoner in the hills, expelled from normal life, frightened of the bandits and the business he had to do. Back then he'd arranged stones on the ground near one of the huts to form faces and he'd talked to them, long conversations. He didn't do that any more but the place remained altered by it. There was a presence there, a charge in the air above the spot, a ghost of himself, perhaps.

As the sun set he watched the shadows pour down behind the hills, filling the valley. Then there were stars. His mule faded into the darkness, the pale sheep also. But the wind was always awake, vibrating over the hard ridges.

The following day, Gino drove his herd near enough in the east for Angilù to hear his singing rise up on the wind. Angilù put his hands to the side of his mouth and sang, 'Who's singing over there? Sounds like a sick dog.' There was a pause, then Gino's voice drifted back. 'Who's that singing up there? You sound like you've got toothache in every tooth.'

For a while they sang insults.

'You know nothing about singing. You'd better go and learn at school in Palermo.'

'You don't know how to sing. You need to go to school in Monreale.'

'When you were born behind a door I thought you were a stillborn dog.'

'When you were born in the middle of the street there was a terrible stink of shit.'

They sang for a while then Gino was gone.

The day after that at sunset Angilù saw his mule twitch its ears forwards and lift its head. He looked across the valley to see a man approaching on horseback, the horse's big, jointed shadow moving over the stones in front of them as it snorted and laboured under a big man. One of the field guards. The Prince chose them for their size, in part, and how they would look in his livery. Angilù didn't have to look; he knew which one it would be before he arrived. He sat still and waited.

Finally, Angilù looked up at the huge silhouette of horse and man right in front of him, the sword hanging from the guard's hip, the feathers on his hat bending in the wind. The horse shifted sideways a little, finding sockets for its hooves in the ground.

‘This evening,’ the guard said, ‘it would be better to let fate take its course.’

Angilù nodded. ‘They’re making it hard for themselves,’ he said. ‘There’s no moon tonight.’

‘Why should you worry?’

Angilù picked up a small pink pebble and rolled it in his palm. ‘Are they bringing or taking?’

‘Does it matter?’

Angilù didn’t say anything.

The guard said. ‘They’re taking.’

‘How many?’

‘You’ve got a lot of questions.’

Angilù looked up at the horse’s solid flank as it stepped back a pace. He could feel the guard staring down at the top of his head. The guard was smoking a cigarette now, an expensive one, sweet and fragrant.

‘Let’s say,’ the guard said, ‘that if it didn’t happen the landlord wouldn’t be happy.’

‘I see,’ Angilù said and let the pebble drop onto the ground. ‘I see.’

The guard took off his hat and wiped the sweat from his hair with his forearm. ‘You think too much up here. You worry. It’s all arranged anyway. You’ll be found in the morning.’

‘Holy Mother.’

‘It’s best for your reputation if they tie you.’

‘But why? They haven’t done that before. Why do they need to do that? Jesus Christ.’

‘What did I say about thinking? Maybe someone is worried that maybe somebody in the municipality is taking an interest. Things aren’t like they were. It’s best.’

‘Best,’ Angilù repeated.

‘That’s all,’ the guard said. He flicked down the butt of his cigarette. It landed on the ground in front of Angilù as light and precise in its sudden stillness as a cricket. Angilù wondered if the guard was watching to see if he would reach across and pick it up.

The guard twisted his horse’s reins and rode away down the hill, the horse resisting the gradient at first with stiff, straightened front legs. It took a long time for him to cross the valley, ride up the opposite slope and finally sink down behind it.

Darkness. The sky crowded on all sides with the countless bright stars of a moonless night. The wind sucked noisily at the fire. Angilù had nothing to do but wait.

When he finally heard them approaching he stood up to meet them. Different footsteps around him but he couldn’t count how many of them there were. They spread out in different directions. Angilù saw in his mind spiders scattering from a lifted stone. They could see him perfectly clearly, as he intended, a man appearing in gusts of flame light as he stood by the fire. He wanted to show himself willing straightaway. The shape of one man approached directly and Angilù turned his back so as not to see the face, not to know. The man said nothing as he took hold of Angilù’s wrists and started tying them. He had the sweet, acrid aroma of red wine on his breath. They would all have had a good meal in somebody’s house in Sant’Attilio before travelling up. The man bent down to tie Angilù’s ankles then thought better of it.

‘Lie on your back and put your feet in the air.’

Angilù did as he was told. As the man spent a minute fastening the rope around his legs, Angilù felt a surprising pleasure at the intimacy of the contact with this stranger. He felt cared for. It was the same careful, practical touch his mother had when she cut his hair.

When he was tied the man turned and walked away.

‘Hey!’ Angilù shouted after him. ‘Hey! Put me in the hut!’ But the man didn’t turn back and Angilù had to crawl like a caterpillar past the heat of the fire to get into the safe darkness of his shelter. Beyond its walls he could hear shouting, the snapping of whips, the bleating and scrambling of sheep driven away in the dark.

The men were busy for a while but eventually it was done and there was quiet, just the wind and the remaining sheep, spooked, rattling the stones. And suddenly his mule brayed into the emptiness, loud and angry. The dumb beast. He lay on his side so as not to lie on his hands and looked out at the diminishing flames and white ashes of the fire as they were torn away towards the stars. He relaxed slowly, slowly fell asleep past sudden painful jerks of his trussed legs.

He awoke before dawn and stretched the cramps out of his legs and arms then lay still and watched the cold red spill of light across the hills. As the sun climbed he smelled the dew on the ground as it burned away, the vegetation of his hut as it heated. He was thirsty but he couldn’t think how to get the stopper from the skin of water without it emptying everywhere. Perhaps he could drink the whole thing.

Also he wanted to piss, but what could he do? He flipped himself over and squirmed and kicked towards the waterskin. Then he twisted upright so that it was behind him and within reach of his hands. His fingertips found the stopper, grasped it and pulled. He moved it by millimetres, with great concentration. When finally it suddenly came loose he had to spin around on the floor as quickly as he could, push his lips up against the weight of spilling water and fix his mouth over the hole. He lay there like a suckling infant, swallowing away as his stomach expanded with the cool darkness of the water. He detached himself, the water flowing over his face again, and crawled away. His hair was wet now, coarse and heavy with dust. He made his way over to the doorway and sat upright waiting to be discovered.

Angilù squinted out over the hills. No one. Nothing. He stared into the blue and pink distances and looked for figures. Nothing. The world was only just creeping awake. His mule quivered its flanks to shake off the first flies. Angilù really needed to pee now and there was no way to get his hands round to the front of his body. He could try lying back with his knife under him but surely someone would come soon. He kicked himself back into the shade of his hut, found a dry area the spilled water hadn't soaked and lay still.

He woke up with one image roaring in his mind – a stream exploding over a rock. There was no choice now. He wrestled his knife out of his belt, gripped it with the blade upright against the rope and lay back over it. He rocked from side to side, crushing his fingers, feeling the blade bite into the rope, its tip

sting against his back. He pushed with his heels so all his weight came down on it, and when it was almost through he rolled onto his face and pulled his arms apart as hard as he could. After three exertions his arms flew apart and he used them to drag himself out of the hut. He fell on his side, pulled open his trousers and let himself go in a long, loud stream that rolled over the ground as thick as a sheet of glass.

The sun was well past its highest point. They had forgotten him. Angilù shouted as loudly as he could, separating each syllable, ‘Motherfuckers!’

He crawled back inside his wet, disordered hut and took the knife to cut the rope at his ankles. His arms were weak. His fingers trembled inaccurately. He saw that the dirt floor was churned, marked with the tracks of his struggle. He pushed the stopper back into the flaccid skin and picked it up. He collected his gun and left to ride his sombre, patient mule back to the estate to report the stolen sheep to the man who had ordered the theft.

Climbing onto his mule, he felt a hot fluttering pain in the small of his back. He checked with his fingertips: fine wet lines where his knife had cut him. He kicked the beast forwards, patting its strong neck as it collected itself under his weight and lunged.

Sant’Attilio appeared by stages, sliding behind slopes, emerging at other angles. From one ridge, Angilù saw the landlord’s separate house, close to the palace, its outer walls and olive trees. From another, the whole of Sant’Attilio was disclosed – cubes of flaking yellow and grey, red roofs, the white church tower, the empty stripe of the roadway, the palace large on its outskirts.

Everything he knew was down there, every name, every person, every secret.

He rode straight to the landlord's house to do it quickly and get it over with. He got down from his mule at the gate and led it by the bridle between the hissing silver leaves of his beloved olive trees. He walked up to the front door and pulled the bell. He heard the sound of shaken brass pass through the house and frightened himself by imagining the landlord's presence moving in response through the interior darkness and no way of knowing how close he was, shifting closer and closer. The door opened. The landlord, smoking, looked down at him from the step then out over the top of his head. A clean white shirt and braces. Angilù thought of the dust in his hair, the dirt on his clothes, his shirt plastered to the small of his back with stiff dried blood. *Best for your reputation.*

Angilù began, 'Sir, last night . . .'

Cirò Albanese seemed bored. He raised a languid upturned palm and curled his fingers to summon the story he already knew out of Angilù.

'Last night,' Angilù began again. 'Bandits. The sheep. They took most of my sheep.'

'How many?'

'I don't . . .' Angilù didn't know what to say. He couldn't say, *I didn't count them because I thought they'd tell you.* He said, 'I didn't count.'

'You didn't count.'

'No.'

'Mother of God. All right. You go straight back up. Don't talk to anyone in the village. You understand

me? I'll let the Prince know next time I see him.' The landlord leaned backwards and closed the door.

Angilù wanted to go and see his mother, to wash, to eat, to be comforted, to get a new saint for the string around his neck because he was worried that the one he had on was losing power. But he'd been told. He climbed back onto his mule and kicked its belly with his heels, kicked again and again until it bounced up into a trot and carried him up and away, the heavy pull of his unvisited home dragging at his back. It carried him up to many days of heat and silence, the noon sun pressing the colours flat to the ground, nights of stars and the sharp points of the returning moon. He drove the remaining sheep on with a whirling whip and they stumbled before him, nervous, thick-skulled, reeking. When he paused they stopped where they were, haggard, and stared down at their own shadows as if wanting to crawl into them. Angilù drove them on past his place of faces in the ground. He looked across and felt a surge of communication from them. He couldn't say what it was they were telling him. The impulse was dark, opaque, but it was commanding. It felt as though they recognised him and what it was had something to do with his shame, trussed up and helpless, forgotten by the world. He should . . . what? He touched the weakening saint on his collarbone and said a prayer.

Finally they reached a hollow full of prickly pears and the sheep hurried towards them, their tatty rumps swaying as they ran. This was now the far west of the estate, the dangerous edge. Bandits here were not the friends of

friends. They would be stealing to sell or even eat. He would have to sleep lightly in the day and try to keep watch at night, his gun close at hand.

He was up there for days before anything happened, more days than it would take for him to be seen and word to spread so he was past his fear when they came, having assumed that no one cared. He'd even started sleeping at night for hours at a time, a decision he made collecting snails one day. He detached their light bodies from a rock, dropped them into his bag, then lay down in the shade and drifted into sleep. When he awoke he found his little prisoners crawling out again in laborious escape. Their long grey feet fully extended, their tiny eyes circling on their stalks, they strived forwards as quickly as they could. He laughed as he picked them up again, unsuckering them from the stones, and kept on laughing, finding it hilarious, and that laughter rinsed right through him, made him careless and light-hearted. He laughed at the thought of himself up in the hills, picturing the top of his head from above as God might see it and whatever, fuck it, whatever would happen would happen. He wiped tears from his cheeks.

They came early so he'd only just fallen asleep. He saw their grey shapes moving in the moonlight. He shouted, 'I have only thirteen sheep! The others were stolen! They're not worth taking.' There was a yellow flash, a jump in the dirt near his feet and he fell away onto his face, his hands over the back of his head. 'Don't shoot! I won't do anything! Don't shoot!' They fired again. He could still see the ghost of the muzzle flash smeared across the darkness when he

heard his mule growl and stagger and fall hard onto its knees. To the rhythm of its heart, blood was pumping out of the poor beast, masses of blood, a sound like a fountain or like a basin emptied over and over onto the ground. The mule wheezed, snarling and snoring, and struggled to stay upright. Angilù saw its head flail down onto one side as the blood continued to gush. 'Why did you?' he shouted and reached for his gun. Another shot thumped into the ground right by him. Angilù aimed at one of the hurrying grey shapes and fired. A twisting fall. He'd hit him. There were curses, two more shots from different places, running feet. Angilù fired again. He saw the men, heads low, arms half raised, racing down into the darkness and disappearing.

Then Angilù was alone with the man he'd shot and had to listen to him dying. Angilù was cursed, forgotten, all his luck gone. His saint was painted tin. In the moonlight he could see the man lying on the ground by a dark irregular shape of blood, his loose legs and outflung arms like a dropped puppet's. The man chattered to himself and cried. Angilù didn't know what to do. He sang to drown out the sound. He thought of the man lying there, was suddenly himself inside the dark cave of his dying mind, hearing the man who'd killed him singing. It was terrible. But what else could he do? After a while he sensed silence beyond the sound of his voice and stopped. Stillness. The bandits gone. The shape of the mountains and the moon. His dead mule. A dead man.

Everything had ended. It was all over. And there was nothing Angilù could do, no way to alter one thing. All the time there had been death, he'd heard

gunshots and stories, but he'd always been apart, hidden in the hills, in his gleaming good fortune. Now he was himself forced to eat death. Now he was taking part. His life was over. He felt tiny sitting there in the dark, his head hanging forwards, the round bones of his neck exposed to the wind. The world had its huge thumb on the back of his neck. It pressed down. It would never release him.

In the faint, frayed light of dawn, Angilù went over to look at the body to see if he recognised the man. He didn't. The shape of the man's skull was distinctive, tall and narrow and accented along the jaw with tufts of beard. His eyes had already sunk under the ridge of bone. His mouth was open showing yellow teeth, surprisingly long, like a sheep's. Angilù crossed himself. The son of some mother, some woman who would beat her head with open hands when she knew, who would clasp her rosary and howl, held up by her daughters. Probably word had already reached her.

Angilù had to go and tell someone. He had, at the very least, to be away from there so that the bandit's people could climb up and collect the body. He picked up his gun and bag and whip and scared the sheep into a huddle and drove them past the fallen body of the mule towards the village. Leaving now, not stopping, they could be back by nightfall.

After the thick, surging colours of sunrise, two little birds joined them, wagtails, hunting the insects that whirred up where the sheep trod. They twitched their yellow tails and emitted their one bright, repetitive note. They kept flying a foot or two in the air and landing again, maintaining a precise distance from

Angilù and the animals. Where they landed was the exact midpoint between their hunger and their fear.

Cirò Albanese rode to a nearby town to talk to somebody, a large stationary man who sat with a boulder of stomach resting on his thighs. This man, Alvaro Zuffò, modestly dressed and inconspicuous as he was, made a centre wherever he sat. Any chair enthroned him. Cirò found him in the clean-cut rectangle of shade cast by the awning of a particular bar on the square. This man had a surprisingly delicate way of smoking. He puffed, the cigarette held low in an open hand of evenly spread fingers. The man talked elliptically but to the point. Birds. Barking dogs. Stones. Fishermen. He spoke in proverbs. Only when Cirò mentioned the posters around the town did he speak directly, with rage. His anger was so large and powerful it seemed to tire him like an illness. He half closed his eyes. That mule-jawed, cuckolded son of a whore had appointed a Fascist governor to Sicily, as Cirò knew, and now disappearances, torture, order destroyed. So the decision Cirò was making was very wise. Cirò didn't know he had made a decision. He thought, rather, that he had come for advice. The man told Cirò where to go. There was a coffin maker down in the harbour who arranged things. Cirò shouldn't say one word to anyone, not even his wife, just slip away there and go.

Angilù pulled hard at the bell of the landlord's house. The jangling faded. He rang again. Silence solidified on the other side of the door. He was relieved, for

the moment. He was alone. Nothing was happening. He walked back through the olive trees to the pillared gate. Beyond it he saw a motor car, dark green, its gleaming polish filmed with road dust. Beside it there was a tall man in a brown suit wearing bright shoes of two different colours of leather.

The tall man saw him. Their eyes met. Angilù wished that hadn't happened. He should have just hidden. He had no wish to meet any unknown friends of the landlord. He hung his head down between his shoulders, an insignificant peasant, and pushed through the gate.

The tall man said, in good Italian, 'He isn't here?'

Angilù answered, as he had to, in Sicilian. 'No one answered.' He tried to walk away.

'What business do you have with him?' The tall man bent down towards Angilù. His face was composed of neat triangles, a clipped beard and moustache, a sharp nose and arched eyebrows. He put his hands in the soft checkered fabric of his pockets, leaning forwards.

'I . . . I have to talk to him, to tell him, about my flock.'

'But as he's not here, why don't you tell me?'

'I should go now, sir, and . . .'

'He's not here. Tell me instead.'

'I'm sorry, sir.' Angilù scratched his head. 'I need to speak . . .'

'What do you do?' The man kept his eyes on Angilù's face, stepping with him as he tried to shift away, preventing him.

'I'm a shepherd, here on the estate.'

'I see.' The man smiled. 'And do you know who I am?'

'No, sir. I can't say I do.'

'That's my fault,' the man said, producing a gold pocket watch as smooth as a river pebble from his waistcoat pocket. He checked it and flipped shut its thin gold door. 'But that will change. I'm your Prince, you see. You work for me.'

'I'm sorry, sir. I didn't . . . I saw you once as a child, at harvest . . .'

'My fault, as I say. Spending all my time away in Palermo like every other fool. What was it you had to tell Albanese?'

'I was in the hills last night with the sheep. West part of the hills, your hills, and bandits came to steal them and shot my mule and tried to shoot me and I defended myself, as I had to, Lord Jesus Christ forgive me, and I fired in the darkness and shot one who lies dead there now. The others ran away. I've penned the sheep above the village.'

'You shot one?'

'God forgive me, I did. He's up there. He's dead.' The long teeth in the half-light. The shadowed eyes. Flies up there now. The mother.

'I see. It's what you should have done. You've been brave. How old are you? Still a boy, really?' He put a clean hand on Angilù's shoulder. 'Why don't you come with me? I'd like to talk to you some more.'

'Come with you? In that?' Angilù nodded towards the motor car.

'Yes, yes. In this. Albanese's not here. Probably a good thing. Come on, then. Let's go.'

Prince Adriano held open the door for him and

Angilù sat down on the chair inside, awkwardly gathering his gun and bag between his knees. The Prince shut the door, walked briskly round the front of the car and fired its motor with a violent twist of a metal handle. Angilù was surprised to see a prince bend down and use inelegant physical force. The Prince then got in and sat in the driving position beside him. He moved some levers and then, without any effort of man or animal, not even the visible pistoning of the train, they moved along the road, bouncing over its rough surface on soft leather chairs, all the way to the Prince's palace.

The palace was the largest building Angilù had been inside, larger even than any church. He'd seen it countless times, of course, from nearby or up above. He knew the shape of the plain, extensive roofs edged with gutters, the two sides that thrust forwards like a crab's claws, the patterned garden at the back with statues in it, but he'd never properly considered that its outward size must be matched by a vastness inside. As the Prince led him through, ceilings flew high overhead, some with paintings on them, false skies and angels, and he saw rooms on either side big enough for whole families.

A dog loped out to meet them, huge and rough-coated. Petted by the Prince, it trotted ahead on high, narrow legs. It turned, mouth open, to check that they were following. The beast was at home here. It lived in this place.

The Prince showed Angilù into a room, indicated a chair for him to sit on, and stood himself in front of a mirror the size of a dining table so that Angilù

could see the back of his cleanly groomed head also. The mirror was surrounded by a thick, ornate golden frame at the corners of which fat little angels were stuck like flies in honey. The dog settled itself on a rug, looped around nose to tail and seemed, by the twitching of its eyebrows, to be listening to its master. Angilù's seat felt treacherously soft beneath him, as though there were nothing there. He had the strange feeling that some of his sensations were disappearing. The heat and wind in which he always lived were gone, shut outside this airy, airtight place. He looked around him at the polished furniture and patterns and realised that the Prince had been talking for some time. It turned out that the tall man's elegant beard was wagging to a great hymn of praise to Angilù himself and not only to Angilù: all shepherds were great, the true and ancient Sicily, classical Sicily. Someone had described Sicilian shepherds in a poem a long time ago. Angilù had shown great courage defending his flock against the bandits and it was the Prince's turn to do the same, to return from Palermo to protect his flock. Now that the Fascists were in power things would be different. There would be no room for people like Albanese who came between the Prince and his people, exploiting them both. The Prince gave Angilù a cigarette of soft French tobacco. Another vanishing sensation: the smoke passed down Angilù's throat in such a light, cool, unabrasive stream that he hardly felt he was smoking at all.

'Here,' the Prince said. 'I'm going to give you a gift, a pledge if you like. Wait a moment.'

He left the room. Angilù and the dog were alone,

silent together. The dog lay on the rug, wet-eyed, its long muzzle resting along its forepaws. Angilù wondered what the dog could smell on him. Sheep, snails, gunpowder, blood, the mule, herbs, sweat.

Quick stuttering footsteps. The dog raised its head. Angilù looked round. A small child stood in the doorway, a girl with big dark eyes set in skin that was pale and yellow. A child who was kept out of the sun, who was never hungry. She wore a dress that stuck out around her legs in stiff rustling layers and pleats. She held the door frame and opened her mouth slowly with a slight popping sound as though to say something, staring with frank curiosity at the stranger. A servant rushed up behind to collect her, a woman with a watch on a short chain that hung on the breast of her dark dress. Everyone here knew the exact time. She caught sight of Angilù and nodded in acknowledgement, a quick tuck of her chin that was more to conceal her flinching in shock than to greet the dirty stranger in the Prince's drawing room. She took hold of the child's hand and led her away.

The Prince returned holding something small high up in front of him like a lantern. 'Here,' he said. 'Open your hand.'

Angilù did as he was told. The Prince dropped onto Angilù's palm a heavy gold ring, a small thing but as heavy as a pigeon. The gold looked soft, buttery, as though Angilù would be able to cut through it with his knife.

'It's Roman, less ancient than your craft but there you are. I had it just the other day from a dealer from Smyrna.'

‘I don’t know . . .’

‘You can show it to other people in the village, tell them that it’s a gift from me, that I’ve returned. There’ll be no more landlords coming between me and them, no more leases bought in crooked auctions with violence and intimidation and the profits from the land going to the landlord and his friends.’

Angilù nodded, knowing that he would never show the ring to anyone ever. It would have to be hidden. One day, when he knew how, he could sell it.

‘And you and I will meet now and again,’ the Prince said. ‘And you can help me get to know the land. You see, I’d like to know what you know.’

Cirò Albanese walked through his house with one hand outstretched, his fingertips touching the wall, feeling the silky whitewash as he moved. Three generations to get into this house. He knew its forms, its sounds, where it was cool, where the warmth collected in winter. His children should grow up here. He should have had them already, a check to his brother’s sons. He was heading for a little storeroom in which he picked up a bottle of his olive oil. He looked at it, holding it towards the window to see its colour. He opened it and swigged. A flash of green-gold light above his eyes. The smoothness as he swallowed, the peppery flavour in the after-gasp. He licked his slippery lips, savoured the hours that had gone into its making, sunlight and labour, the possession of the trees.

In his bedroom he went to a particular drawer and collected money which he put in two different pockets and more still in the lining of his jacket. He folded a

handkerchief and fixed its neat peak in his breast pocket. He looked at himself in the smoky reflection of the old dressing-table mirror and smoothed his hair back at the sides, straightened his lapels, plucked his cuffs.

Take nothing. Say nothing to anyone. Go.

People were disappearing. This was true enough. Life was becoming impossible. People knew his name. That's why he had to go this way. And better to do it, better to act for yourself, be the captain of your own fate. This was about staying alive.

He found his wife busy at the kitchen table, her hair pinned up out of the way, an ordinary day six months into their marriage. Teresa was small and voluptuous, as though she had been assembled quickly and greedily. This on top of that on top of that. Breasts, belly and behind. He took her waist in his hands and laid his face against the warm skin of her bare neck.

'Baby, I can't really . . .' She raised floured hands, adjusted her fringe with her wrists as she turned inside his grip. 'You're dressed up.' He kissed her hard on the mouth. She squeaked complaint then acquiesced, softening under the force of him. He pushed his tongue into her mouth, pressed it up against her front teeth so that they raked the surface as he withdrew.

'I've got business,' he said. 'I'll see you later. What are we having?' he asked, peering over her shoulder.

'You'll find out,' she said.

Hours later Cirò had found the coffin maker's down in the city harbour. He stopped outside to smoke a cigarette and think for a moment and look at the water. This wasn't nothing he was doing. He was even

afraid. Big boats standing there. Big white seabirds flying athletically overhead. The stevedores' voices bounced with a prompt, echoless lightness over the surface of the water. Cirò was an inland Sicilian. For him the sea was strange, dangerous, dazzling and beyond his calculations. It meant travel to invisible places. It meant the edge of his world, the end of it.

He threw down his cigarette then knocked on the door. He gave the name of the mutual friend who had sent him. They nodded. A boy made him coffee while they waited for a weeping widow to finish her order and leave. She pressed the tears from her cheeks with a black-bordered handkerchief and argued them down to a good price in dignified whispers. Cirò smiled at her sharpness. When she was gone they locked the door and showed Cirò his coffin and how it worked, the latches and hinges inside, the sliding panels to open the vents. They made out documents with the name and address of a family. He would be their uncle. They told him to urinate and then climb in. Standing over the drain at the back he found he couldn't pee. He came back and stepped up on a chair then into the coffin. It was a little tight at the shoulders of his strong, short-levered body but otherwise fine. He lay there and looked up at the wooden planks of the ceiling and their faces bending over him. 'Don't open the latch,' they said, 'until five hours after you feel the motion of the sea. Then you just climb out and mingle in the crowd. You're just another passenger.'

They put on the lid with its false screw heads. He latched it inside and opened the vents. It worked: he could breathe. After a minute or two he felt himself

lifted up and processing out on a trolley. He began to feel very calm in an enclosing darkness that was safe and simple. He felt more protected than he had for many years. After days of much agitation arranging everything for this moment, hiding things, instructing people, he relaxed. The motion lulled him. Cirò Albanese was almost asleep when they loaded him onto a ship bound for America.

Part One
North Africa
1942

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And here was a world intact, like a dream of his childhood. After years of war, not a sign except the intriguing sight from the train of numerous unfamiliar young women in the fields, land girls brought in presumably from Birmingham and Coventry, too distant to be seen properly, labouring silently. In London there were shelters, sandbags, militarised parks, blacked-out windows and gun emplacements. Here, nothing, trees washed through with sunshine and bird-song, the smell of the ground breathing upwards through the thick moist heat. As Will started out, his feet remembered the exact rise and fall of the walk home from the station. How perfectly his senses interlocked with the place. He knew that when he rounded this corner, yes, here it was, the peppery smell of the river before he could see it. He could picture the dim bed of round stones, the swaying weeds, its surface braided with currents. *A full-fed river.* Behind his left shoulder, away up for a couple of miles, was the rippled shape of an Iron Age hill fort where he'd played as a child, battling his brother down from the top. Everything here was still clean and fresh and in place, the countryside sincere and vigorous. It was as though he were walking through the first chapter of a future biography, with his kitbag on his shoulder.

Will decided to avoid the village and headed down through the wood. According to his father this was a recent planting, maybe only a hundred years old. It was still coppiced in this section, which had a peculiar regularity. The evenly spaced, slender trees always made him think of stage scenery. When the wind died the coppice had an indoor quiet, the quiet of an empty room.

‘And where do you think you’re going?’

Startled, Will turned to see his younger brother, Ed, wearing his hunting waistcoat, his open shotgun hooked over his shoulder. ‘For God’s sake, Ed.’

Ed smiled. They shook hands.

‘You didn’t hear me, did you?’

‘Can’t say I did.’

‘Makes a fellow wonder who’s been in training and who hasn’t.’

Ed was much given to stealth. He loved hunting and had a straightforward aptitude for it that Will sometimes envied, often mocked. Ed would appear suddenly in a room, quiet in his body, his senses splayed around him, then smile and go out again without saying anything. Father had been in a way similar, although sharply clever, a quiet grammarian indoors but a sportsman outside, hard-riding, red-faced, breathing great volumes of air, his hair sweated to his head. A mere schoolmaster, he’d been invited to join the hunt after the last war when he’d returned with a medal, with *the* medal. It was outdoors that Will was allowed glimpses of what he took to be his father’s mysterious heroism, that undiscussable subject. There was a kind of calculated rampaging, his movements

very hard and linear. Ed had a different quality. He was less reflective, less troubled by thought, simply a live moving part of the world of trees and creatures and water. Will wasn't sure how he himself would be described. He wasn't a natural sportsman although he was efficient and strong enough. He always noticed the moment of commitment, the threshold he had to cross between thought and action, his mind instigating his body. He didn't think he should notice; it made him feel slightly fraudulent. His movements were effective but too invented. He was playing a part.

'Why aren't you fishing?' Will asked. 'I can't imagine there's anything left to shoot. I thought the woods would be stripped bare with rationing having everyone setting snares and popping their shotguns.'

'Ah, but for them wot knows the old woods like I does.' He opened his waistcoat to show hanging inside its left panel a rabbit, teeth bared and eyes half closed. 'And,' he said, reaching into his front pocket and carefully lifting out a bird, '. . . there's this.'

'You little tinker. A woodcock. When everyone else is working on the nth permutation of bully beef.'

Will took the bird from him. Its head, weighted by its long bill, hung over Will's fingers on the loose cord of its neck. The small body was still warm, the plumage shining with the airy burnish of a living bird. Will's senses were lighting up, home again after weeks of training grounds, weapons drills, diagrams, distempered huts and dismal food. 'That's a very kind homecoming gift,' Will said.

'It isn't any such thing,' Ed said and took the bird back, refolding its wings to fit into his pocket.

‘All for you. You going to sell it on the black market?’

‘No.’ Ed was impatient. ‘I’ll give it to Mother. You’ll probably eat it tonight in a pie.’

‘Did she send you out to meet me?’

‘Er, no. How could she if we didn’t know you were coming?’

They walked out of the wood, the shadowy trees gently breaking apart to reveal the river, there with the sun on its back, the fields glowing beyond.

Will narrowed his eyes at the view.

‘Ah, yes.’

‘Pleased to be home?’

‘I won’t be back for long.’

They turned away from the riverside and up a rise to come out into the lane. Either side of them as they walked back to the house the hedgerows were lively with small birds, the verges starred with the blues and purples of wild flowers.

As they entered the front garden, Will called out, ‘Ma! Mother!’ They rounded the side of the house and entered through the back door. Immediately he was inside, dropping his kitbag down beside the boots and walking sticks and umbrellas, Will felt himself claimed by the familiar aroma of the place. It was a combination of many things – carpets, dogs, wood, the garden, the damp in the cellar – too subtle to be separated. It was more a mood, a life. It contained his school holidays, his father’s presence, his father’s death. A world intact.

‘Oh, Mother! Where art thou?’

He found her in the kitchen, leaning over the table with palms pressed flat either side of the newspaper.

‘Surprise.’

‘Oh, crikey, yes. It’s this one. Here he is. William of Arabia,’ she said, lifting her spectacles and fixing them on top of her head before reaching her arms towards him, and waiting. That annoyed him, the quick flash accusation of emulation. As though T. E. Lawrence were the only man in the world to learn Arabic, to be a soldier. He walked towards her and she took hold of his shoulders with hands that were scalded red. She must have just been busy in the sink. He looked into that emotional round face, her eyes moist and diffuse with poor sight, her heavy cheeks hanging. She pulled him forwards over the long incline of her bosom and kissed him vividly on the temple.

‘So you’ve survived training?’

‘Outwardly I seem fine, don’t I?’

‘Near enough.’

‘Some chaps broke significant limbs with the motor-cycle training.’

‘Motorcycles?’

Hearing the voices or scenting him, perhaps, the dogs came shambling in. Will bent to Rex first. The King Charles spaniel squirmed down onto its haunches and whisked its feathery tail. He rubbed the soft upholstery of its ears. Will had a voice he used for the dogs, clear, enthusiastic and mocking. ‘Look at you. Look at you. Yes, indeed.’ Teddy, the black Labrador, his large mouth loosely open, panted and bumped against Will’s legs, trying to insinuate his sleek head under Will’s hands. ‘Oh, and you. Yes, boy. Yes, Teddy. Oh, I’ve missed you too. Yes, I have. I have.’

Squatting down now, Will combed his fingers through the rich, oily fur at Teddy's nape. He felt the upswept rough warm wetness of Teddy's tongue against his chin.

'Don't overexcite them, darling.'

'They're dogs, Mother. They overexcite themselves. You do. Yes, you do. Pea-brained beasts. They're just pleased to see me again.'

'Broken limbs on motorcycles, you said.'

'Off motorcycles. Up a hill as fast as you can, whizz round then down again likewise. They disconnected the brakes to make it more difficult. There were chaps strewn all over. And they call it "Intelligence".'

'Do they? Ah, would you look at that.'

Will glanced up to see Ed laying his kills on the table, the woodcock's wings dropping open, the rabbit stiff and grimacing, the fur on one side blasted.

'Number two son brings great treasure.'

The predicted pie appeared for supper, the fine dark meat of the woodcock, with its flavours of dusk and decaying leaves, and the clean tang of the rabbit were both impaired by a horrible margarine pastry. They ate economically without candles or lights. Through the windows floated a soft lilac light. It hung in the room, almost as heavy as mist, and made the striped wallpaper glow with dreamy colour. Will realised how tired he was at the end of his training, at the end of a lot of things, and posted now, although Mother was yet to ask, off to the war finally. His mother spoke as though overhearing his thoughts.

'You know I had hoped the war would have finished before you got dragged into it.'

Will sat up. He was horrified. 'But you wouldn't want me to miss my chance.'

'I think I could cope.'

Ed said solemnly, 'A man wants to fight', and Will laughed.

'And how would you know?'

'Boys.'

'Look, it's my duty, isn't it? It needs to be done. It's what Father would have wanted.'

'I'm not so sure you know that about him,' Will's mother said quietly.

'Why wouldn't he?'

'You're his son.'

'I know that. All somewhat academic, anyway. I've been posted.'

His mother looked up at him, her dim eyes watery, a rose flush blotching her neck. 'Have you?'

'Yes.'

'And?'

It wasn't what he'd wanted. It was not what he deserved, with his Arabic and ambition. He had been warned by one NCO during training, a sly and adroit Cockney who seemed to be having the war he wanted, who had friends in the kitchens and spat at the end of definitive statements. 'You need blue eyes,' he'd said, smoking a conical hand-rolled cigarette, 'to get a commission. Take my word for it. You'll end up in the dustbin with the rest of them.' There was a look for the officer class and Will didn't have it. Five feet nine inches tall, he had dark hair and dark eyes, a handsomely groomed round head and a low centre of gravity. This was unfair. In his soul he was tall, a traveller, a keen, wind-honed figure.

The man who sat at the last in a sequence of desks Will had visited, the man who decided Will's future, considered the paperwork through small spectacles and made quiet grunting noises like a rooting pig. Finally he looked up. 'All very commendable. Languages. I'm putting you in for the Field Security Services.' The dustbin.

Will pinched the bridge of his nose. 'If I may, sir, I was hoping for the Special Operations Executive, you see, I . . .'

'The duty to which we are assigned,' the man interrupted, as though finishing Will's sentence, 'is where we must do our duty.'

And so Will had humiliated himself precisely in the way he'd told himself he never would.

'Sir?'

'What?'

'Sir, I'm not sure I should mention this but my father, you see, in the last war . . .'

'Yes?'

'Distinguished himself. He was awarded the VC. I . . .'

'Oh, excellent. Jolly good. You should try to be like him.'

The personnel of the unit to which Will was assigned was like a saloon bar joke. *An Englishman, a Welshman and a Jew* . . . And lo and behold his commanding officer was tall, blue-eyed, a wistful blond, younger than Will by a couple of years, an Oxford rower, perfectly friendly, unobjectionable and unprepared. To Will he said, 'And suddenly we're all soldiers. All a bit unreal, isn't it?' But they weren't soldiers. Not really.

The only danger Will could perceive with the FSS was spending the remainder of the war guarding an English airbase doing nothing at all.

Will considered how much of this to tell his mother as she asked again, 'And?'

'You needn't look so worried. I'm not going far just yet. Port protection sort of thing. Security.'

'Isn't that police work?'

Ed, leaning low over his plate, looked across to see Will's reaction.

Will felt an urge to throw his drink in his mother's face. He pictured vividly the water lashing out from his cup and striking. It was a thought he had now and then, in different company, just picking up his cup and hurling its contents into the face of whoever it was who had provoked him. He wouldn't ever do it but in those moments the vision of it was so clear and fulfilling that he had to resist. 'It is what I have been assigned to do until I am posted abroad.'

After supper they listened to the wireless, angling their heads just a little towards its glow and chiselled voices, their eyes vaguely involved in the carpet or what their hands were doing, his mother sewing, the needle rising and sinking, thread pulled tight with little tugs. The dogs slouched around the room, lay down and got up again. Will called Teddy to him and patted his smooth, hard head. The wireless made Will crave action and involvement with a physical feeling akin to hunger, an emptiness and readiness in his tightened nerves. He was very alert. He'd had years of this now: battle reports, a burning, piecemeal geography of the war, and war leaders and chaos, victories

and defeats. And propaganda, of course. You couldn't really know what was going on, but Will with his intelligence, deep reading and cynicism made shrewd guesses. The reports on the wireless were so charged with possibility and vibrant with what was never said or admitted about the battles, the terror and exaltation. The mere cheering of victories didn't come close to what Will supposed the reality must be. The war was large and endlessly turbulent. There was room in it for someone like Will, for his kind of independent mastery. He could make elegant and decisive shapes out of the shapelessness. He wanted in. *By it and with it and on it and in it.*

When the news reports gave way to dance band music, Will got up to go into his father's study.

The room had its own stillness. The book spines. The vertical pleats of the heavy blue curtains. The solidity of the desk with its paperweight, mother-of-pearl-handled paper knife, the blotter and wooden trays. Behind Will, the sofa on which his father had died.

Somewhere in a drawer in this room was the medal his father never took out. The room's composed silence was like Will's father. He had always raised a hand halfway to his mouth and coughed quietly before he spoke, preparing himself to do so. Sometimes Will felt as though the empty study might do the same, clear its throat delicately and say something neat and short, something devastating. A terrifying rupture of his reserve had presaged Will's father's death. He'd come back from the hunt after being unhorsed. He'd landed badly, apparently, and sat down to dinner looking pale

with a deep red scratch trenching his cheek just beside his nose. There was a small notch taken out of his forehead also. Ed asked what had happened.

‘What do you bloody well think happened?’

‘Darling . . .’

‘What are you leaping into the breach for? Damnfool question. And I have a pounding headache. Christ.’

He leaned over and vomited onto the carpet right there at his feet. They all sat there waiting through the noise, the wrenching up out of his body. Teddy ambled over afterwards and sniffed at it.

Father sat up straight and gulped water. ‘Don’t all gawk at me like that. I’m obviously ill. I’m going to lie down.’

He stood up, swayed, and stalked out to his study. Half an hour later, Will’s mother found him dead on the study sofa. Dead and gone having hardly ever said anything at all to his sons. There was much to cherish, of course, in Will’s memories but he was gone, a man who had always known more than he said.

Will read along a shelf. Something fine and sharply enhancing of his intellect. Lucretius on the nature of the universe? Why not? It had that fine brilliance and fearlessness as a description of the world, bright bodies in space. Distinctive also. Let the other fellows always be quoting Cicero and Virgil. And reading Latin would keep his mind active. Will would have this and his Arabic poetry. The Lucretius was a squarish, green-covered volume. Inside he saw his father’s pasted *ex libris*, signed with his fastidious, vertical pen strokes. *Henry Walker, 1921.*

He began reading it that night under the low, sloping

ceiling of his boyhood bedroom, intending to remember and look up the words he didn't know.

In the morning he drew the curtains. A neutral day, the light white and even. There was none of the gorgeous lustre of the previous day and this was almost a relief. The world was a realer place, more practical. Then he noticed in the glass of one pane of the window the twist of bubbles. He'd forgotten about them, or felt as though he had, but if asked at any time he could have sketched their exact distribution, rising through the clearness. They had been a small magic of his childhood, catching the light differently, sparkling a little. And they were part of his room, his world. As a child he'd almost felt them inside himself, a sensation of excitement spiralling up in his breast. And they connected his room to the river, as though his windows were formed from panels of the river's surface. That river there, brown and steady, rather workmanlike today. The bubbles in the window filled him, even before he'd gone, with a large nostalgia for this house and the landscape and his childhood. It was poetical at first but gradually he became aware of a dark outline around that feeling, a constriction, and realised that it was fear. His life, unexciting as it may have been so far, was still a detailed, complicated thing. In its own way, for him, it was precious. It would be a lot to lose.

He turned away and examined the small bookshelf in this room painted with creamy white paint that showed the tracks of the brush. How to. Boys' adventures. *Alice. The Wind in the Willows.* Ah, yes. He realised that it had been in his mind since his return. *A full-fed*

river. By it and with it and on it and in it. He'd loved that book as a boy with its small engrossing illustrations, darkly cross-hatched and tangled like nests holding the forms of the characters. Sentimental, of course, but he decided to take it too.

At breakfast Will told his mother that he was off that day to his posting and she fell silent. They chewed through their rough and watery meal of national loaf and powdered eggs – here, in the countryside, they were eating powdered eggs – and after that she disappeared. Will was used to interpreting her silences, particularly those of the stricken widow period, and he knew what she was saying. A stiff, stoical farewell was all that was required but instead she would force him to think of her, helpless and alone in this pristine place in the middle of England that the dark, droning bombers had swept over on their way to flatten Coventry. She would be here all the while imagining him blown to bits. This thought demanded that he imagine his own death also and that was deeply pointless and unhelpful. Typical: her determination never to make a scene often resulted in strange, cramped, unresolved scenes like this. Useless woman. A boy going away to war without a goodbye from his mother.

Ed walked with Will towards the station, putting on a flat cap when light rain began to fall from the low unbroken clouds. The dismal, factual light looked to Will like something issued by the War Office. They walked together through the quiet coppice with the dogs snuffling at the ground and there they parted with a firm handshake. Will thought that Ed may have held onto his hand a fraction longer than necessary

and said, 'Let's not be silly about this. I'll probably be back before you know it. There'll probably be some administrative delays. There generally are.'

Ed put his hands in his pockets and called the dogs. 'It's all delays for me.'

Will smiled. 'Nice for Mother, though.'

Ed hitched an eyebrow, saying nothing, then called the dogs again. They gathered, breathing, at his feet. Will petted them a final time and Ed turned to go, the dogs following after in a wide swirling train. Will watched his brother vanishing and appearing through the trees, slightly hunched, the rain pattering on his cap. Ed was heading home, sinking back into his place. Then Will turned himself and headed towards the station, out into the world and the war, and he was glad to be going.