

Chapter 23

Gionin found three little rooms for me in a big wooden house by the railroad.

There were about ten Norwegian families in that house and two Italian men, Toni and his old father. Toni, he was North Italian like us but he was Genovese. He was a nice young man-short, but he was pretty with black hair and gray eyes. He was one of those artists that put down the marble to make the mosaic. That old father had a hand-organ, but he was too old and sick to go very much on the street. They were in one of those three rooms when we came, so we let them stay and help pay the rent-we were all North Italian together.

Gionin, he had a little money from the mine at Union so he could pay the rent.

Then he bought a little secondhand stove and some wood and coal. The table he made himself from some boards he found in the street, and he made the bed too.

But no chairs. For chairs we were sitting down on those big American Family Soap boxes. Then we had to buy some blankets. But Gionin was afraid to stay there with me-he was afraid the police would come. So he was sleeping by some of those other Toscani and by his cousin Tomaso.

The other people from Toscana were not religious, but Gionin never missed one Sunday to go to church. So here it was the first Sunday in Chicago and we didn't know where there was a church. Oh [end page 203] my goodness! We walked and walked and walked and walked and all the time asked somebody else, but everybody kept saying, "You're going right. It's far." We went way to that church on Franklin and Illinois. Me and my children froze to death walking. But we never

even thought we could take that streetcar with the horse on. I was in America ten years and I never took the streetcar. We needed those five cents to eat. Five cents was enough to make the whole supper for the family in that time. Only the rich people could take the streetcar not us poor people.

After not long Gionin found work. The first work he had in Chicago, he was carrying the bricks and mud for the new church they were making over past Chicago Avenue. It's a Polish church now but in that time it was Irish. He used to come by me with his shoulders all sore-all open-from carrying those bricks and I was making him some cotton-cloth pads to put on his shoulders so they don't get so cut. And every noon I used to carry him a little pail with the stuff to eat.

But sure enough! One day I was home doing the washing-I was bending over my tub scrubbing and rubbing those plaster shirts and with my foot rocking the cradle because my Domenico was sick and all the time crying-and here came the policeman to take me to jail. I couldn't understand much what he said so he talked to Toni. Toni told the police I was not the kind of woman he said and I didn't run around with no man. He said, "Don't take her to jail. She's an angel from heaven the way she works and takes care for her children!"

The police could see when he looked how I was doing all that heavy washing and taking care for my sick Domenico. So he said he didn't want to arrest me-he thought it would be a mistake. But then he told Toni I had to be in the court tomorrow morning. He said if I promised to be there and didn't run away he wouldn't put me in jail. He was good, that policeman. He didn't arrest me and he

gave me fifteen cents to get some kind of medicine for Domenico. He wrote it on a paper what kind of medicine I must get from the drugstore.

So the next day I was in the court with my two children. Gionin and all his friends came there with me. Toni too. There I was, a young Italian girl with a shawl over my head, and I couldn't understand nothing. When we went by the judge, there was Santino from [end page 204] Missouri! He was telling the judge that I was the worst kind of woman-that I ran away and was living with all the men, and this and that. He wanted the judge to punish me and put me to jail.

I can't tell you very much what happened, because the judge was talking English to all those friends of Gionin and to Toni. When he asked me the question Toni told me what it was and I answered the truth, that's all. In the end the judge told Santino to get out of town. He said if he was not gone by six o'clock the same day he would put him to jail instead of me. Then he said, "And don't you ever come back, either!"

Six o'clock night, when the train was supposed to leave for St. Louis, Gionin and all his friends and all his relatives in Chicago were there in the depot with stones. If Santino didn't go they were going to stone him. When Santino saw all those people taking my part he had no intention to stay. He went back to Union. He went back there and got the divorce; then he married one of those women he was living with. But I heard later from his sister-in-law that that woman wouldn't take so much like me. When he started beating her she got him put in jail. He sat in jail twenty months for one beating he gave that new wife!

That man, I have to leave him out of my story, that's all.

So after Santino had the divorce Gionin and me went to the court in Chicago and got married together. The priest said he couldn't marry us in the church because I had that first husband living-only when he died we could be married in the church. Me, I was crying with tears coming down my eyes and praying God, "Oh God, why do You make it a sin for me to live with this good man Gionin? He's so good and so religious! My children will starve if he doesn't take care! Why do You make that a sin? How can that be a sin?"

Once a long time after, when Father Alberto came to America, I went by him and told him how I didn't say yes that time I was married with Santino in Bugiaro. I told him the priest was deaf but the people knew it that I didn't say yes. He said, "Well, if you can find all the people who were at your wedding and they sign their names on the paper that you didn't say yes, then I can marry you in the church."

But how am I going to find all those people? I can't, that's all! [end page 205]

(After Gionin and me were married together about ten years and have already three children, a missionary from Italy came in our church. He preached so strong against the divorce-what a sin it is against God, and the punishment God is going to give those people, and all and all-that Gionin got the scare and he went away and left me. About three months he left me alone to take care for all those children. Nobody but me knew why he went away that time, but I knew it was all the missionario's doing. So then one day he went to confession to Father Alberto and Father Alberto told him it's a sin to leave me alone like that with those children. Oh, Gionin was glad to hear that, so he could come back! He said

he only left me because he didn't want to go to hell.)

My husband he was many months carrying the bricks and the mud for that new church. But then those other Toscana people-that little bunch of Toscani were all very friends together-they said to him, "Oh, you're foolish, Gionin. Why you don't get the horse and wagon and sell the bananas like us?"

So he did it-he got the horse and the wagon and he used to peddle the bananas.

And when the cranberries came he sold the cranberries too.

Oh, now I remember another little thing to tell. One time Gionin bought a new horse and he came home and told me about it. He said he changed in the old one and he gave some money too for another one. He said, "Rosa, I bought a nice horse this time. But I don't know if I did right. There was another horse there for ten dollars more-it was still a nicer one. What d'you think? "

And I said, "Well, if you think it's worth ten dollars more you give it to him."

But we didn't say no more about it. We went to sleep and we think no more. So in the morning my husband took the bananas and the horse and wagon and he went.

Then here came a Toscana man and he said, "Lady, you're the wife to Gionin?"

"Yes."

"Well Gionin, he said for you to give me the ten dollars because he wants to go by Guido and take that other horse." [end page 206]

And I said, "Why do you come for the ten dollars? Why did he send you and not come himself? "

"Well he sent me because he wanted to wait there on Franklin Street."

"Well," I said, "can't that other Toscana man give the horse, anyway, and trust

my husband for ten dollars? If Guido won't even trust him one day, I don't have the ten dollars to give him! "

"Well," said the man, "don't get sore about it. I only do like he told me."

And I said, "Well, I don't have one dollar-not one cent. I can't give it to you."

There I had all my husband's money in my underskirt pocket, but I told him I had not one penny.

So then my husband came home at night and I asked him why he sent that man for ten dollars, instead to come himself.

He said, "Why Rosa, I didn't send nobody. I didn't go by Guido today. I didn't go."

"Oh, for the love of Mike! " I said. "That man came here and he said to give him the ten dollars. And he was a Toscano too." So then I told all about it.

Gionin said, "Well, God, He blessed you this time, Rosa, that you didn't give it! "

And nobody-nobody-knew where that man came from! I don't know yet who he was or how he could know about that other horse.

My husband when he was young was a beautiful man-nice teeth, nice hair, nice face, and big and strong. So all those ladies on Franklin Street, they liked him. And one woman, Dina, she loved him. And she all the time sent for him. But I don't think he did anything with her-he was just a very friend of her husband because they both sold bananas and would go together to buy them. I was brokenhearted, but I never said anything about it.

Well then one day a Toscana woman she came by me and said, "Oh Rosa, I saw your husband go in Dina's house and stay all night last night." [end page 207]

And sure, I knew he didn't come home till one o'clock. I was crying by myself and asking myself what I am going to do. So after that Toscana woman left me I said, "I know what I'm going to do to get happy again! "

I took my new baby in my arms-my Visella was just two or three weeks old that time-and I walked way to State and Superior Street to the Holy Name Church. I don't know if it's there anymore, but there used to be a crucifix in the front hall of that church with Jesus about nine feet tall. It made you shiver to look at Him. I kneeled down saying all the prayers and crying for about one hour. And then I was looking up at the face. When you go here that face looks at you, and when you go there it looks. Where you are makes no difference those eyes look at you anyway.

So then I took my little baby in my arms and started home. And all at once I was happy-I didn't have that worry no more in my heart. And after I passed Franklin Street and came by the bridge on Indiana, I met Cesca, the wife of Tomaso the cousin of Gionin.

"Oh my goodness, Rosa! " she said. "Where did you go with that little baby? "

I said, "I just went on State Street."

"Oh, you went to the Boston Store?"

"No, just on State Street."

She said, "Your eyes are so red. You've been crying?"

But me, I didn't tell. I didn't say nothing.

Then she said, "Oh, Rosa, didn't you kill your husband last night?"

"Why do you say that? " I asked her.

"Oh," she said, "those three cousins they make me so much trouble! They were playing cards in my house till one o'clock night and I couldn't chase them away. They learn to gamble with those cards like the American men, and I can't chase them away."

So then when my husband came home that night he was so sleepy. I said, "Sure you're sleepy. Why not when you come home one o'clock night? "

He said, "Yes, I went by Cesca's and I was playing cards."

So then I began weeping and I told him all that I had done.

He said, "Why Rosa, I have no intentions with those other [end page 208] women-they're jolly, that's all. Do you think I can put the beauty of you with that Dina and her rotten teeth?" And the tears were coming down from his eyes too. He said, "Rosa, I tell you, I'll never again walk in Dina's house! Never! " And he surely never did. And he even stopped buying bananas with Dina's husband. Those other Toscani they were not religious. Only Gionin had the strong religion. And that husband of Dina was terrible. When he and Gionin took their wagons and went together to peddle bananas and they came near a church he would say, "Hey, Gionin, hurry up and move away from this bad-luck place! " He wouldn't go near the churches and he hated the priests. He'd say, "Those blackbirds in there make me sick. If they put God alive in my mouth I will spit Him out! I will chew God up and spit Him out! " That man was so bad I was glad

when Gionin stopped peddling bananas with him. It was only because they were Toscani together that they were friends like that. They had only a little bunch of Toscani in Chicago. The other Italians around there came later and they were Sicilian.

The people from Toscana they're not good like the people from Lombardia. But they're not bad like the people from Sicilia- I should say not! The people from Piemonte are a little more bad than the people from Lombardia, but they come next. Lombardia is the last in the world to do wrong things. The Italian government made that investigation and they said so. Gionin was not like the other Toscani in Chicago, but they were all paesani-they all stuck together and helped the other. [end page 209]