

Theft of a Good Man

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WINNER OF THE INAUGURAL JOHN GARDNER
MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR FICTION

Theft of a Good Man

by David Varela

I can't remember what's happened since my last visit. No doubt I drank a fair deal, had a few thoughts of which I should be ashamed, lost my temper once or twice. I stole a pair of boots in Treviso. Near Valdagno, I ran away from an inn before I'd settled my account. I've angered women. But these are things without substance, a matter of a few pater-nosters. This year I took a good man from the world. This year I have sinned.

I was called to the monastery of St Jerome, above Garda, to cut the hair of the Abbot. He's a bad-tempered old goat, in case you ever meet him. He's also very particular about his tonsure and has it trimmed each Tuesday after matins. I sharpened my blades and made my way up there, knowing that I'd be in for a hard morning regardless of whether my work were faultless or not. Sometimes I'm tempted to chop out a wad of hair at the back, to see if anyone will tell him. I doubt his brothers would dare. When you're locked up with a cockerel like that, it's not wise to criticise his plumage.

It's a shame the Abbot is so objectionable because I enjoyed my visits to his tower. He sat himself in a straight-backed chair by the window, overlooking the fields, and watched the monks plough their soil and plant their crops, weed the hedgerows and pull firm, ripe vegetables out of the ground. They rolled up their sleeves and hitched up the skirts of their robes, sweating in the sun like ordinary labourers. I wonder if they knew what they were in for when they first signed up. Prayer and abstinence are what they'd expect inside the monastery walls. Perhaps they were shocked when they joined as boys and were handed trowels instead of Psalters and told to muck out the pigs. Or maybe it's a blessed relief after all the time they spend in those cold grey cells. After a few years of confinement, maybe they think of starting a farm of their own, and religion becomes a nuisance as they kneel in vespers, worrying about the beet-roots.

I can hardly imagine the Abbot up to his knees in swill. A right man of letters. Every time I went up to his tower I'd find him poring over some text or other. I have an interest in that kind of thing, so when he stood and brought his chair to the window, I took a look at what he was reading, saw if I could make it out. Wonderful pictures. Sometimes it was a devout text and I could pick out a few phrases, other times there would be drawings of places around the world and battles from history, kings and queens, animals in gardens, men on horses chasing through the forest. The last time I visited him it was a stag being torn apart by hounds.

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I always felt he was annoyed at my arrival, before I'd even cleared my throat. The Abbot didn't like to talk when I was cutting his hair. I leant in front of him once, blocking his view of the window. He raised his right hand and waved it across, as if he were giving half a benediction. Half a blessing is a curse, my mother used to say, and I jumped back behind him before he could threaten again. It made me twitch and nick his scalp with the blade.

'You idiot,' he growled, 'next time I'll call for the butcher. Clean it up and go. Out.'

I was already wiping the blood off with a cloth. Clerics can be very peculiar about blood, but I suppose if it weren't for that I wouldn't have a living. They get so irritable. How can a cut on the head affect the way they perform communion? You'd know the philosophy better than I do, Father. Tell me the Church's version later. I learned the lesson in my own way.

I was wrapping my instruments in their roll when a monk appeared in the doorway. He was out of breath and he stood there without a word while he panted, wiping his hands on the sides of his cassock. He must have run up the stairs from the field. He had trouble composing himself in front of the Abbot, but he lowered his head and spoke in swallowed words.

'Father Abbot. Accident. Shepherd . . . western hills. His son is here . . . help. Old man . . . kicked in the heart. With your permission . . . immediately.'

The Abbot caught the threads of his words and stitched them together. 'I see. The wound is grave?'

'The boy is unsure. I could examine the old man, perhaps administer a poultice—or absolution, if the situation warrants.'

Both monk and Abbot crossed themselves and whispered into their hands. It might have been a good moment to make myself scarce, but the monk was standing in the way of the door.

'Barber. Go with him.' The Abbot was glaring at me. 'He may need a surgeon. Take your knives and make yourself useful.'

It wasn't what I wanted to hear, but it was a way out of the room, and that's what mattered. I pulled my bundle to my chest and followed the blustering monk down the stairs. I only realised afterwards that the Abbot hadn't mentioned money. This wasn't the moment to bring it up.

I'm not a good businessman. I confess that I'm not a good tradesman in many ways, and forfeiting payment is the least of my weaknesses. In my youth, I was a weak student—easily distracted, my masters said—and by the time I reached the age of twelve my choices were already limited. The Church didn't want me. I'm no singer. Farming was hard work, and my family had no holding to speak of. A military life was denied me when I fell out of a tree and broke my ankle, so I was pressed to settle for a trade. My mother had always been friendly with Beppe, the local barber-surgeon, and he agreed to take me on in exchange for a stick carved with the pattern of a serpent. I wish to God she'd given him a quilt instead. By the

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time Beppe died, that stick had the shape of my head stamped into it too.

I wish he'd lived longer, though. Beppe had been both barber and surgeon to our village for thirty years, and he traveled for miles to help surgeons and physicians cure their patients. He had books. There was so much knowledge in his head that it took him three years to teach me what he knew about hair. I would watch him cut and twist and tie the locks of the rich women, and even if I didn't grasp how he did it, I knew that he had turned his trade into a craft. It seemed to be a good living: his artful hands could run up and down these ladies' necks, touch behind their ears, bend their heads down and up again while their husbands left them alone in the house. Beppe would sometimes tell me to go back and fetch something from the village, 'to save his old legs,' he'd say. Not that old. When I returned, he'd be on the road home.

'Never mind,' he'd say, 'I managed without it.' Sly as mist.

The monk's name was Fra Paolo Rini and he was a lean, sober man who had taken on the colour of his turnips. I'd seen him before from the window, and I remember the way he had once slapped a brother on the back and laughed. The noise had reached the tower and the Abbot had arched an eyebrow. I don't know what monks can joke about. Nothing, by the look on the Abbot's face.

'What's your name?' Fra Paolo asked me at the bottom of the stairs. 'I can't call you Barber all the way to the hills and back.'

'Marcello Veronesi,' I replied. I saw no reason to lie. He looked like an honest sort and, if the Abbot was the man I knew, I could consider my work for the monastery to be at an end. There was also the matter of the shepherd to be taken care of, which was no small concern. With luck, he'd be dead by the time we got there and I could come straight back and salvage some of my customers before word from the Abbot got round.

I know how rumours start, you see. I'd found out a lot from Beppe about barbering, and I'd even worked on men myself—never women—but most of my days were spent cleaning his kit, cooking meals or honing blades on the wheel behind his shack. I enjoyed that in the evenings, watching the sparks kick up and die. So three years into my apprenticeship, I was barely a barber and nothing of a surgeon. One night we argued. I said he was a slow teacher, he said I was a slow learner, and he settled the argument with my mother's stick.

Beppe said that he had had many masters, but all I had was Beppe. In Salerno, he said he had learned from great teachers called Constantine, Galen, Hippocrates, Celsus and Avicenna. I remember Avicenna because one of the books had his name on it—not that Beppe thought I was ready for it. So when he was asleep, I used to pull down the books and look at the diagrams of men, red wires running through their bodies. Fat dots marked points on their limbs like ports on a map, and I'd prod myself to trace the route from my Rome to my Constantinople. The trouble was, each part of the map remained foreign to me. It was like Avicenna's description of his home in Arabia. I could see where each point was, there on my skin, but as to its inhabitants, its customs, its relics, its imports and exports—I was a stranger in every town. I could only discover so much. I

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knew that without Beppe as a guide I would never be able to explore these secret cities, and that's why I had to stay.

Once, he woke up in the middle of the night and caught me. As he ambled up to the candle, I realised that I'd been speaking the words aloud and he would have heard me stuttering through the text if he'd been sleeping in the next village. He said if I didn't like my bed, I could go outside and work on his blades until dawn. Then he went back to his bunk. I started sharpening the knives.

When I woke up in the morning, the shack had burned down and Beppe was dead. One of the neighbours woke me as I sat slumped over the wheel and asked what I had done, which is typical of the way people think. I'd been asleep, how did I know? They made up their own minds. That's how rumours start.

♦ ♦ ♦

Fra Paolo guessed that we could reach the shepherd's hut by sunset. There were no horses to be had and it looked like a rough climb, so we gathered some food and the monk's essentials and set off along the track. He was a fit fellow, sure enough. He fairly galloped up that trail, determined to reach the dying man before his Maker beat him to it. In the end, though, his legs could not stretch as far as his ambition and we were still hours away when night arrived and the winds picked up.

I don't like to be caught outdoors in the mountains—and mountains they were, I can tell you, even if the slopes did look green and gentle. When it came to finding shelter, we were lucky to trot right by a cave before my legs gave out. I scraped together some kindling and worked up a fire. Then Fra Paolo and I had our first real conversation.

I could see why he made the others laugh in the field. He was an awkward man, his arms and legs too long to sit cross-legged on the ground, and he was only a few years older than me, his early thirties, he said. Twenty years with the monastery, and he'd never wanted to be anywhere else. His only problem was that he assumed the rest of us held God in the same regard. The two of us undid our packs and laid out our meal, and I was glad to see that he'd brought along a flask of wine, which would go down nicely.

He saw the look in my eye, though, and smiled.

'I thought we could take communion before we dine,' he said, and poured half a cup.

'Don't be shy,' said I, and he made it a cupful.

He murmured his way through the rites and I tried to nod in the right places and say 'Amen' when he did—I'm not a heathen, Father, but my Latin isn't the best. So, when he was finished muttering he stood up and banged his head on the ceiling. I've never laughed so hard in my life. He howled and hopped around clutching his shaven skull, telling me not to laugh at a man's pain, then looked at me kneeling there and put his straight face on again, the one he used for widows and greenfly.

'Don't—' he said. And that's all that he said.

A growl prickled up the back of my neck, then a breeze whistled over

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my head. A lynx had pinned Fra Paolo to the ground. It was a good scrap: Paolo pushed the cat's head to arm's length, but then it tore away at his stomach with its back paws, shredding his clothes and his flesh. Bloody gobbets of hessian spattered the walls. I scrambled over to the fire, grabbed a burning log and threw it. The cat skittered back the way it came. So fast. I still don't know if I was brave or not.

But there was Paolo, heaving and gurgling in a puddle of brown blood. It was gushing out of him like water from a pump. I pressed my hand to his side but the blood ran between my fingers and into the sand, turning it the colour of pots and roof tiles. But as the ground got darker, the monk got paler, until his face was like vellum.

I remembered Beppe treating a wound once. Robbers had stabbed a pilgrim as he passed near our village and Beppe had cleaned the cut using a piece of cloth and some wine. Paolo's injury would need a lot of wine. So I grabbed the goblet, poured it into the wound and bound it tight. Surely consecrated wine would be even better medicine? It stopped him moving anyway, and whatever the reason, there was nothing more I could do. I sat by him in the cave with a branch burning in my hand.

♦ ♦ ♦

He woke up early. The first thing I heard was a yelp as he rolled over onto his side, then slumped onto his back again with a sharp breath.

In winter, the children sometimes lie in the snow and drag their arms round in arcs, and when they stand up it looks like there's the shadow of an angel behind them. Paolo hadn't moved from the spot where he'd fallen, and all round him was the shadow of his blood, wide as the length of his arms, black.

'Dead,' he rasped. Parts were coming back to him, but the whole was still elusive. He opened his eyes and squinted at the stone ceiling. 'Hell.' Then he turned his head and saw me. 'No.'

I couldn't tell what he meant. His words were too quiet to carry expression, as night is too faint to carry colour. Maybe seeing me there had jolted him back to Earth, or maybe he was terrified at the prospect of eternity in a cave with me. But that's what he said.

He bent his legs and sat upright, shook his head and put a hand on the dressing I'd bound to his waist. I could see that yesterday was returning to him. He looked at me. Then the cave entrance. Then the fire. Then the bandages. And then the dark circle in which he sat.

'The cat. How did you . . . ?'

'It ran away. You fainted and I fixed your wounds.'

He gazed down again, like a boy sitting on top of a tree, scared to look and scared to move.

'This is all . . . mine?'

'Lie down and rest. You're hurt and you need to let your body balance itself. Take some meat, you've run dry and cold.'

His attention was still elsewhere, even when he was chewing on a corner of cured beef. He tore off a sliver, gave the rest back to me and stood up—he stood, when the night before he should never have stood again. It

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wasn't right. Maybe he was deluded, so dazed he couldn't feel the pain.

'No, no, I'll be fine. I don't feel too bad. How far was the shepherd's shack from here?'

His eyes seemed clear enough, he was steady on his feet. I've seen newborn foals look worse. For a while I thought that it must have been me who'd banged my head the night before and my imagination had got the better of my reason. Paolo brushed his teeth with a twig and a mouthful of water and was waiting for me to join him on the road. We walked on.

As we went further up the track, the monk's gait became more relaxed. He stopped holding his bandage. His stride lengthened. He drew his shoulders back and walked upright, eyes level with the horizon. Potholes became challenges, not obstacles. By the time we reached the top he was kicking stones and jumping to catch hold of branches, like a farm lad trying to impress the girls.

'You must tell me what you used in this plaster.'

'Oh, pine resin, vinegar, oil of roses. Nothing unusual.'

He leaned to one side and stretched, as though he was just waking from a solid night's sleep.

'Perhaps it's the letting then. It's left me rather light-headed.'

I grunted and kept my mouth shut, hoping that we'd find the shepherd soon, preferably beyond help.

♦ ♦ ♦

As it turned out, we were just in time. The door to his shack was open and there he was, lying in his cot, feverish but breathing. His white hair was matted and dirty. He didn't move or speak when we approached him, just opened his eyes and sighed.

'Greetings, old shepherd. Pardon our manners. Under which constellation were you born?'

He was in a delirium, there was no talking to him. The monk started his babbling while I opened the shepherd's shirt and had a look. There were dark liver spots on his body. I could see the purple hoof-print on his chest, over the heart, but the flesh around it was discoloured too, blue and black. Round the bruise there were fine red lines and a swollen gash full of pus. I didn't like it at all. Fra Paolo was peering over my shoulder, waiting for a verdict.

'He has an excess of blood in this quarter here. Find me a bowl.'

While the monk tipped some crusts from a dish, I prepared my instruments. Scrapers, rasps, spatumina, probes, scalpels, drills, tooth trephines. I tested the point of a skewer against my finger. The shepherd's skin was thin and weak, it wouldn't need to be too sharp. With the bowl on the floor, I jabbed the skewer between his ribs and a jet of blood splashed onto the flags. The shepherd turned his head and looked into my eyes, swallowing hard, twisting his body. I had to put a hand on his chest to hold him down and the pressure just made the blood flow even faster. He was losing his breath and starting to panic.

I've never made great claims for my skill. If he died, I could easily say it was too late for him when we'd got there and his son and the Abbot

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would be none the wiser. Paolo couldn't be much of a physician if he couldn't see through my performance. He knelt beside me and took the shepherd's hand, praying fast and hard with his head lowered. He didn't notice the change in the shepherd's eyes—it was as though his eyelids had shrunk back into his head. The fear was in him and his body went rigid. The blood slowed to a trickle then dripped to a stop. All I could hear was the monk mumbling on and on, praying in circles, squeezing the old man's hand in his own, until he noticed that he couldn't hear the blood any more and looked up. The shepherd was motionless on the bed. Paolo let go of his hand and then we heard his voice.

'Thank you.'

He smiled at us both and Paolo got to his feet for a second, then dropped to his knees again. In that moment, I realised that Paolo had changed. He'd become more than what he'd once been—more than a man.

'You have a great gift, Marcello,' stammered Fra Paolo. 'It is a wonder few ever witness. I—I—' He bent and kissed the hem of my cloak. 'This is a wonder.'

♦ ♦ ♦

'Are you certain?' the Abbot said, scrutinising me in his study.

'With my own eyes,' Paolo replied. 'As sure as I stand here. And this, look—'

He reached into his shredded habit and unwound the bandage from his waist. He handed me the dressing, which was caked like a slaughterhouse apron, and uncovered the wound. I couldn't see it at first. Where last I had seen a hole the size of my hand, there was now only a scar, clean as the flesh of a salmon. 'He is a healer of great power,' Fra Paolo shook his garment back into place. 'I dare say no more.'

The Abbot sat by his desk and studied me. I don't like being looked at, Father. I tried to keep my eyes lowered, but I couldn't help seeing a picture full of gold in one of his books and he shut it sharply.

'I trust your word, Fra Paolo.' I didn't trust him, mind. I knew what was coming. 'The Death is still strong in the north-east. You know the village of Callucci, barber?'

Indeed I did, and I dare say you do too Father, even at this distance. Nobody had been allowed in or out for months. Every man, woman and infant touched by disease.

'Our finest men of medicine have tried to help, but physic is of no use—cure one man and his brother taints him again. Perhaps you can change things.'

This Abbot was condemning me to an early grave, and I wasn't about to go quietly. So I took desperate action. I told him that the monk and the shepherd were just fortunate, that my skill was nothing, that I wasn't even qualified. The Abbot just waved his hand, half-blessing me again.

'I'm sure you'll be fine,' he said.

Damned. I'd never been more honest and now he was punishing me for it. Maybe he knew. But as I said, I wasn't going without a fight. I asked for Fra Paolo to go with me.

'Fra Paolo is very important to the life of the convent,' said the Abbot.

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'I'd rather he stayed here.'

That bastard Abbot. I'd cut more than his scalp next time.

'Father Abbot, if I may, I'd be glad to accompany Master Marcello. Callucci is some distance off and the journey difficult. He'll be of no use if he gets lost along the way.'

I knew I'd be able to count on Paolo. He was a man of true faith, even if it was misguided.

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The Abbot gave in and allowed us to travel together. We were given full provisions and a horse this time, which is a comfort not normally afforded me. Paolo had exaggerated the severity of the route and the miles slipped past in warm green meadows and vineyards on the higher slopes. The day was clear but so was the night, and we stopped at an inn before the heat escaped back to the stars.

Paolo was reluctant to spend the evening with the drinkers, so we adjourned to our bunks upstairs. He made a joke about feeling safer in a bed than in a cave. It was funny. Still, he insisted on us both taking communion again, and the very mention of it turned my stomach. In his bag he had the same set of cruets and chalices as he had taken on our first journey, and he set them out on a bench before pouring the wine, holding a wafer up to the ceiling, and going through his usual ritual. He was very precise, fingers tipping and picking up the vessels with delicate speed, like a conjurer switching cups in an effort to hide the pea.

He lifted the cup as an offering to the ceiling joists and continued to recite his Latin. The ancients used to believe there were spirits in everything—chairs, stones, trees, the sky. Maybe Paolo was placating the gods of this building, keeping the roof from crashing down on our heads, shoring up the walls with his prayers, keeping wildcats away from the window.

He closed his eyes, tilted the little silver chalice and took a mouthful. He spat it across my bed and dropped the cup on the floor, sputtering and staggering back towards the door, reeling, speechless. The boards were covered in the same sticky, thick substance that had soaked the floor of the cave. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

'I'm sorry. The wine. It must be off.'

'We'll live without it.'

'Yes.' He felt his way round the walls to his bed, like a blind man, and sat on the thin blanket. 'I think I'll turn in. I'm sorry for being such poor company, but it's been a tiring day.'

'Yes.'

We each pulled the covers up close. Neither of us slept, just as neither of us spoke of the tiny shoots sprouting from the floorboards in the morning.

♦ ♦ ♦

In a way then, reaching Callucci was a relief. The main street was empty when we arrived, but within a minute there were ragged shadows standing and staring. We were watched with suspicion, as though we were thieves looking to steal their relatives away to the next life.

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It felt like I hadn't seen children in weeks. These were odd, though. Too old for their bodies. Broken children. They were scared to touch anyone, avoiding the diseased hands of their parents, realising that solitude meant survival. The adults were as filthy as their offspring. Their sleeves were tattered, their hose were split or torn, and not a one of them had their head covered, not even the women. Some were still in bedclothes. A gaunt fellow with oily grey hair and stonemason's hands addressed us with the solemnity of a gallowsman.

'Do you know where you are?'

'We do,' Paolo replied, defiantly. 'We are here to cure the dying. Can we find a bed for the night?'

'More beds than people in Callucci now,' said the gaunt man, turning away, 'many more.'

We set ourselves up in the tiny chapel near the well. Fra Paolo had been treated once in the monastery hospital at St Jerome and was acquainted with its methods, so we pushed back the pews and brought in a dozen of the now-vacant beds.

The chapel had not been used for almost a year. There was no cloth on the altar, but white dust sat like silk on every surface. A pair of doves were nesting in the roof and their year's worth of mess painted one of the columns.

When the plague hit Callucci, attendance at the chapel was higher than ever. With so many people being struck down by the hand of God, the villagers were suddenly very keen to salve their consciences. But before long, they began to see a pattern. Even the most devout parishioners were falling foul. Especially them, in fact. First the Datinis, then the da Folignos from the pew in front of them, then the smith and his wife and their three daughters. The village elders realised that gathering to pray each week was not an effective way of fighting the pestilence. They began to hold mass outside the chapel, praying to the cross above the door, but the congregation still thinned out. Scared of the air, the water and the neighbours, families barricaded themselves in their homes, only gathering supplies when they had to, keeping the heavy drapes drawn fast across the windows.

Between funerals, the parson made calls at each household, looking after the sickest of his flock, carrying the Good News and the gossip round the village. He didn't last long. And when he died, the number of deaths began to drop. That was when the villagers realised what had happened. God had forsaken Callucci, and it had all been the parson's fault. Jumping to conclusions again, you see, Father.

Our little hospital was very ordered and more successful than any infirmary before or since, I'll wager. Fra Paolo quizzed each patient about their astrological disposition and assessed the balance of their humours, examining the nature of their pulse and the extent of their affliction. He'd take confession if they looked in a serious state. And then he called me in to deliver one of three treatments I had devised: there was a herbal concoction which we'd brewed up, and that tasted foul enough for the patient to feel it was helping; there was the letting, of course; and for variety I

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introduced a lozenge of worms and goat's cheese coated with urine, which was probably more vile than the disease itself. But after each treatment, Fra Paolo took the hand of the sufferer and spoke a brief benediction. By the morning, the pustules under their arms and their rancid sweats had disappeared. We kept the healthy ones separate from the rest of the villagers, but after three days, there were more cured than sick and we had to keep the ill in quarantine while the healthy returned to the village outside. A week and Callucci was cured.

The villagers were an embarrassment. The gaunt old gentleman, whose name was Luca, led a service in the church to honour me. They threw themselves to the ground in front of me, offered me food, livestock, and any number of wives. Then I noticed that on the ground, worshipping with the people of Callucci, lay Fra Paolo Rini. That was the end.

Paolo knew I was troubled and offered me counsel either as a friend or as a cleric, whichever I preferred, but the friend and the cleric were both Paolo and I couldn't face either of them. I couldn't face anyone.

♦ ♦ ♦

The day that the village was safe, I saddled the horse and left for the mountains. But damn that Paolo—he wouldn't let me go alone. He started by walking alongside me, trying to talk me into staying. After a few miles he gave up and simply insisted on coming with me. I told him I wasn't going anywhere near civilisation, but he assumed that I was going on some divine retreat into the wilderness. Jesus must have got sick of those disciples following him round, Father. I can see why the desert must have seemed so appealing.

So I headed deep into the forest, leaving the track as soon as I could, and there we stayed, setting up camp under a giant spruce. That first night, Paolo spotted a badger snuffling round our bags. I've seen a badger bite the leg off a bloodhound, they're no joke, but Paolo didn't worry for a second. He sat there and calmly trimmed the twigs off a branch, stood over the badger, took one swing, and snapped its neck at the nape. That was another thing I hadn't expected from the monk. Maybe he and the Abbot had more in common than I thought. The badger's carcass lasted us three days. Paolo skinned it and removed the entrails, left the fur to dry out in the sun and carved the body into portions, which he rationed out. He insisted on eating the less appetising organs, sparing me from the eyes and brain.

When there were only bones left, he boiled them down into broth, which he thickened using nuts and roots he found in the forest. He told me the names of all the trees in Italian and Latin. There was food everywhere he said, if you knew where to look. He could lift the bark off a tree trunk and reveal smooth-skinned grubs, sap that dripped like honey, mushrooms that grew in layers as though they were building their own shaded city. It was as if Paolo had planted all this years ago, knowing he'd return one day to gather his harvest.

The night we ate the broth, Paolo sat cross-legged with his difficult limbs and smiled a trusting smile at me. It was maddening. I jumped up

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and kicked the fire into the trees, scattering the flames outside Paolo's careful stone circle.

'Marcello—what's wrong?'

'What do you want? Why did you follow me? Go! Take the horse, I don't want you here!'

'Marcello?'

'Do you think you'll hear the music of the spheres in my voice? Are you waiting for great secrets to be revealed? Here's a secret—it's all a sham. I'm nothing. You're the healer, not me. I'm a barber. I pull teeth and cut hair and lance boils, but you heal. The shepherd, the villagers—all you. Even that cat'

Paolo just looked at me, puzzled, then shook his head.

'Your parables and your mysteries . . . you're teaching me many things. I'll try to understand.'

This is what happens to people who swallow too many fables. They can't take a straight answer anymore. It's all about 'faith' and 'trust'—they lose their sense. I remember Paolo saying that everything on Earth was pointing towards eternity, everything carried some secret spiritual message, like a book written in an unknown language. The trees had branches that stretched upwards because they were reaching out to Heaven. Flowers were the Virgin Mary, caterpillars turned into butterflies because of the resurrection. I tried telling him that a tree was just a tree but he wouldn't have it. There was no talking to him.

At least he realised that I wanted more time on my own. The next morning, I headed west into the forest, keeping the sun behind me and treading a straight line, trying not to put names to the trees, walking through bushes and across a stream filled with leaves.

After an hour, I came to a cluster of cabins but nobody saw me. Though I'd been wanting to avoid people, they suddenly seemed like the perfect distraction. I climbed a tree and watched them all. I pretended I was the Abbot in St Jerome, looking out over the fields. There was a carpenter working on a heavy elm bench. Two others were fixing a roof. A woman with a baby went into one cabin and an hour later came out and went into another, then another. Probably showing off the new-born. A girl walked right under my tree and into the clearing, carrying a basket.

I stayed in the tree until I noticed the sun had overtaken me and begun to lower itself over the forest. Paolo, I knew, would worry if I wasn't back by dusk. I was happy to go. People were still being people, work was still being done, the sun still set in the west. The world had not been shaken by my absence. I could stay in the forest and life would continue without me. It was as though I had never existed, and that was the best I could wish for.

It was almost dark by the time I got back to our camp. At first I thought Paolo wasn't there. Then there was a flutter of wings and I realised he was exactly where I'd left him that morning, lying by the ashes of the fire. Only his face had changed.

He was stretched out on the forest floor, shocked by death. Next to him were two damp circles in the earth: one brown and clotted; the other crim-

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son. The two fluids had separated out like vinegar and oil, spilling from his side like a bag full of secrets. Thirty-two years had brought him here.

I wasn't the first to discover his body. The insects had got to him long before I had. Flies were wading through the molasses of his blood, breeding in the sticky resin. They'd laid their eggs inside the warm, open wound. The heat would help them hatch all the faster. Beetles ran through his hair and pushed balls of thick, scabbing blood across the soil towards their nest, picking up dirt and leaf mould as they went. Before my return, the birds had been revelling, dipping their beaks first into the massed insects then into the rich, subtle, forbidden corpse.

I've seen bodies before, of course. Disease-ridden ones with abscesses and bones poking through at the elbow. Drowned men, swollen with salt and green with seaweed. Babies strangled by their own cords. But I've never been good at handling them, closing their eyelids, ferrying them home or to the burial pits. Touching them feels like desecration. Beppe always showed more respect for the dead than for the living. He said that all dead men deserved to be treated with honour because they had faced God.

Paolo's body was desecrated enough. I brushed away the insects and swept the dirt off him, lifting him onto a blanket. I bound the caked wound shut again, then pulled the blanket tight around him. It was dark now, and I had to keep his body off the ground, away from the swarming bugs and anything larger that might be attracted by the smell. Even the horse was straining on its tether. All I could do was tie each end of the blanket and hoist him up using one of the thick spruce branches. He was light, and even in that sheltered spot, he swung from side to side in his woolen hammock like a silkworm in its cocoon.

♦ ♦ ♦

Morning again. Paolo had made it through the night without shifting from his branch, and the wildlife had been unable to penetrate his new woven skin. There was a dark patch midway along the blanket though, so I lowered him down, worried that the gash in his side had started leaking.

He'd soiled himself during the night. Another lesson of Beppe's I'd forgotten. Maybe that's what happens when you face God. I used the last of our water to wash him down and rinse the patch in his smock. His eyes didn't move. He stared through the trees, reading secrets in their leaves, letting me scrub around his body, undisturbed. He was as cold as the air now. When he was clean, I hoisted him up to the branch and went to collect more water from the stream, taking the thirsty old horse with me.

I reasoned with myself, made calculations. Paolo hadn't moved from the spot where he'd lain down to sleep, so he could have died at any time that night. That meant he might have been dead for a day and a half already. I'd have to look after him for a while yet.

The horse nosed around in the water, the leaves sticking to his snout. I let him walk unbridled while I splashed my face and refilled the two bottles. Water. The stuff of life. Avicenna said that even in the Arabian desert, you could cut open a parched, brown plant and find water. Paolo could have drawn a lesson from that, could have delivered a sermon on it. Now

Theft of a Good Man

his body was as dry as a stick, leaking its fluids and stiffening up from the outside inwards. I wondered if he was soft and dark on the inside, if his humours remained in their houses, if there were parts of his body that didn't even know that the whole had died.

Which part of him died first? Did it start at his fingers, curling them up with pain? Did his skin bristle and quiver all over his body? Or did his chest suddenly contract as the organs convulsed, rebelling against their cage, rattling his ribs? And the soul—if he had a soul—did it flee the quaking body as its timbers collapsed, or was it the departure of the soul that made the body writhe?

Paolo always knew these things.

I tied the horse to the spruce and lowered Paolo to the ground. Taking his head in my lap, I pulled the blankets from round his face. His mouth was open, but now instead of hanging there, his jaw was fixed and rigid. I uncorked one of the bottles and poured a little water into the gaping mouth. I could hear bubbling as it found its way down into him. He drank without swallowing. I stopped before his mouth overflowed. There were a few drops on his lips, and the cracked skin was pink and smooth again. I rolled the blanket back further and poured water onto his fingertips. The skin softened, but his joints remained as unyielding as ever.

His lips dried out and died a second death. Water wasn't enough.

I kept Paolo by me during the day, only lifting him up into the tree when I went to find wood and food. I looked in the places he had shown me, and soon found enough mushrooms and berries. I kept the fire going all day, keeping us both as warm as I could until the moon rose and it was time to heave him back into his hammock.

I heard wolves during the night—not howling, just padding round the camp, staying outside the light from the fire, patient as midwives.

♦ ♦ ♦

Beppe taught me about hair, and hair has taught me about people. Long hair is for maidens, thinkers and madmen. Youths with white hair have secrets from their parents. Curling locks belong to emotional people, fighters and lovers. Women with red hair were all friends to Beppe. Beggars always surprise me with their strong, thick hair. Hunters and yeomen prefer it closely clipped. Monks don't have a choice. Fashions come and go, but hair remains honest.

Paolo was growing a beard. I noticed it when I unwrapped him that morning, and it made him look tired. His hair was unruly too, so I shaved him and tidied him up. I nicked his chin twice. The bone was getting closer to the surface, and his skin felt so dry that the blade rasped. At least he looked respectable now.

My mother always set so much store by appearances. Hands and hair, she said, were the measure of a man. I wonder what she'd think of me today with all these scars on my fingers. I don't look like the artisan she wanted. I look like a cut-throat. A murderer.

The last time I had spoken to Paolo was just after sunset three days before. Out in the woods, it was difficult to measure time, far from church

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bells or sundials, and we had taken up the habit of rising and setting with the sun. He had prayed on his knees before turning in, thanking his Lord for the day, the food, the shade of trees, the birdsong, the mild breeze, the comfort of dry soil rather than mud, the grace by which He prevented branches from falling on our heads, and the company of his great friend, Marcello.

I told him to be quiet. I told him that his jabbering was disturbing my prayers. He took me at my word and went silent.

So when the sun set on the third night after his death, I prayed—for myself and for him. They were selfish prayers. I prayed because if Paolo could live again, my sin would be less. Nobody would call me murderer.

I sat by him until the fire burned down and I was left in the darkness you only find in the forest.

♦ ♦ ♦

I didn't see the sun rise. Light seemed to whisper through the leaves, falling in shafts like rain, trickling onto the forest floor, then filling the gaps between the trees.

Paolo's face hadn't changed. He had his eyes closed, like a man remembering things long past, but that was where the resemblance to a man ended. The wood had claimed him, turning him brown and green, drawing his spirit away and into the bark and the mushrooms and the creatures that had once fed him. The body lay lank in the dirt, flesh made meat.

As I squatted there on my heels, on the soil, under the trees, under the sky, I realised why I'd failed. A sinner's prayers carry no weight. I could never have hoped to save Paolo while his death rested on my conscience. So I lashed him onto the back of the horse and brought him here. It's the first time he's ridden that nag. He's waiting for me outside, his hands and heels dangling above the ground. Do you think I've confessed enough?

HP