

The Sicilian Woman's Daughter by Linda Lo Scuro

PROLOGUE

Rumour had it that Ziuzza, my grandmother's sister, on my mother's side, carried a gun in her apron pocket – both at home and when she went out. She wore her apron back-to-front, resulting in the pocket being propped up against her belly. She kept her right hand poised there, between her dress and apron as if she had bellyache. I had noticed this suspicious behaviour when on holiday in Sicily with my family when I was twelve. At that stage, never could I have imagined that she was concealing a gun, while she stood there in my grandmother's kitchen watching me have breakfast. I never saw her sitting down. She brought us thick fresh milk, containing a cow's hair or two, in the early mornings and often stayed to chat.

She had a dog, Rocco, white and brown, which she tied to a wooden stake in my grandmother's stable downstairs. It was a lively animal, snapping at whoever passed it, jumping and yapping. The mules, the rightful inhabitants of the stable, were out in the campagna with my grandfather from the break of dawn each day.

A tight silver bun stood proudly on Ziuzza's head. Her frowning face always deadly serious. Fierce, even. An overly tanned and wrinkled face. Skin as thick as cows' hide. Contrastingly, her eyes were of the sharpest blue – squinting as she stared, as if viewing me through thick fog. I was scared of her. Truly scared. And all the other women were frightened, too. You could tell by the way they spoke to her, gently and smiling. Careful not to upset her, always agreeing with her opinions. They toadied up to her well and proper. An inch away from grovelling.

And, I found out the rumours about the gun were true. Ziuzza would come and bake bread and cakes at my grandmother's house because of the enormous stone oven in the garden. I helped carry wood to keep the flames alive. Did my bit. One day the sisters made some Sicilian cakes called cuddureddi, meaning 'little ropes'. They rolled the dough with their bare hands, into thick round lengths in the semblance of snakes. Using a sharp knife, they then sliced the snake-shape in half, longways, spread the lower half of the butchered snake with home-made fig jam. They put the snake together again, slashed it into chunks. Then the chunks were dealt with one-by-one and manipulated into little-ropes by pinching them forcefully into shape with their nimble fingers.

As Ziuzza bent over to wipe her mouth on the corner of her pinafore, I caught a glimpse of her gun. I was sitting at the table sprinkling the first trayful of cuddureddi with sugar. No doubt about it. It was there in Ziuzza's big inside pocket of her pinafore. While I was looking at the bulge, she caught me out. We exchanged glances, then our eyes locked. She narrowed her hooded eyelids into slits and crunched up her face. I blinked a few times, then looked around for some more wood to replenish the oven, grabbed a few logs and vanished into the garden.

After she received a sickening threat, Rocco's bloodied paws were posted to her in a box, she, like her dog, came to a violent end. Ziuzza was shot in her back, in broad daylight, by

someone riding by on a Vespa. People with line of sight, from their windows to the body, hurried to close their shutters. Nobody saw who it was. Nobody heard the gunshots, though the road was a main artery from one end of The Village to the other. And nobody called a doctor. It would be taking sides. Which you certainly didn't want to do. Added to that was the fact that Ziuzza at that moment was on the losing side. She was left to bleed to death in the road like an animal. It wasn't until the dustcart came round that they removed her body because it couldn't get by. But nobody commented, it was as if they were removing a big piece of rubbish. It was nothing to them. But instead of throwing it away, they took the body to her home. Nobody was in. So they brought it to my grandmother's house instead.

This was the lowest point in our family's history. With time, though, Ziuzza managed to triumph through her son, Old Cushi, who began the escalation. And, later, her grandson, Young Cushi, completed it by becoming the undisputed boss of our village, of the region, and beyond. But the transition was not easy. A bloody feud ensued. Lives were lost on both sides. Some might know who Ziuzza's enemies were. I didn't get an inkling. Most of the information I came across was from listening to what the grown-ups in our family were saying. And they never mentioned her rivals by name. Some faceless entity fighting for control of the area.

This is just one of the episodes I remember from our holidays in Sicily. There are many more. Every three years, I went to Sicily with my parents. Those I remember were when I was nine, twelve, fifteen and eighteen. The last time we went my mother was ill and we travelled by plane. All the other times we travelled by train because poverty accompanied us wherever we went. I think we had some kind of subsidy from the Italian Consulate in the UK for the train fare. It was a three-day-two-night expedition. I remember setting out from Victoria Station carrying three days' supply of food and wine with us. Especially stuck in my mind was the food: lasagne, roast chicken, cheese, loaves of bread. We'd have plates, cutlery, glasses, and an assortment of towels with us. At every transfer all this baggage had to be carried on to the next stage. No wheels on cases in those days. Then we'd get the ferry from Dover to Calais, and so began the first long stretch through France, Switzerland, until we finally pulled into Milan Station. Where our connection to Sicily was after a seven-hour wait.

We used to sleep on the waiting-room benches, though it was daytime, until someone complained about the space we were taking up. The Italian northerners had a great disdain for southern Italians. They saw us as muck, rolled their eyes at us, insulted us openly calling us "terroni", meaning "those who haven't evolved from the soil." Even though I was young, I noticed it, and felt like a second category being – a child of a minor god. There was the civilised world and then there was us. My parents didn't answer back. And it was probably the time when I came closest to feeling sorry for them. For us.

The journey all the way down to the tip of Italy – the toe of the boot – was excruciating. The heat in the train unbearable. When there was water in the stinking toilets, we gave ourselves a cursory wipe with flannels. Sometimes we used water in bottles. Every time we stopped at a station, my father would ask people on the platforms to fill our bottles. Then came the crossing of the Strait of Messina. At Villa San Giovanni, the train was broken into fragments of three coaches and loaded into the dark belly of the ferry. My mother wouldn't leave the train for fear of thieves taking our miserable belongings, until the ferry left mainland Italy. While my father and I went up on the deck to take in the view. But we had orders to go back

down to the train as soon as the ferry left. Then I'd go up again with my mother. She became emotional when Sicily was well in sight. She would become ecstatic. Talk to any passengers who'd listen to her. Some totally ignored her. She'd wave to people on passing ferries. Laughing and, surprisingly, being nice to me.

Reassembled together again, the train would crawl at a tortoise's pace along the Sicilian one-track countryside railway, under the sweltering heat. Even peasants who were travelling within Sicily moved compartment when they got a whiff of us. Another event that excited my mother was when the train stopped at a level crossing. A man got out of his van, brought a crate of lemons to our train and started selling them to the passengers hanging out of the windows. My mother bought a big bag full and gave me one to suck saying it would quench my thirst. Another man came along selling white straw handbags with fringes, and she bought me one.

By the time we reached The Village our bags of food stank to high heaven and so did we.