

Podere La Sole, Toscana, 1933

Paulo watched the ant crawl up the bark of the Big Tree until it was too high for him to see and the wind caused the leaves to shatter the swirling sunlight into sparkles and the air cooled his skin and it itched where the insect bit him yesterday and a farm wagon was coming up the hill in a cloud of dust behind the disagreeable mule and he knew he would soon smell the stink of the mule. He hid in the cavity between the enfolding roots of the Big Tree because he knew the wagon held his papa who was looking for him and would take him home and yell at him and maybe beat him for once again scratching pictures into the plaster of the stables. He wondered where the ant was going and what might be hidden at the top of the Big Tree and his papa stopped the wagon and was squinting into the dark draping shade of the tree and Paulo shrugged deeper into the space between the roots to keep from being seen and the mule pulling papa's wagon really did stink and it bit him three times before and it really hurt and he hated the mule.

"Paulo," called his father and the word for his name was hard to hear because a bird had flown into the tree, a black-and-white magpie, and it was looking curiously at Paulo and he wondered if it might be able to see the ant from its perch high in the branches. One day he would be tall enough to climb to the very top of the Big Tree and learn what is there and see the entire world from the top just like the ant and the magpie. There were many types of ants that lived in the soil beneath the Big Tree and his papa had slammed the reigns down and was heading up the hill toward the Big Tree through the rows of prickly wheat and red poppies. There were the orange ants that he called the demons and the white ants that he called the priests and then there were the big black ants he called the dragons and they bit you and clamped into your skin and

you had to pinch their heads off to get them to release and they were so big that birds like the magpie liked to eat them.

Paulo picked up a small stone and threw it at the magpie not to harm the bird but to watch the arc of the stone and how it flashed as it traversed the web of light and shadows beneath the arms of the Big Tree but the magpie flew away anyway and Paulo laughed because it was beautiful.

A dragon ant made its way tickling up Paulo's leg and Paulo smiled and watched it and knew that it would not bite if he left it alone but then his papa was lifting him roughly and Paulo laughed with delight and his father yelled at him and cuffed his head and carried him into the sunlight and the lights that connected the sky and the earth like a spiderweb spun as always, beautiful and mysterious, and soon he was inside papa's wagon and staring at the moving fields and watching the springtime wind make swirling patterns in the new wheat.

The girl was pretty and smiling and Paulo loved her as soon as she walked into the room and he ran to her and clutched her waist and she threw her arms into the air and laughed, not at him as so many did, but at the joy of being with him.

Paulo's mama scowled. "Paulo, let her go," she said and she pulled him away from the girl who was still smiling and who smelled like the roses in the courtyard where the big yellow-and-black spiders lived and their webs caught the morning dew and shimmered.

The girl knelt in front of him. "Hello, Paulo. I am Rocinthe."

Paulo squirmed but his mama held him tight and she never beat him but he was more afraid of her than of his papa who beat him often. "He doesn't talk," Paulo's mama said. "He's retarded."

The girl's eyes narrowed and she looked uncertainly back and forth between Paulo and his mama and the sound of a bell from the church in Buonconvento broke through the whisper of the wind in the curtains and Paulo stared at the patterns of the squares of tiles in the floor and noticed the imperfections in their symmetry for the first time.

"He is a beautiful boy," said the girl. "We will be great friends."

Paulo's mama pursed her lips and let out a long sigh and released Paulo and he flew into the arms of the glowing angel and she scooped him up and the distant bells of Buonconvento pealed over and over as she swung him in a circle and he laughed with joy.

It was easy to climb out of the window and Paulo loved the night and the stars wheeling through the sky and the web of light was even brighter when the sun was gone so he often went to the stables or the dovecote to draw his pictures. He had to draw the pictures because the light built up inside him and began to burn and the only way to make it stop was to release the light into a picture and even though he knew he was drawing it wrong it still made the pain lessen. The podere was still and the moon was shaped like a scythe so he picked up a stone and began scratching into the plaster at the inside of the manger below the house.

Paulo tried to draw exactly what he saw, the moon and the web of light like the spiderwebs in the courtyard but no matter how hard he tried he could not get it right and so he decided to keep trying. The drawing grew and grew as the moon moved overhead and the web of light spun reality like the spiders in the courtyard and a few tendrils of light touched the drawing but it was wrong, wrong. Paulo pounded the stone into the plaster and shattered the drawing and the cock crowed and he heard voices and he began to cry and his hands were bleeding and then his papa

was pulling him up and hitting his head and he cried out and the burning sensation flared in his eyes and he flailed out and suddenly he was on the ground and his papa was also on the ground and thunder rolled across the clear, dawning wheatfields and his papa was screaming "Madre di Dio!" and there was blood also on his papa's hands and the sun rose and Paulos screamed and screamed and screamed and screamed and screamed until the glowing angel came and swept him into her arms and hid him away in her bedroom and cried with him.

The glowing angel Rocinthe held him high and he could see the drowning water below and knew it would touch him and when it did it would be like burning fire like it always was and ripples of light shimmered angrily on the water and he screamed out and a housefly flew across the room and battered itself against the window and the glowing angel only smiled at him which made him scream louder.

"You must have a bath, little Paulo Diodatti," she sang. "You are a little boy, and all little boys are smelly things." She held him tightly and rubbed her nose against his and laughed and for a moment his fear subsided and he laughed too but then she was lowering him toward the shimmering water again and he kicked and fought and the fly battered itself against the glass and then he was plunged into the water and it was the end of all things and he kicked and screamed and the water became even angrier and splashed into his face and he choked and coughed and sputtered and all the while the glowing angel sang softly and soothingly.

"You are a sweet morsel underneath all this dirt, my little Dio," she sang, and she moved her hands across his chest and back, not roughly like mama, but smoothly, reassuringly. The burning angry water did not consume him, and after a few moments the engulfing warmth and the angel's

hands on his skin filled his senses and the fly was no longer battering itself on the window but had found a way to escape between the sash and the narrow opening at the top and the glowing angel was still singing. "We will cut your hair, too, and make you look like a boy instead of a hairy monkey. And I have made you a new shirt. Perhaps we will even go into the village soon, if you will behave."

She lifted him out of the water and swaddled him tightly in a warm blanket and put her hands on his shoulders and held her face close and rubbed his nose again with hers and he laughed and then she held him even more tightly and stared into his eyes and he saw her eyes were brown and gold and in them he was thrilled to see the web of light, even more beautiful than ever before and she sang softly almost like a whisper:

"They are wrong, little Dio, it is not a demon that eats your soul. It is the light of God in you. It shines so brightly that it blinds them."

Paulo awakened and cried and cried in the darkness until the door flew open and it was Rocinthe the glowing angel and she flew into his bed and cradled his head and shushed him and her gown was soft against his cheek and her hair braid fell across his shoulder and he buried his face into her neck and clenched his eyes tightly against the fading images in the darkness.

"Shh, my little Dio, it was only a dream," she sang, over and over again, matching the rhythm of his own rocking motion, holding him ever tighter until the clench of his muscles loosened and her warmth filled him with relief. Paulo clutched her when she moved and she shushed him again. "I'm not going anywhere, little Dio. You are a baby bird learning to fly and one day you will fly to the top of your tree but now you are in the nest and I will keep you safe."

The glowing angel sang to him and he could see a hint of motion behind his closed eyelids and he clenched them tighter because he knew the spiraling pinwheel of his nightmares was there waiting for him.

The glowing angel sang and he could feel the vibrations of the sounds in her throat and he nuzzled closer and put his hands on her neck and could feel the air flowing in and out and creating the beautiful song and for a moment, the briefest delicious instant, everything else was forgotten and the song filled the universe and his muscles relaxed. Once Paulo's mama had sung to him but that was long ago and he had forgotten why she never came anymore when he cried.

Finally he opened his eyes and the room was filled with love but the spinning pinwheel was still there, on the floor, dim but still just perceptible, always threatening to engulf him and the entire world.

"Where are we going?" asked the glowing angel and Paulo led her through the fields by her soft hand along the thread of light that marked the way. As Paulo got closer he began to run and she ran with him, still holding his hand and their feet flew until the Earth became transparent and they were flying over a swirling endless globe of energy and joy toward the Big Tree.

"Paulo, where are we going?" she sang again, and he kept running because he knew she already knew where they were going. The hills of Tuscany were rounded and bare save one, the tallest and most magical because at the crest dwelt the Big Tree, the only tree in sight, a massive spherical wonder of thick branches and dense oak leaves that drew the web of light to the ground like lightning to an iron rod. Paulo slowed and led her through the thick draping branches that formed the outer wall and into the cathedral of shadows beneath the tree.

"My God," she gasped. "Did you do this?" She spun around and around in the shadows of the branches, the hem of her skirt twirling wide, laughing with delight amidst the glowing shreds of colorful paper he had tied to each and every branch and twig until the entire underside of the tree had exploded with color almost like the web of light.

Paulo knelt between the three big roots and looked into the bare earth and watched the sparkles of life. The demon ants were busy devouring the husk of a beetle, and a stream of them extended away from the meal and into a hole beneath the big roots and into a network of tunnels beneath the roots and the tiny scintillating creatures scurrying through the tunnels made a beautiful shape like the veins of a leaf.

Paulo could feel the warmth of the glowing angel and knew she saw the beauty of this place, too. But when he looked up at her, she wasn't looking at the tree or the ants or the birds or the thousands of scraps of paper hanging from the tree or the intricate lines and patterns he had scraped into the dry earth or carved into the bark of the tree. She was looking at him, and her eyes were wide.