

CARTAGENA

By Lena Eltang

Translated from the Russian by Lisa Hayden

Petra

My brother was killed at dawn and found at eight in the morning, when the fish market opened. His body was lying in a large basin with salt. That's where they usually put the fish they've brought in from the night catch: the sun's already high at eight in the morning but nobody's brought the ice yet, so they dump all the fish there right away and sort it later. The janitor opened the building and called for the police right away, then the watchman, who'd been awakened by a siren, showed up at the market and said it was Brie, so they didn't call me in Cassino until nine but I was already on the train, on the way home, and I'd forgotten my phone at the college, in the dorm. They called my mother, too, but she never picks up, figuring nobody could possibly have anything good to report. When I got to the market, the commissioner looked at me like I was a ghost. He thought I was up north, he'd called there using the number he'd gotten from our neighbor, and he'd only left the message a half hour ago. And so now I'm standing here, barefoot and disheveled, as if I'd grabbed onto an eagle's tail and flown the whole three hundred kilometers.

The policemen were smoking and leaning against a car, the janitor was crouched by the entrance, and people were already gathering outside the gates of the market, which was cordoned off with yellow tape. I remember it peculiarly well though at the time I couldn't look at people at all. I remember the sun was shining right in my brother's face and I wanted it to be dark. I even remember the sound tin trays make when they're dragged across a granite floor. I was sitting on that floor, looking at my brother's face, as ruddy and fresh as if he'd just closed his eyes. Salt glistened in hair that had barely grown out, and a black drop of blood by his left nostril looked like a motionless ladybug. Alongside my brother, there lay a piece of green wire mesh that looked like a crab fishing net.

"Who could he be in hock to?" the commissioner asked. "Could you give us a list of his buddies?"

"Debts have nothing to do with it," I said. "He would've told me."

"Women, then..." The commissioner waved to the sergeant. "Get started."

I kissed my brother, brushed the salt from his face, stood, and left the loud, echoing hall crammed with washed-down metal tables. Confused fishermen and middlemen were crowding on the pier; they stood silently, trying not to look at me. Only old Vitantonio nodded and pulled his knit hat off his head. I walked along the breakwater, licking my salty lips and thinking about what to tell my mother when I got home. Everything was just like always: gasoline swirls in puddles, metal carts piled high with fish, wet nets with tangled little melon-like floats, and

stained ropes wound around mooring bollards. At some point, it all felt like a practical joke, some foolish game, and that people would start laughing and stamping their feet behind my back, and Brie, wearing his squishy fishing boots, would catch up to me, firmly grab me, and lift me off the ground.

“Hey, Petra.” I heard hurried footsteps behind my back. “Hold on. I’m going to need your signature on some papers. Stop by the station tomorrow, okay?”

“When can I take the body?” I stood, waiting for the commissioner. “I have to bury my brother so my mother doesn’t find out. Will you help me?”

“Are you sure that’s for the best?” He looked at me, puzzled. “It’s not illegal or anything, but people just don’t do that. A mother should mourn her own son.”

“Mama will just die if she finds out. She’s barely holding on as it is.”

“Maybe I should send the sergeant to tell your mother? A funeral, that’s something sacred. Think about it, you’ll have to lie for the rest of your life.”

“I’m a good liar.” I nodded to him and went on my way. The sun had already risen over the Santa Caterina church and was now shining right in my face. Spring days start early but as soon as dusk descends, night doesn’t even grant it a half-hour before thudding to earth with all its gravity, as if it were an enormous deep-water fish falling on deck. A blind, flat fish pounding against metal with its wiry green scales.

I went to the station every Tuesday and Thursday, all through March.

At the time, I wasn't even contemplating finding a way into the Briatico. I thought the police would sort things out themselves, there was a reason, after all, they called our commissioner a commissioner even though he was no more than a senior Carabinieri. Now he's handling the case involving the hotel owner: it caused a stir all around the region and about six people have told me about it already, all of them, of course, in different ways. The tinsmith who lives nearby stopped in to fix some utensils and spent a whole hour savoring the story of how that rich man Averici had been gunned down on his own land during the night and left sitting in the gazebo as if he were sleeping.

“There's no two ways about it, he was following his no-good woman from Perugia,” said the tinsmith, “caught the lovers in the gazebo, and took a bullet in the chest, right in his enraged heart. They dragged that woman to the station in plain view of the whole village, and it all happened in a way that I could finally have a good look at her acclaimed breasts. They really do stick out like squash in a garden!”

I half-listened to him, thinking about how quickly I'd grown unaccustomed to the locals' unceremonious way of expressing themselves and how it annoyed me now, kind of like the wall covered with mildew at my parents' house. In my several years away at school, up north, I'd managed to shape a completely different Petra—distant, reserved, even a little severe—and my

brother would have been indescribably happy if he could have seen me now. My cowardice and willingness to submit to circumstance had irritated him no end.

Oh, well, I thought, the commissioner will close the Averici case and then get to work on my brother's case, I just need to grit my teeth and wait. It would be good to size things up on my own, talk with people, write down my thoughts, and give that to the commissioner when the time comes. There's a reason, after all, that the province of Campania is paying for me to go to law school.

I had no money at all so that first week I got a job in a fish shop by the gas station, and I spent the night in the store room a couple times, catching up on my sleep on canvas sacks that smelled of wine vinegar. I told Mama I didn't want to leave her on her own as long as Brie was at sea with the fishermen. She looked at me, doubtful, but showed no signs of objecting: with her, you never knew what to expect from one day to the next. I remember how I asked old Pennichella who my brother might have gotten work with so he could disappear for a long time, and he wrote down a name on an empty cigarette pack. Then he gloomily added that he'd stop by and look in on my mother, though he didn't approve of my lying.

In the mornings I'd weigh slippery calamari and after noon I'd wash off my hands with lemon juice and head down to the waterfront, to the Carabinieri—six kilometers downhill and just as far coming back if nobody picked me up. The commissioner had already started running away from me, forcing the duty officer to lie that he wasn't there, but if I barged into his office,

he greeted me with quiet but convincing curses. On the other hand, they did show me a note they'd found on my brother; they brought it from the archive room. There were just two sentences: "Come to the grove behind the quarry at one in the morning. You'll get what you're asking for, pretty boy." *Pretty boy* was written in the village way: *fichetto*. Well, I had nothing to say against the note. It was a love note. And the handwriting was feminine, uncertain.

Fichetto, that was the name of the burro that walked around in a circle at the village oil press, and we'd run off to see him in the mornings every autumn, clutching a treat in our fists: a piece of bread roll or a prune. In those days, they weren't yet bringing olives to Castellabate for the oil press. Tautly stuffed sacks were delivered by cart to a barn at the village edge, where the black burro in the leather harness turned the grindstones. His eyes were sorrowful and satiny-black, which is how he got his nickname. My brother had gray eyes with lots of flecks but I have dark blue eyes, nobody in my family had eyes like mine except a Tuscan grandmother I've never seen.

I got work at the Hotel Briatico on the twelfth of March and the police closed the case at the end of March, so there was no more point in going to see them. It just infuriated me that I couldn't get things rolling, but now I'm in the exact place I need to be, practically the scene of the crime. A few days before his death, my brother told me he'd witnessed a murder and intended to meet someone from the Briatico to get money in return for his silence. "Money will

rain down on us like cod on the deck,” my brother said cheerfully, adding, “Pieces of eight! Pieces of eight!” in a shrill, birdlike voice.

Treasure Island is still on his shelf. The two of us tossed around quotes from that book so often that even many years later, when I got the letter from my brother—well, it was actually an ancient postcard, where he announced we’d get rich soon—I couldn’t help but remember what the squire said about having “money to eat—to roll in—to play duck and drake with ever after.”

What was Brie planning to keep quiet about? It’s unknown. Who was that person? A lodger or someone from the service staff? It’s unknown. The place they’d set for the meeting with my brother was chosen wisely: the road through the eucalyptus grove, which bordered the market, was blocked by granite chunks that had been taken out of the local quarry even before the war, so you couldn’t drive through, and hardly anybody goes there. Now they transport fish on a new road, around the hill.

Why was he killed instead of being paid? It’s unknown. Though it can be explained.

The Gardener

I’d go to the library a lot more often if it weren’t for that drab, prickly librarian. And this isn’t just because of the shelves with the wine, though there is an excellent Greco di Tufo there that I could drink forever, and the Vesuvio, too, which smells like ether and mushrooms. There’s nothing better than sitting on the threadbare sofa at dusk and gazing at the portrait hanging over

the desk where nobody writes anything. It's the proprietress of the house in sixty-two of the last century; the date and the artist's signature are in the lower corner. A barefoot girl is sitting in a wicker chair by a window, and behind her back there's a pale blue cypress-lined walkway lit through by the sun. Stefania is wide-eyed, and her evening gown is unhooked and about to fall from her shoulder. I think her lover, someone skillful and patient, drew her, and that's why she herself looks so impatient.

It's hard to believe the painting was done in the sixties. The Berlin Wall was being built somewhere and the sets were catching on fire in Peking opera, but at the Briatico, people were kissing outside in those tree-lined pathways and hosting balls. When I look at the sly proprietress, I often think she and I could have come to an agreement. Well, maybe not a complete agreement but we would've enjoyed the conversation. With certain people, you immediately feel like you were written into the very same *Tavole Amalfitane*—that's the seafarer's codex or, better put, maritime regulations—I saw it in a museum but don't remember what city it was.

There's a girl here at the hotel I feel something like that with, even though she annoyed me a little at first. She had a way of looking right into your face, and I get goose bumps when people stare. She knows that now and tries not to gawk, but she's got a new habit of stroking my head. My first woman had the exact same habit. She could spend hours stroking, smoothing, scratching with her nails, and tugging on my hair. She was Italian, too, only from Caltanissetta.

Her lips were the color of cinnabar and there was a pink streak over them, like her lipstick had smeared. Though she'd never used lipstick in her life.

My first woman dumped me here, in Italy. She just went, leaving me a tent, a primus stove, and a couple of sleeping bags. Before that, we'd spent a week on the coast near Taranto, living on bread and mussels in cider: we dug mussels on the shoal and bought cider from some local guy, right from the cart. I'd never eaten much shellfish before but my girlfriend handled them so masterfully—pricked them with a pin, sniffed them, counted the rings—that one time I let myself go and gobbled up a kettleful. It rained that night and mussel madness came over me. I woke up my woman and spun her all night like a mill wheel, nibbled at her like sheep's cheese, and licked her like a honeycomb. The tent collapsed when the stakes came loose in the sand but we were incapable of stopping so had a good romp in the wet tarp, like puppies.

Then we made our way to the other shore and spent one more night that crunched with mussel shells, and she dumped me in the morning. She left traveling light, she only had a knapsack with a couple t-shirts, a notepad, and some pencils. I remember how she'd flat-out refused to leave it in the tent when we went up the hill: she said her sketches had to be with her, heaven forbid they get lost.

I also remember how she talked the whole way from Traiano about Norsemen, a two-tone masonry facade, and a red porphyry baptismal font. And as I shivered in the rain and thought about how lucky I was, I looked at her hair, plaited into ten braids.

“I’m turning thirty in June,” she said after we’d set up the tent in a dry grotto at the base of a granite cliff. “I’m eight years older than you. That never even crossed your mind, isn’t that right?”

The wet granite was black and the dry granite was pink, making our shelter look like a dog’s gaping jaw. My girlfriend sat down on the edge of the granite tongue and swung her legs over the water.

“Is that so? That means we should meet here again in eight years,” I said, crawling into the tent and lying on a sleeping bag. “In this exact same spot. Come here.”

“But that’s another century!” she said, settling in alongside me. “We’ll be old and fat, we’ll have houses, canaries, and mortgages. Will you really come?”

“Of course. I’m willing to marry you tomorrow morning at the village mayor’s office.”

“Oh, come on, kiddo.” She started laughing in the dark. Her hair was still wet and it cooled my stomach. “But eight years from now is an entirely different matter.”

Kiddo! Her adulthood seemed affected and her reasoning seemed childish. When we met, she’d just come to London to go to a school for art restorers, smoked grass, and went around in a hand-me-down biker jacket. And I was an urchin in a tweed sport coat going to college at his father’s expense. Then she started school, traded the jacket for beaded Indian dresses, and began looking even younger. Anyway, what’s the difference? Age should be counted from the end of the line, but not everybody understands that.

“Deal. I’ll be here on May 20, 2007.”

We were lying feet-to-head, I was looking at her hip, which looked in the dark like a rounded snow bank, and I imagined I was smoothly skiing downhill.

“Watch out you don’t let me down,” she said and fell right asleep.

Flautista_libico

I had to come here to sort everything out (although, no, I’m lying, that reason is the least of it). I wanted to see the house they’d taken away from me and I wanted to live in it despite all the mediocre cards I’d been dealt in this story. And now I am.

When this hotel is mine, I won’t even think of kicking out all the poor old people, I’ll appoint Pulia as the manager, clear out the hookers (and the rich old people, too), leaving everybody nobody needs, and we’ll all pick olives and make oil. Stefania promised that everything here will be mine: I remember her roguish smile and sweeping hand motion that encircled half the world (the second half would have to be given to the monastery). I should have inherited the estate, there is a reason, after all, that Diacopi blood flows through my veins, and a small donation would have been enough for the Greeks; that bitten-off finger was worth no more. A stableman smilingly told me about that finger but the story seemed bizarre when I was six years old. After my grandmother came to worship, apparently in Cephalonia, she found her way into the reliquary where the sacred remains were stored and bit off Saint Andrew’s finger,

pretending she was pressing against the hand for a long kiss (and what kind of wolfish teeth do you need to do that, anyway?).

Her conscience began tormenting her later and she informed the monastery that she hadn't stolen the sacred object but merely borrowed it, and was planning to leave to the Greeks all her relics that remained intact after the chapel fire (meaning charred bones gathered at the site of the fire). As well as the house and its grounds, too, under the condition the Greeks restore the chapel. They summoned a notary for this but the matter dragged on because the monks weren't answering the proposal and Stefania wanted exuberant consent (or maybe she was expecting something like a pardon). Several weeks went by in angry perplexity, the monks weren't saying anything, and the notary went back and forth a few times before stopping. And then one morning my grandmother fell off a horse and died, despite being an excellent horsewoman. After her death it emerged that the notary had good reason for all the travel: on one of those days, Stefania had overcome her pridefulness and rewritten her will. Without any conditions whatsoever.

It's pretty obvious that when she was sitting over those papers, she had no intention of dying so fast. A last will can be rewritten a hundred times in the course of a day. My grandmother was neither a devout churchgoer nor a fanatic: she was most likely tormented by a collector's passion. There wasn't any other estate in the region that had a chapel like this, what with its authentic sixteenth-century frescoes and iron castings, but the main thing was that the shrine with the relics was a hefty trunk, not some little ark. The stableman said people in the

village had their doubts about the relics and the old people chuckled that, well, the trunk might be stuffed with a hodge-podge of bones, but half of them were from sheep. People in the area thought my grandmother was quite some liar, especially for her stories about cardinal Dalla Costa, (bishop of Padua, seemingly in the thirties), who was allegedly her first cousin once-removed. I think that truly is a lie.

Relics were scattered around the whole glade after the chapel burned down, and Stefania walked around in ashes up to her knees, out of her mind and grabbing at shards and small hunks of metal. After she'd come to her senses, she said she'd pay for every last bit of cartilage if all the bones were picked up by evening, so the village boys cleaned the fire site to a sparkle and piled up a fairly decent little mound at the edge of the glade. There were rumors you could assemble two apostles from those bones, in any case, there turned out to be too many bones. The finger wasn't found, though: it evidently turned to dust as punishment for my grandmother's avarice.

She was a flighty, limited, quick-tempered woman but she was my kin and I liked her perpetual patchouli, baggy dresses, and habit of walking around the house barefoot. And who so wanted her to die? The Greeks weren't involved, they still haven't even sent an attorney to look over the property. I have no idea who Averici paid the rent to after 2001: maybe to them, maybe not to anyone at all. My fugitive father didn't get a single lire and there was just one entry regarding him in the will: *that he not set foot on my land*, over-the-top dramatic but that was

Stefania. My mother and I didn't even warrant entries like that. My grandmother's promise was an air kiss, she knew me too little to grab for the papers, my face and habits reminded her of her son (that's what she said), she wanted to bring me into the family (that's what she said), and I was promised heaven and earth but that would have taken a little more time, at least a year or two.

My mother was planning to let me go to Traiano for the whole summer and that summer would have become the foundation stone in the wall of my future castle. In reality, though, the summer began at boarding school and in autumn of 2002 I had to kneel for the first time by a dirty sink and open my mouth as wide as I could.

Petra

My childhood ended the instant the Saint Andrews chapel burned down. My brother and I used to go there to play, well, actually, he went there and had to drag me along with him, I was ten and never left his side. They'd been fixing up the chapel since early spring: it was surrounded by scaffolding and there was a big padlock on the door because the restorers left their tools and work clothes inside. There were two of them that summer, and one was apparently a Roman: they worked slowly and were very taken with the local wine. Brie knew where they hid the key, under a large piece of pink limestone that decorated the flowerbed with the lupines.

We got there around noon on the day of the fire and found a stranger in our domain. A young woman in a striped dress that looked like a sailor shirt was sitting on a rock across from the chapel; an open knapsack stood alongside her and she had a large drawing pad in her hands. She looked at us cheerfully and said, “All the best things go out of their way to just happen to be closed or broken. I wanted to sketch the fresco: I saw it in a book but real life is totally different! There’s a big lock hanging there instead, like it’s some cattle shed.”

I don’t remember her face, I only remember her mouth: lush and dark as if she’d been eating bilberries, and a little smeared around her lips. This is private property, Brie haughtily told her, tourists aren’t allowed, but she started laughing and got a big apple out of her knapsack. We ate the apple and offered her the key to the chapel as a modest reward—we could have just given it but some sort of sudden greed gripped us and besides, Brie had been talking incessantly all day about a pen knife he’d seen at the hardware shop.

The young woman looked at us, understanding, and got out a green five-thousand-lire bill. You know who that guy is, she asked, poking her finger at the portrait on the bill, it’s Bellini, he wrote the opera *La straniera* and went to school here in the south. I’ve come home, kiddies, but I apparently look like someone from abroad, too, otherwise how can you explain the fact that you’re treating me like an American tourist? But I forgive you, I was shameless myself as a child.

She winked at us, took the key my brother held out, flung the knapsack on her shoulder and headed for the chapel, with us following her. Brie cheered up and whispered in my ear that we'd get rich today, because he had an excellent idea.

We milled around outside the chapel while the woman fumbled with the rusty padlock, then we went in after her. She stood at the sarcophagus with the relics and looked, mouth agape, at the fresco, which was nothing special. The fresco depicted a crowd of people at a lake shore and two kneeling apostles.

The chapel was crammed with wooden sawhorses, buckets, and jars, and there was a pleasant smell of turpentine and oil paint; brushes had been left on the altar and some small knives, too, which Brie immediately snapped up, sorted through, and disdainfully tossed aside, saying they were dull. Then he climbed onto a sawhorse and began haughtily scrutinizing the fresco as if he understood something about it; I was upset because I thought he liked the young woman.

Sure, she had long legs, and her hair, which was so black it was almost blue, was gathered in a bun woven from lots of tiny braids. I decided to make the same kind of bun at home, and I did. I still braid my hair like that sometimes.

“When you make it to Rome and see Ghirlandaio's capella,” the young woman said, without turning, as if she weren't talking to us, “you'll realize the fresco here is no worse, not in

the least. An ordinary village artist painted it but look at those birds! Their scarlet feathers reflect the apostles' haloes and the birds look like they're openings in the heavens, do you understand?"

Brie took two steps along the board he was standing on, so he could look at the birds, but he grazed a jar of turpentine and fell, crashing right at the young woman's feet, along with the jar. He lay there for a time, sulking, then abruptly sprang up, grabbed my hand, and dragged me toward the door. The turpentine had spilled on the floor but all the shavings there soaked it up like a thick rug. I didn't immediately understand what Brie was doing when he pressed himself against the wooden door, firmly closed it, and twice turned the key, which was still in the lock. Let her open up her wallet again, so she doesn't get too high an opinion of herself, my brother said, bending toward me. His cheeks were covered with red spots but he was smiling.

"Hey you, do you hear me?" My brother went up to the chapel window, which was covered by a metal grate, shoved a finger through the grid, and knocked on the glass. "When you're tired of admiring the birds, put another bill with the composer under the door. Two's even better. And then we'll think about whether to let you out of there."

The young woman appeared on the other side of the window: her nose flattened ludicrously against the dirty glass, her even white teeth gleamed, and she didn't look the slightest bit scared.

“Nice joke,” she said, “but you won’t get away with it. Today’s a work day and the owners of the brushes and palette-knives will show up soon. Nobody leaves their tools overnight in a chapel where even children can sneak in easily. Just open up, I’m not mad at you!”

The remark about children made my brother’s cheeks flame even brighter: he shook his head indignantly and started pulling me away from there, and we left the glade, went down to the sea, and ran across some of Brie’s buddies who had a basketball with Stefano Rusconi’s autograph. The boys raced around in the sand and I made a fort with towers on the shoal. By about four o’clock, we’d completely forgotten about the young woman. Actually, at first we forgot but we remembered later, when we were lying on the wild beach and heard the siren from the fire truck that was driving along the lower road, which was right above us.

My feet went cold from that sound and I still remember how I got up off the sand and slowly walked toward the black boulders that bordered the beach: you could see the road from there if you stood on them. A premonition of misfortune smothered me but my brother and the other boys calmly climbed ahead of me, grasping clumps of grass and the precipice’s rocky teeth.

Driving up the hill along the narrow, twisty rutted road wasn’t an easy climb and one of the firemen—he was fat, wearing yellow overalls—got out of the truck and waved his arms around, explaining to the driver the best way to turn. After we’d clambered onto an outcrop on the cliff, we caught sight of tongues of flame over the park at the Briatico. The reddish flame

stood high but a dense black cloud climbed even higher, as if someone had shaken every bit of soot out of a huge chimney all at once.

“That’s not the hotel,” Brie said, reflecting, “the hotel’s much further to the left. That’s the hotel roof sticking out behind the cypresses. Do you happen to remember if that city girl had cigarettes with her?”