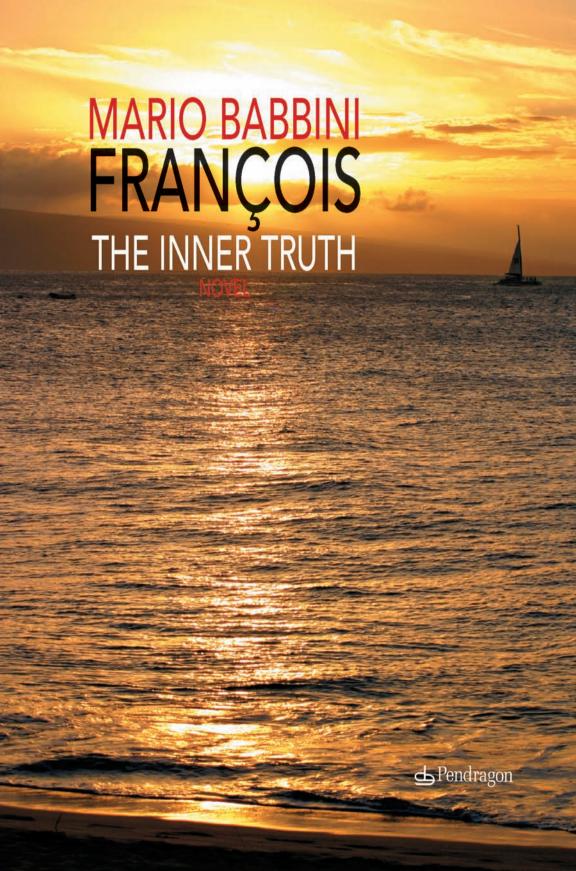
François is a fisherman in a small village on a Caribbean island. In flash-back form, his story unfolds, with all the grief, abandonment, catastrophe and the small, daily surprises. With coherence and poetry, Babbini's writing paints a solid, resolute character. A solitary, obstinate man who is able to mould his destiny, in order to achieve a divine goal: giving love, charity and forgiveness.

François. The inner truth

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## Mario Babbini

## François The Inner Truth

**Novel** 

Mario Babbini François The Inner Truth novel

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## Chapter 1

It was a Sunday morning in the early nineties on one of the many islands scattered on the ocean along the tropic of cancer.

The town, on the west side of the island, wound along a white sandy beach bordered by a rocky promontory on the north. The wreckages of four big ships, all cargos used to transport bananas, were stranded on the beach very close to the first houses. The government of the island had not yet found the money to take these hulks away.

The town was a good example of a fast grown urban center. Two new buildings of the local banks were on the main street together with the telephone office and a big hotel for tourists, but the roads were full of holes, the sewers were open and an absurd intertwine of wires was hanging from the electricity poles. Several frameworks of cars were lying forgotten on the sidewalks. The roads were full of the best multicolored garbage made of leftovers of fruit and vegetables, ragged papers, some dead mice or chicks, bottles of beer and Coca-Cola. Few houses on both sides of the street were stone buildings painted with lively colors but many were small, dirty and decrepit wood shacks placed on poles fitted on the ground and surrounded by rusty iron plates. Several plucked chickens were scratching about in the yards and some haggard dogs were sleeping in front of shack entrances.

A road leading out of town followed the slope of a hill. The villas of rich people were located on both sides of the street. They exhibited large fronts with big porches and balconies and were surrounded by white walls with wrought iron gates. Inside, the gardens showed well trimmed lawns and a profusion of plants and flowers that painted brilliant colors on the wall background. From the windows one could see all the arch of the bay and a group of remote islands, suspended in the light of the sea.

Even if the rainy season had already started, the morning was clear and the absolute lack of pollution gave the air a crystal appearance that carved every object in the landscape. The sun, already high in the sky, shone on the plantations of coconut palms that stretched along the foothill up to the base of the mountains. The sun rays lightened the yellow tips of the leaves fluctuating in the wind, and created waves of golden light against the green of the forest. Few cows, that the intestinal worms made bony and skinned despite the forage abundance, were grazing on the football field in front of the school building. Some newborn calves were sucking their udders and few white herons were standing near each cow, ready to catch insects and lizards put to flight by the movement of the grass.

The catholic church was located outside town on a climbing road. A stone staircase led to a large church square on the border of a field of bananas and mango trees. All that was left of the ancient nineteenth century building was the bell tower located on the church facade, made of stone and elevated on four porch arches. The inside of the building, a large central nave and two aisles, was unadorned, with two lines of benches on the side of the central corridor and some chairs placed near the entrance. The stations of the Way of the Cross were hanging on the church walls and the roof was of iron plates painted in white. The simple internal aisles contrasted with the main altar, a magnificent monument of white and pink marble with several sculptures picturing scenes of Jesus' life. The altar had been carefully assembled for the Sunday mass and the bright colors of two bunches of anthurium flowers and croton plants showed up on the snow-white of the marble.

The town people started crowding the church.

A sea of black faces: the offspring of slaves that white men had stolen from Africa centuries before. After the slavery time and the colonial period, when the island eventually conquered again the freedom lost five centuries before, almost all the English had gone away leaving the inheritance of a language and the basis for a well-being that was all still to be built.

The people were coming on foot or crowded in the pickups for the transport of bananas, but the wealthy were parking new and expensive cars, carefully cleaned and polished. Everyone stopped on the church square to say hello and to exchange few words. What was amazing was their elegance, an exotic elegance which perfectly harmonized with the nature around. Women dresses were a palette of lively colors with drawings of flowers, leaves, variegated parrots, grey herons, blue-yellow toucans, or were regular but always with bright colors that showed up the brown of the skin. Some clothes were embroidered, with wide necklines and long skirts, very similar to evening dresses. The oldest men wore white or blue cotton shirts, the young boys had multicolored shortsleeved blouses and dark trousers carefully ironed. The children were certainly the most beautiful. The girl dresses were full of laces and embroi-

deries and the youngest, with their round faces, their black wide-open eyes and many hair braids bound with colored ribbons, were like little dolls gathered in a large shop-window. The boys had short hair and were dressed like adults, with long trousers and colored shirts. It was already very hot and people foreheads started beading with sweat.

As always, the old man was among the first to enter the church. With slow steps, since he was limping a little on his left leg, he went to his usual place, a chair at the bottom of the central nave. Even if his hair was a white down, nobody would have thought he was eighty two.

He was tall, lean and his aspect had the Berber features of the Tuareg people. The red-brownish skin was dried by the sun, but there were few wrinkles on his face. The arms were solid, brawny and full of scars and a wider scar covered the chest and the base of the neck. The old man had very clear eyes and the light brown-golden irises stood out against the black of the face.

The people started entering the church and many were saying hello to the man sitting near the entrance.

"Good morning François, how are you today?".

"Good morning Alick, not too bad I should say".

"Good morning François".

The little voice was the one of a small boy, hand in hand with his older brother. The old man looked at the boy's eyes and smiled.

"Good morning Peter, you are really a clever little man".

François: his name was chosen by his mother, a mulatta who was from the French islands in the north. Many persons in town had French names since the island was repeatedly conquered in the past by the French and the island dialect was also a mixture of French and English.

The old man was watching the people entering the church and he felt that in the round or oval lines of those faces, in those eyes that reminded of some antelopes of savanna, in those flattened noses with large nares, in those mouths with tumid and sensual lips, in that way of smiling that disclosed the whitest sets of teeth, in the women hair arranged in different hair styles or combed in long braids hanging on their shoulders, in the slender bodies of the girls with long necks and firm breasts bursting out of clothes, in the big nates of the old women showing an evident steatopygia, in that color of the skin that ranged from a light mahogany to a strong black with a bluish reflex, there was all the history of his people, of the thousand tribes of his race.

There were Serer from Senegal, Fulani from Mauritania, Ashanti from Ghana, Douala from Camerun, Benguela from Angola, Babwa from middle Congo, Sukuma and Yao from Victoria lake, Shona from Zimbabwe, Tutsi from Ruanda, Lango from the high Nile.

And the old man remembered what he had seen a few days before on TV, in the new bar near the movie theater of the town. One of the many reportages on the famine in subsaharian regions of Africa, where the drought had spoiled the harvests. The kids with skeletal limbs, the sore lips full of flies, the wide-open eyes that were saying "I am hungry", framed by the camera only for a short while, professionally estimated in order to rise in the audience the amount of pity that made the reportage good and appreciated, without ending into a disgusting feeling.

It's really true, he thought, the children of slaves are better than the children of free men.

The observation was difficult to explain. A non-believer would have simply said "an ironical destiny" but the old man knew that every human event answers a plan of God, even if this plan is unintelligible in most cases. He was sure of one thing, however: in the past as well as now, the suffering of his own people was the consequence of the behavior of other people whose greediness in the past had promoted slavery, and whose indifference or annoyance today simply prompted them to switch off the video.

Now the church was full of people and it was difficult for the late comers to find a seat on the benches. The choir members, most of them young, were entering through the door of a lateral aisle. Two men and a woman held their guitars, a short and sturdy man was carrying two drums and a boy, with a Somalian aspect and his hair combed in long locks, sat in front of the keyboard. The choir conductor, a man elegantly dressed with jacket and tie, took place in front of a reading desk near the orchestra. From another reading desk a woman announced: "Today is the fifteenth Sunday in ordinary time, cycle C. The entrance hymn is number 180 in the song book".

The crowd stood up and the instruments hinted a few notes of the song. The crowd started singing.

I the Lord of sea and sky
I have heard my people cry

. .

The song rose high, amplified by the vault of the church, accompanied by the sound of the guitars and the beating of the drums. Everybody was singing, the limpid voices of the children mixed with those deeper of the men and those sweeter of the women. They were singing even with their bodies which were waving rhythmically, while their feet were moving in a dancing rhythm.

The old man joined in the singing. He had a bass voice, perfectly tuned, that followed accurately all the nuances of the melody. This too is prayer, he thought, and perhaps is the more effective prayer since it gets us near the others and teaches us to love those who are singing with you.

The song was going on and the choir repeated on second voice the end of each strophe.

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Here I am Lord. Is it I lord?
I have heard you calling in the night
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. . .

The latest notes of the song faded slowly and the silence which followed was broken by the priest's words: "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...".

The mass had started.

For the old man that mass, for many years now, was not only a meditation but also a moment of memories that surfaced, vivid or faded, from a remote distance.

"I confess to Almighty God...".

The old man remembered the time when, in the same church, he said that prayer in Latin, as he had learned it at the catechism "Confiteor Deo omnipotenti, beatae Mariae semper Virgini, beato Michaeli Archangelo, beato Ioanni Baptistae...".

The priest went on praying "...that I have sinned...".

The old man was often thinking of the problem of sin. Certainly his life didn't seem a sinful one, but he believed the parable of the talents. The person who received more must give more, he thought, and a sin that could be a mild one for a person who has nothing to give, becomes a serious sin for a person who received much and gave little. He asked himself again, as he had done several times, if in his life he had succeeded in giving as much as he had received.

The answer was always the same: no.

The priest started singing the Kyrie and the crowd sang again.

Lord have mercy Lord have mercy Lord have mercy

The melody, in si minor, was slow and solemn and the old man fancied that the song was getting out of the church to spread over the town lit by the sun. To look for all those who had forgotten the word of God, he thought, all those who had lost the urge to love the others and who didn't know that the unconcern toward our brothers is the way to damnation.

Christ have mercy Christ have mercy Christ have mercy

The music rose an octave and the guitars started a fast arpeggio accompanying the song. The women voices got louder.

Lord have mercy Lord have mercy Lord have mercy

Again the motif of the first strophe but now the drums were scanning a monotonous rhythm and the boy's hands were running on the keyboard to embroider chords that were changing the timbre according to the change of the registers.

The priest started singing the *Gloria* and the song was marked by a rhythmic clapping of hands.

The weather was changing and a light breeze from south-east was gathering balls of clouds on the top of the mountains. The blue of the sky changed to a uniform grey and the first drops of rain raised spirals of steam from the hot asphalt of the road. In a few minutes it was pouring and the roar of the water, amplified by the plated roof, became a deafening rolling.

The old man liked the rain. When a shower got him in the open he didn't look for a shelter but allowed the rain to run on his skin and tasted the drops running on his face. In the rain everything looked different: the colors of the forest, the smell of the earth, the scents of the

plants, the outline of the trees vanishing in the water curtain. It seemed that the surrounding objects were getting young again and the old man felt deeply the sensation, almost tangible, of being wrapped in that shining and wet new world.

A man from the orchestra stood up in front of the reading desk and said on the microphone: "The refrain of the psalm is: *the precepts of the lord gladden the heart*".

Then he started singing while playing the guitar.

In the sunset of life it is only the memory the thin thread that ties yesterday's and today's existence and prevents time oblivion, the old man thought. In the singing man he had seen himself again, the boy who sang the psalm during Sunday masses. In those days he had the music in his blood and was the best in playing the guitar, an instrument bought after years of careful and obstinate savings.

But the psalm is beyond time, he thought, and the generations that have repeated its words unchanged throughout centuries, are the best evidence of the eternal praise that humans are always giving to God.

The priest had started reading the Gospel "...but the man was anxious to justify himself and said to Jesus: 'And who is my neighbor?'. Jesus replied: 'A man was once on his way down from Jerusalem to Jericho...'".

The old man became attentive. He had got absent-minded looking at a chubby baby who, in his mother arms, was obstinately trying to grasp her braids, in spite of the deterring attempts of the woman.

He always believed this passage of the Gospel was the highest message of Jesus teaching. He remembered what he had learned at the catechism: love towards others, one of the highest human natural virtues, that Jesus grace had made supernatural virtue.

He couldn't help thinking of what newspapers reported nowadays.

In the land where he still felt like a son, Tutsi and Hutu, two tribes of his people, were slaughtering each other in a genocide that had made hundreds of thousands of victims in a few months. And it was a massacre of unbelievable ferocity which involved young boys, elders, sick people, pregnant women, neonates, babies, and which compelled the defeated to pay in order to get the privilege of being killed by a gun shot instead of being cut into pieces by the blades of machetes. The old man remembered what a missionary referred from the newspaper: "For many years the local televisions were preaching only tribal hate. Unfortunately the outcome was totally expected". Then François' mind drifted to the shores

of Africa and the slave trade. He could hear the creaking of the timbers as the slaves huddled in the bellies of the boats weeping their way towards the Americas.

Was this the good and charitable man of the message of the Gospel? Perhaps it is my old age that makes me so pessimistic, the old man thought. In fact, for many years now, what he read in newspapers or saw on TV, seemed more and more convince him that the message of the Gospel was absurd. Men's actions were wars, terrorism, the tortures of tyranny, homicides, rapes, robberies. Even behaviors that were not criminal and looked lawful at first sight, became quite dubious when considered according to Jesus' word. When he saw on TV war reportages he couldn't help thinking that weapons, rifles, tanks and airplanes were hardly ever built by the people who were fighting. There were other people that were selling weapons, people who were living in wealth and had, as their first interest, only the one of increasing their wealth. People who proclaimed the iniquity of war but were supplying antipersonnel mines to fighting nations. People who punished countries selling drugs with embargo, but who were the first to buy drugs from the same countries.

"...A man was once on his way down from Jerusalem to Jericho...".

Many questions were occurring to his mind. How big was the gap between the kids who were playing in the houses of the rich and those who were playing in the favelas of South America? Was it really so licit to buy expensive clothes, jewels, sophisticated toys, luxurious cars, vacation houses and all the other things that newspapers and TV offered with persuasive and very effective messages? Was it really so licit to give our sons everything, while forgetting that all children are, at equal right, sons of the sons of God? It seemed that the God of the Gospel had been replaced by the new Gods: money, power and pleasure. Gods to conquer and, for many persons, to conquer even at any cost.

Be careful François, he thought, the sin against hope is the worst of all sins. You know that, in spite of all the persuasive strength of events, Jesus' word tells us a different story. The evil of the world is always under our eyes, but the good is often bashful and concealed. There are many men that do bad things but there are other men who, modestly and silently, follow every day the Gospel of Luke "...he went up and bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them".

The choir started singing *Alleluia* and then everybody knelt down for the elevation.

"Make me an instrument of your peace, Lord" the old man prayed "and forgive my sins because I am a sinful man. Forgive me for all my acts that offended You, but above all forgive me for what I didn't do, for the help that I didn't give to others, for the food that I didn't offer to those who were hungry, for the house that I didn't open to those that needed a shelter, for the assistance that I didn't give to the sick that asked for assistance, for the comfort that I didn't bring to those who needed comfort".

The rain was ceasing, the clouds were dissipating in the sky revealing portions of light blue, and the bright colors of a double rainbow drew iridescent half circles from one side of the bay to the other.

The woman announced over the microphone, "The communion song is number 156 in the song book". The crowd started singing again.

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Lord you have searched my heart
and You know when I sit and when I stand
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Starting from the first benches all went to the altar to receive communion. The song was going on.

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Yahweh, I know You are near
standing always at my side
```

The old man reached the altar with his limping step, took the Host and went back to his chair, deep in prayer.

The priest gave the final benediction and the woman started singing the final hymn.

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When the saints go marching in
when the saints go marching in
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People were getting out of the church and the notes of the song were stressed by a pealing sound coming from the bell tower. The bell-ringer, a sturdy young boy with a very dark skin, was following the rhythm of the song using the bells like a battery. The outcome, even if unusual, was very effective.

As it happened every Sunday, on the church square a group of kids surrounded the old man.

"Are we going fishing, François?".

"Can you take us fishing François?".

"No, I am sorry kids, not today, my boat is broken. Next time, as soon as I have repaired the boat".

On Sunday, for many years now, the old man had been used to take a group of kids fishing along the coral reef, on the left side of the bay. On his boat he had put an old outboard engine that the owners of a yacht had left on the beach and that he had succeeded in repairing by adapting some parts from a nearby mechanic's shop. But that Sunday the boat was out of use. Some days previously, coming back from the sea, it had knocked a submerged rock, a few meters away from the shore.

I must be really decrepit, he had thought listening to the sharp sound of the prow planking that was breaking, because he had always perfectly known the location of that rock.

The crowd going down the road full of sun, was a kaleidoscope of colors that were fading, at the end of the slope, in the shining azure of the sea.

But the old man didn't follow the crowd.

He moved slowly, with his limping step, along the road leading to the cemetery, high on the hill.

There were many graves, up there, waiting for his prayer.

François is a fisherman in a small village on a Caribbean island. In flash-back form, his story unfolds, with all the grief, abandonment, catastrophe and the small, daily surprises. With coherence and poetry, Babbini's writing paints a solid, resolute character. A solitary, obstinate man who is able to mould his destiny, in order to achieve a divine goal: giving love, charity and forgiveness.

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