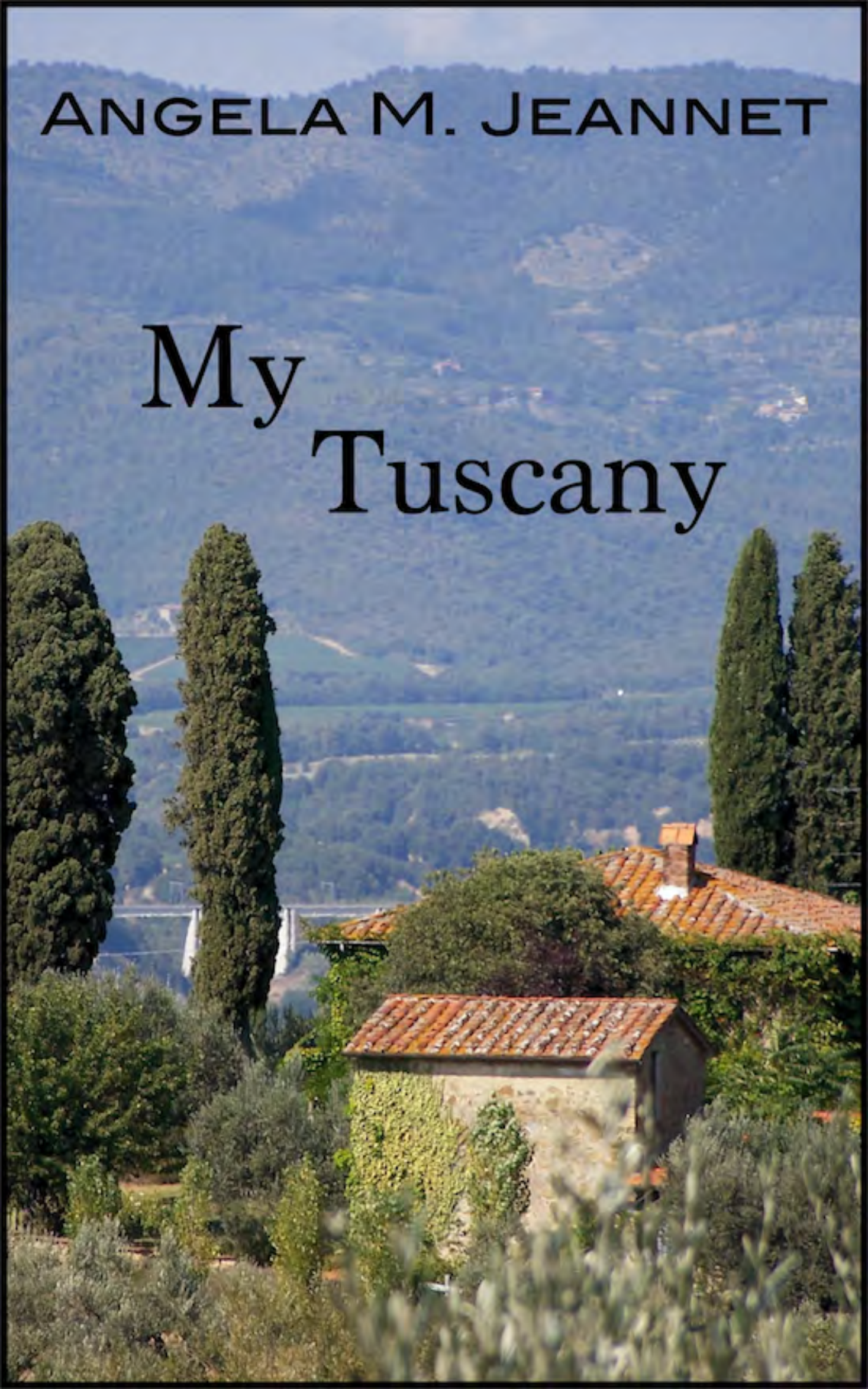
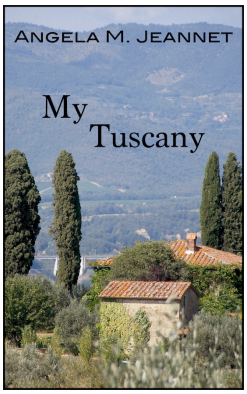

ANGELA M. JEANNET
My Tuscany



My Tuscany *follows a girl's coming of age during a dramatic period in European history. The events take place in Tuscany in the last years of the Fascist regime, during WWII and the early 1950s. At the heart of the story is a reflection on the indoctrination of young people, which has become a particularly sensitive issue in recent years.*

My Tuscany

Angela M Jeannet

My Tuscany

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I

The Seasons

I.1
An adventurous year

That morning in mid-October, when we entered the school building we found a mass of people crowding the main hall. Dim light bulbs in brass sconces lit the scene. The students rushed here and there, chattering and shouting and pushing each other either to get closer to friends or just out of wild excitement. Our professors stood in the middle of the milling crowd with their coats on and worried faces. The noise was deafening. Nobody had gone into the classrooms yet.

Suddenly, the voice of the school director boomed in the dark hall from a loudspeaker.

"Tomorrow morning all classes will meet downtown. In the Scolopi building. Classes will begin at 7:30. At 10:30, classes will be dismissed."

After a moment of stunned silence, the din of voices started again. "Where? At 7:30? Why? Where?"

The loudspeaker was repeating over and over, "Tomorrow morning all classes will meet downtown. In the Scolopi building. That arrangement will continue indefinitely."

Now pandemonium erupted. The address system kept blaring out the new schedule but was crackling so loudly that few understood what the Director said. The professors started calling and gathering their students around them to explain, shouting too, where they were going to meet the following morning.

"Near Santa Maria del Fiore, that's right. At 7:30 a.m. Because of the air raids. You'll be sent home at 10:30. Yes, classes will begin at 7:30. Yes. Tell your parents that there are changes in the schedule."

At last the boys, still shouting and pushing, started moving toward the exit and filing out through the massive front door. I went out with the other girls. We were a much smaller group, and we were supposed to use our own entrance, a narrow door cut into the brick wall on the east side of the building. Once I got out I went to the

corner across the street and gazed at the school building. I had to wait for my father to come and pick me up. Our school was beautiful, with ochre moldings and wide windows overlooking a square filled with pine trees. But it was right by the railroad; the Allies were sure to target that corridor with their bombs, people said. We could not stay there. Now that everybody had left, the building looked noble and forlorn. I felt that we were abandoning it in the time of danger.

The following day at dawn, the downtown area was filled with students of all ages. We spread everywhere in the narrow streets, sleepy-faced, dragging our feet and our bookbags. We formed long lines, boys and girls separately, out of habit, but then we all filed through the same back door two by two, disappearing inside the ancient Scolopi building.

First day in the new location. It's mid-morning but the classroom is still dark. At 10:30 the sirens blare the alert. We jump up and look at each other; we don't know what we are supposed to do. Our Latin teacher stands up behind her desk at the top of the podium. She tells us that there is no danger—the planes are headed north of Florence. We must just leave the building to be on the safe side and go home right away without running and shouting. She goes to the door and watches us file out as if she wanted to count us. The narrow hallways are filling with people. Everybody is being herded out from the glum classrooms of this former convent. It's dark in the halls. The glass panes of the windows are painted black because of the air raids. The sirens keep wailing. The lights go out. The classrooms empty slowly into the corridors that wind up and down the building and become incredibly crowded. We shuffle downstairs, bumping against the banisters and into each other. As we turn toward the main exit, I see a boy lean on the wall and vomit in the corridor. His face is green with terror. I look at him with surprise.

"How silly. We are going to be let out. What's the problem?"

I am excited: this is a great adventure. I like being free to go where I choose in the middle of the day.

"I love this war," I tell myself as I follow the crowd. "Things are happening all the time. The *Duce* told us to be ready for this. We may become heroes—we might even die for our country. At last we are being tested."

I admired my Latin professor.

"Well, she is not a soldier, but she is a Red Cross volunteer."

Often the professor didn't have time to go home to change into civilian clothes and she came to school wearing her dark blue uniform. She carried in her hand a veil with a white circle and a red cross in it. She was dark-haired and tall; for me, her only flaw was that she had big breasts. I would have liked my teacher to see that I was not at all afraid, and that I could have been a good Red Cross volunteer, even though I was too young right then.

Airplanes rumbled somewhere high in the sky. I left the area in back of the school building and walked with a martial step along Borgo San Lorenzo toward the square that faces the cathedral. That is the heart of Florence; a maze of narrow streets flows into it. Crowds of people were rushing out of the downtown buildings, office workers and storekeepers, professors with grim faces, and a noisy, scruffy mass of youngsters. Then in no time everybody dispersed and the whole downtown remained empty.

Every day, after the alerts sounded, we could watch a breathtaking spectacle. We actually saw dozens of planes, arrayed in square formations way up in the sky, neatly following one another in long waves. We were told that they were all directed toward Germany and the industrial centers of Northern Italy.

I liked the planes' rumbling as they broke through the bright clouds into the blue. The gray formations seemed alive with the silver flashes of the planes' fuselage. People were not too alarmed. Florence was too beautiful and dear to the British to be bombed—that's what the Florentines said. But around us the city lay shrouded in sandbags and protective walls. I had no idea of what was beneath those concrete blocks and steel palings. I was told that there were marble statues and painted church walls under them. They were hidden from sight for safety, but the

most precious treasures that could be removed had been sent away (“just like my mother and my little sister,” I thought). They hid in the hill towns that the war would not reach. I did not particularly care about art objects in those days because I could not even imagine them.

I walked across the square facing Santa Maria del Fiore. The church and the baptistery were hidden by walls of cement blocks. Not much of them was visible. Church people were pulling open the massive bronze doors of the cathedral. A dark maw gaped, slowly sending out a breath smelling of incense, and let in a stream of people who rushed inside seeking shelter.

“The British will not bomb the Brunelleschi dome,” people said.

But they were crying and there was terror on their faces. The noise of the crowd was like a storm at sea.

I walked on. I did not go in. I walked alone in the deserted streets. I liked the solitude of the quieted city. The sun’s rays fell softly on the stones of the pavement and on the buildings’ walls.

In the spring of 1943, as the war got closer and closer, my family had left the seaside city of Livorno and had settled in the countryside, where we had a big empty house we used for summer vacations. My parents knew that we would all miss the mild Mediterranean air, the familiar avenues and squares and stores, and our friends and the comforts of a peaceful life. But people talked of an inevitable Armageddon, bombings, and warships shelling the city. If you could, you left.

I turned twelve later that summer. Ever since I had turned nine, I had lived in the war’s atmosphere with greater and greater enthusiasm. All Fascist youths were called to the country’s help. We listened to the *Duce*’s speeches, in awe of his shouting voice. His face was present everywhere with its square jaw and dark, burning eyes. His words hovered in gigantic black lettering on buildings’ walls everywhere. He was ever-present in our lives. We wished we could fight and die as He asked us to do.

Then, in the fall of that same year, my father and I moved temporarily to Florence.

A house in the country

A lot of time has gone by since then. I have been living abroad for years, but I still own the old house in the country, and I still have to deal with land rentals, house maintenance, and taxes in various offices and bureaus.

The architect at City Hall is a handsome man, taller than most people of his generation in this village. Dark, wavy hair that is beginning to turn gray around the temples, a taut skin and a suntanned complexion, he is a healthy man in his prime. He is shuffling papers, looking for some documents I have requested and that he said are ready.

The house that I probably should sell still sits high on a ledge that slopes down toward a small valley. Massive rocks support its foundations. Harmonious lines trace a rectangular body that is topped by a dovecote in the classic Tuscan style. The façade shows its age. A band of gray granular plaster still runs along the ground floor but has fallen down here and there, uncovering large stones. Patches of smooth plaster on the upper floor, under the eaves, show the golden-yellow traces of ancient paint. Double shutters with green slats cover the windows that open up, evenly spaced, on the four walls.

The architect seems flustered. Neither of us is speaking. I look around his office. It’s not large, but it’s been newly repainted in a light cream color, the furniture is modern, and the two windows on contiguous walls open to a view of the valley. A breath of wind moves the tip of a cypress tree framed by one of the windows. The building is at the top of a hill. I sigh looking out. That landscape, the light of that sky have been a part of me ever since I was born.

Long grey clouds now sail slowly through the sky, soft colors linger in the northwest: blue, pink, cream. A light mist broken by bright bands of sky wraps the mountain across the valley. Such a small valley compared to other valleys I have known! The mountain is called Pratomagno ever since the Middle Ages.

A movement recalls my attention. The architect has found what he was looking for. He hands me the papers, I pick them up, we exchange a few niceties, and I leave. I start going downstairs. The streets of Sartenna are just beyond the door. So many memories! Every step, every corner, every stone wall of this place tells me stories of a past we share, a past that is filled with events.

That spring, in 1943, in the heart of World War II, I became familiar at last with the land of my ancestors.

"Well, *nina*, they used to own a great spread of land, you know."

Great-aunt Laura would retell the familiar story dreamily.

"Our people came from up north way back when. Yes, we go way back in history. They came down on horseback, they were the emperor's warriors. They decided to stop on these hills by the Arno, and the emperor gave them a lot of land."

Or perhaps—I thought—it was some bishop who gave them land, or whoever ruled the region at that moment. The intruders, so the story went, set root and survived in a fortressed village built on a ridge that controls two valleys. I could hear Great-aunt's voice in the background telling her tale.

"And they became lords and bishops."

I could almost see the old warriors clad in armor like those pictured in my history books. Then I would walk to the edge of the garden in back of the house and gaze at the landscape. The building dominated a cascade of narrow terraces where rows upon rows of grapevines stretched among the silvery clouds of the olive trees. Below the hilltop that jutted out from a range of smaller hills covered with woods lay a narrow plain with a patchwork of fields. The Scerfio, a thin stream, ran through them and reflected tufts of tall grasses, shrubs and trees that covered its banks in all the shades of green. As I looked to the right, in the distance, beyond the cleft made through the centuries by the Arno that is still young and clear there, the peak of the Pratomagno rose above powerful flanks. A thick carpet spread its folds over the mountain. The woods turned dark green, golden, or blue in the sun through the hours of the day and the seasons of the year.

I loved that observation point. The younger children and Great-uncle Anchise would rather sit in front of the house on the benches he had built in stone, with back rests and armrests, along the retaining wall that separated the garden from the street. Two umbrella pines shed needles and shade on the benches, and three or four rattan chairs with sagging bottoms sat leaning around a table. The pines opened their canopies in front so high that they were visible even from the back of the house. Two palm trees also stood in the front garden, fat with matted hair and leaves, shivering in the unfamiliar climate. Who knows who had planted them; perhaps my ancestors loved their foliage that made them think of exotic adventures. A heady fragrance came from the flowerbeds in the shape of large petals, edged by stones. They were brimming with stock and snapdragons and their fragrance made me melancholic; it grew stronger when warm rains drenched the clusters of purple and white blooms.

The war made our family a permanent part of the village for about two years. Today's visitors find that cluster of buildings very beautiful. The houses, when you look at them from the top of a higher hill, form three knobby lines along the crest of the ridge. They are all made of stone. They cling to each other, brown and grey, topped by red and orange tiles, the roofs of uneven heights mottled by grey-green lichen. The ruins of what was once a fortress rise, towering above them. Two curved streets run between the rows of buildings, and stone stairs cut through them. You could get lost there, but Sartenna is too small for that. The shape of the village retraces the pattern of the walls that surrounded a long gone abbey, which was also fort and manor and is now invisible, embedded as it is inside the village core.

Prosperity has come to the village, these days, but the hills around it haven't changed. They are still covered with olive trees and oaks. Wildflowers bloom along roads and fields in all seasons, braving scorching summers and brief but bitter winters. At mealtimes a fine restaurant sends the fragrance of cooking through Sartenna's alleys and squares where old people stroll or sit watching acquaintances and occasional strangers go by. The cars of tourists negotiate with caution the hairpin curves of the road leading to the village that sits very high; steep slopes

plunge into valleys on either side. The church bell tolls at the canonical hours, helping the local people forget other visitors who terrorized them during their remote and recent history.

In the mid-1940s, fewer than one hundred families lived in the village. Thirty or so more lived out in the countryside. The buildings' stone walls in those days needed pointing. Ancient doors and tiny windows looked out on the streets from behind unsteady wood panels, and stone steps here and there went down inside the rows of houses. A few stores huddled along the main street, and occasionally a pale light bulb shone through the dusty glass of their doors. In winter, the wind swept along the shiny slabs of the pavement, and you had to bundle tight in heavy clothes and lean into it. But in the summer, a breeze blew gently, so the old men and women dragged thatched bottom chairs and wood benches outdoors and sat all along the walls to visit and chat.

Winter 1943

I was supposed to return to school in the fall, but that year everything turned out differently. Italy had been at war for three years, and many cities had been bombed by the Allies. We faced an unusual situation. My father was named to a teaching post in Florence, and he decided that my mother and younger sister would remain in the safety of our summer home in the Valdarno, but he and I would go to live in Florence come mid-October. Only on weekends did we go back to the old house. Each week my mother prepared provisions for us: a huge loaf of bread scooped out to hold a whole roast beef inside, and then pancetta, eggs, cheese, and fruit. The shops in Florence had little food and what they carried was inedible, my father said.

We rented a furnished room on a tree-shaded avenue, viale dei Mille. Our windows overlooked the foliage of the old elms and oaks. The avenue ran parallel to the railroad, which was just two blocks away. We were conveniently located. We could walk to the Campo di Marte station in five minutes crossing Ponte del Pino, a bridge that overlooks the tracks. I liked living by the railroad. It seemed to beckon to me. I dreamed of travel, of faraway places and adventures, and often stopped on the

bridge to look at the trains. They were mostly made up of boxcars in those days. At times they were full of German soldiers, who sat dangling their feet from the sides with the sliding doors open. The soldiers were blond; they laughed and kept jumping off the boxcars and climbing back on. I wondered about their travels and envied them. Some trains with the boxcars locked up went by slowly, some stopped under the bridge for hours.

We had a room with twin beds and the use of the kitchen in the apartment of a woman who worked as a cashier in her son-in-law's coffee shop. There were a few pieces of tired furniture in that bedroom, a chest of drawers that kept getting stuck, an armoire, bookshelves. Our large suitcase rested on a chair that stood in the corner; it was full of our things, as if we were always ready to leave. Some evenings my father cooked a few strips of pancetta and two eggs in the empty kitchen. He was always tense and worried, except when he was preparing our dinner. The aroma of pork meat frying spread tantalizingly in the cold air. We ate bread we had brought from home; it was chewy and satisfying. The kitchen lamp with its low-wattage bulb threw its yellowish light on the bare table. We ate quietly. The landlady was almost never to be seen.

I had never been in Florence before. I had only heard its name from my father, who loved it with a passion. I really liked living in the city alone with him. I did not miss my mother. I felt that we were more adventurous, my father and I. When I was little, he told me stories about his youth that sounded very exciting, and he taught me about poetry and nature. Unfortunately, even when he was in a good mood, he was tense and got angry easily. Now he was changing, somehow; he seemed despondent, and for the first time in my life I had the impression that he was confused.

"What a disaster!" he would hiss under his breath.

I did not approve of his saying that; we had been warned about speaking against the *Duce*'s decisions. But in some other ways, things were better between us. Now he did not get mad at me for every small thing I did wrong; he sort of ignored me. He was too busy with his classes that met at odd times in some other part of the city, and he was too worried about something to try to teach me things

and be upset with my clumsiness, as he used to. As a matter of fact, he treated me like an adult. Most of the time he wasn't even with me. He helped me get ready for school but then he went away and we did not see each other until evening. I had a lot of time to myself.

Every day, after being sent home from school at mid-morning, I would walk around, learning the city and watching people. Men and women were thin, dressed in worn clothes, and they were in continuous motion. I saw them go about their errands and tried to guess where they were going, where their houses were, and what their families were like. Some buildings downtown were beautiful. I looked at their large windows with well-ironed curtains and got glimpses of gardens behind massive iron fences. I daydreamed about other people's lives, mysterious sequences of actions and relationships I tried to imagine. There were also German soldiers everywhere. They filled several hotels near the main railroad station. They walked about as if on a perpetual parade, and I was in awe of their severe, dreamy countenance, the rhythmic sound of their steps. We Italians wore shoes made of cardboard and only the metal tips and heel-savers clicked weakly on the pavement. But I attempted to march proudly like the Germans.

I walked and watched. Everywhere in the city activity was frantic but quiet. I felt that the sullenness around me had something to do with what had happened the previous summer, an astonishing event that had alarmed me and left me with a sense of loss.

Little Fascists

I was eleven, then, and spending the summer months of a long, boring vacation in the country. It was the warmest part of the summer. Later, like all my contemporaries, I was to remember the exact date of that event: July 25. I could replay the scene that had taken place in our kitchen like something staged and unendingly repeated.

My mother is washing dishes at the sink, and my sister and I are drying them. Someone, I cannot remember who, comes running into the room and says in a whisper, "Mussolini has fallen."

I say out loud: “Fallen? How, fallen?”

No one answers me. People scurry about and whisper to each other.

“What do we do now?” I insist, but I am told: “Be quiet!”

I understood, in time, that Mussolini was not the *Duce* any more. That is not possible, I thought, it can’t be. I knew that people sometimes tell lies.

But it was true. His closest collaborators, the members of the Fascist Council, had turned against him and the king deposed him and had him arrested. All the things I had known in my first eleven years of life were swept away by that one piece of incredible news. There was no more Fascism and nothing was taking its place. No one told me what to do about that and I did not know what to think. I lived in suspense for weeks waiting for something to happen, but everything seemed to go on as before. Then it dawned on me that perhaps there had been a mistake. The *Duce* was in hiding, ready to return like legendary heroes.

In my astonishment I looked for sustenance. I tried to get closer to the other institution that had ruled a good part of my life. I started to go to church almost every day. The small church building in the village was serene, and the familiar fragrance of incense soothed me. I used to admire the teenage boys of the local notables who came to Mass dressed in the Fascist uniform of Avanguardisti. I used to wait with envy and some trepidation for the moment when they would salute the Host by raising unsheathed daggers. But now Mass was a sequence of mindless prayers, and the rituals seemed empty in their repetitiousness, as the world outside boiled with excitement. The Fascist youth had disappeared. I decided that I would read the Gospels on my own. I was moved by them, and without knowing it I started to compare their words with the words I heard in church. I felt sad without knowing why.

September 8 dawned on the hills. All the people in the village heard of an armistice that the king had signed with the Allies, and then of his immediate flight with the last remnants of an Italian government. But I figured that the Gospel’s saying had come true, something about swords being made into spades. I tried to explain that one evening to a group of peasants who were walking to the village to get news. The sky—I remember as if it were yesterday—was violet blue and the air

was mild and still. We reached the village, and everybody was talking in hushed tones. But it was not clear at all what changes were going to happen. As a matter of fact, even the armistice did not seem to affect the world around us. The only piece of news was that, shortly after September, lots of country youths, not young anymore, exhausted and confused, started to reappear at their homes' front steps. They were returning by train or on foot from the faraway places where their young years had been lost forever. HE had returned, too, after being rescued from a mountaintop prison by a daring German pilot. I remember a magazine illustration: His face is barely visible under a shapeless black hat, his eyes are hidden, and his worn frame is wrapped in a loose black coat. The images show some young pilots gesturing in dramatic poses and there is snow on the ground, mountain peaks in the background.

A new Fascist party was formed with the Nazis' support, militiamen were dressed in black now, and the Germans, grimmer than ever, were in control even more than before. That fall my father and I moved to Florence.

My world changed. It was then that I realized how much I enjoyed loneliness and also life in a large city. Streets and squares felt comfortable and mysterious. My father worked somewhere downtown, too, but my school was far from his, and he decided that it would be best for us to meet at a midway point in the afternoon. We knew about the daily air raids, and he told me where we should go at any time in case of danger. The shelter he chose was near the Arno river, a network of underground corridors and halls that had been the location of the Florentine mint in centuries past. An ancient stone tower, called *la Zecca*, marked the entrance. The famous Florence's coin was called *zecchino* because of that, my father told me. I was supposed to wait for him there. But I never felt like going down into those dark caves smelling of urine, where women complained and children screamed and cried. Even during the alerts I kept walking around town.

There was a sort of esplanade near the Arno, with a medieval city gate standing alone in the middle of it; that was piazza Beccaria. At noon I would go there and eat something at the headquarters of the Fascist Youth Organization that was housed in a building in the familiar bastardized *Novecento* style. That horseshoe-

shaped building survived and stood empty for years after the war, then it was razed. Bare walls and yellow stucco sported *travertino* trims and eagles that jutted out from balconies and window frames. Innumerable rooms and halls stretched in every direction. Lunch in the chaotic cafeteria was a disgusting uniformity of sour vegetables and grey meat. I picked at what was on my plate, but after eating I would go to one of the salons and sit in a leather armchair. In contrast to the noisy lunchroom, no one was ever there. Sofas and musical instruments gathered dust. I wished that I could play the harp that stood in a corner with its broken strings, the concert-size piano, or a set of drums that I touched with the tips of my fingers. I spoke with no one. After a while I would start walking through the building. I observed the movement of people I didn't know here and there in the various rooms and up and down the staircases. I was curious to know what was happening in that place, where young people were few.

Now I see only snapshots of the few months I spent in Florence. They are disconnected moments of a period in my life that seems to have lasted years.

It is evening and everything has closed down. I have just realized that there is no bread in the house. My father will be back late today, and I was supposed to go to the bakery and buy bread using our coupons. I run and run all the way to the other end of town to a baker we know. The streets are deserted; it's almost time for the curfew to begin. I pass a church that stands darkly at a curve in the never-ending street. It has a curious name, *Madonna della Tosse*, a Madonna that has something to do with coughing. The shop is locked, no bread tonight. I must run back home as quick as I can. I feel stabs of pain in my side caused by running. I can hardly breathe, that Madonna has an ominous name, and there is an emptiness inside me that makes me ravenous.

I am small and very thin in a photo I am looking at today. Kids in wartime always look like that. The part in my hair is crooked and my braids look like little bunches of straw.

My father that evening takes me out to eat, but the only things I see in my plate are greens as hard as sticks and nauseating pieces of dark bread. We are at

the *trattoria* next door. Thin men in dark clothing sit around the wooden table. I am falling asleep. I cannot eat.

"She'd rather have some *ciccina*," says the fat woman at the counter, half-joking and half-sighing, and the few customers agree in silence looking at the little girl who is leaning her head against her father's shoulder.

I can still see all those faces nodding in the dim light and a man in the farthest corner chewing on a pipe. His eyes are red, his face is full of lines and a dark stubble, and he mumbles something about a grandson who is mistreated at home. The glass door and the windows are blacked out. There may be an alert tonight.

It's sometime in the middle of the night. I am being pulled out of my bed. I sit stunned on the edge of the mattress. My father is putting my socks on, helping me get dressed. We go down the darkened stairs, floor after floor, and run out the main door into the night. It's very cold, my teeth chatter. Lots of people are walking uphill in groups. They are fleeing the railway nearby and they crowd the garden of a villa that spreads its hedges of unruly shrubs and masses of tall trees beyond a wrought-iron gate. The planes rumble overhead in the darkness of the sky, but they do not stop. They go on, following their mysterious path north of Florence. When we return to the cold room, I find my bed still undone, uninviting, but I fall on it and I am immediately asleep. One night, my father says:

"We are not going to go out anymore at this time of night. Let the alert sound."

We are just now getting ready for bed. We spread all our clothes on top of the blanket for warmth as we undress.

"I don't want you to die of pneumonia for fear of the bombs," he says.

We sleep through the alert, exhausted and happy.

There are lots of books shelved behind glass doors in the rented bedroom, which used to be the room of the landlady's daughter, a blond and jovial young woman who is married and has a child. Her husband owns a coffee shop down the street. I have a key to the apartment and have returned home in mid-afternoon. A sunbeam streaks the bedroom's white and black floor tiles and the reddish wood of

the bookshelves. I observe the dust particles that shine as they rise, thick as pollen on invisible air currents. The apartment is quiet, and I am reading stories that are not very interesting but will do for now. Nothing is said in those stories about the war. They involve men and women who follow one another in various places I do not know, and talk a lot, and then lie down together in meadows and even in boats for reasons I find difficult to figure out. The stories suggest something exciting and I read them to find out what grown-ups do, but I really prefer war stories, even the ancient ones such as *The Iliad*. I am not scared by war at all and I despise those who are. I feel that I am a good Italian and have become a good Fascist.

I wished that I were a boy. I wanted to obey the orders I read on posters stuck on the walls of buildings.

"All Italians must stand by their German allies and fight the invaders," the posters said.

And the Fascists sang:

> "Comrades in the same war
> comrades with the same fate
> if you share bread and death
> you can't be parted in this life."

I remembered what I was told when I was little and marched with my classmates as a "Daughter of the She-Wolf." I knew what my patriotic duty was. I was faithful to Him, the *Duce*. Boys not much older than I, boys of fourteen and fifteen, were leaving for northern Italy, armed and dressed in uniforms. I envied them; everybody was going somewhere, and I was not. I envied their freedom to travel, to see the world, and be part of something heroic.

On one of those long days, I don't know how, I ended up in a theatre where there was a ceremony I wanted to see, a farewell to volunteer troops. The theatre was filled with shouting boys and the electric aura of their unleashed energy. Everyone was standing, speaking loudly, calling people, and moving around the

theatre. I was alone in the general confusion, the only girl, half scared but also excited. A loudspeaker suddenly boomed and everybody sat down. The seats were covered in worn dark velvet. Men in black uniforms addressed the boys:

"Your Fatherland is proud of you. We are not traitors. We will fight the pluto-democracies side by side with our German allies and we shall win! *Viva l'Italia*!"

A roar greeted the words. Everybody jumped up. Everybody was screaming at the top of his lungs.

"Come to the front of the theatre to enlist."

Groups moved forward in noisy tangles. The recruits were going to be given arms. Their eyes were large and seemed to burn in their thin faces that were white above the dark-green Fascist Youth uniforms. The shouts rose and subsided in waves. Everybody was going to leave right away—that's what I understood—for northern Italy, where the Social Fascist Republic had formed and was gathering troops. More boys joined right there on the spot. They were still wearing civilian clothes. Their parents must not have known that they had gone there after school, just like me. There were more shouted addresses, and the screams of the crowd covered all other sounds. I shivered with enthusiasm, but I knew that I was excluded from the chance of becoming a recruit. I was a girl and I was too young. The others were going to leave for a wonderful adventure and I had to go back to a cold rented room, my tired father, and my haphazard classes.

I do not remember my return home after that. All I remember is the stormy gathering of boys in a dark theatre, the *Apollo*, which remained closed and decaying for well over half a century, not far from Florence's main railway station.

Back to the country

The alerts and the signs of a spreading guerrilla increased. We heard about actions against the Fascists and the Nazis. Back and forth my father and I went, from the country to the city and from the city to the house in the country, to spend weekends soothed by warmth, abundance, and the fragrance of home cooking.

In the country, winter was different. You had to sit inside in the evenings watching the big logs burning in the fireplace. The sap hissed and bubbled, and a sudden crackling would send flocks of sparks up the black chimney. We roasted chestnuts and listened to Great-uncle Anchise, one of my paternal uncles still living, who told and retold stories about the family, brothers and sisters and relatives I had not known, and about people from the village, and ancient legends about the family's ancestors. His favorite topic was the other war, the one he called "The Great War," when he fought against the Austrians. He usually called them "the Germans." Italians had lived with the memory of that terrible war ever since 1915. Now the new war felt like a sequel; even the same characters seemed to have returned. And for us youngsters, the older people's tales evoked heroic adventures that prefigured our own.

He still had the coloring of a young man, *zio* Anchise, white and rosy with blue eyes, and a briar pipe either in his mouth or his hand, always. At times he would stand up in the heat of storytelling. A bit bent on his bowed legs, he raised his arm holding his pipe by the bowl in a dramatic gesture that the red flames blew up and set dancing on the walls. His white mustache and flowing white hair shone in the fire's light.

"They were coming down from the Tarvisio Pass, thick as grasshoppers. But not as lively. They had covered miles, so they shuffled along. Hundreds of them. Austria is on the other side of that pass, see? You have to come through that pass. The mountains are rugged up there; the Alps, they are covered with snow. We knew right away that those were Italian prisoners. They had been let go right after the armistice. The Germans were famished. They had lost the war, that time. And they are going to lose this one, too, mark my words."

A pause.

"The last thing they cared about was the Italians they had in their camps. Down they came, those war prisoners. Those who had survived, mind you. They wore tattered uniforms, rags really, and they were skinny as rails. Some could barely

walk, but they meant to get home no matter what. It was scary, their eyes, some were like crazy. Fixed on one point. Lots of them sick, too."

"Well, my captain calls me. 'Contini,' he says. 'My brother is bound to come through this pass.' We were camped near Tarvisio, see. It was like being on the outskirts of hell. Bedraggled people all over. Well, we were not in such good shape, either."

"The prisoners were coming down south. At the same time, hordes of refugees were returning up north, returning to the Venezie from whatever holes they had been hiding in. Their fields had been a battleground. Nothing left standing, no trees, no vineyards, and all the houses were ruins. Some cried. Some were just stunned; they had already cried all their tears. The kids were thin as crickets, you felt sorry for them. And nothing much to eat for anybody. Those were ugly days."

Zio Anchise would sit in silence for a while, for effect perhaps, or just lost in his memories.

"He calls me. He knew that one of his brothers had been made a prisoner. He even knew in what camp he was. The Red Cross worked as it was supposed to, in those days. Now everything has gone to hell—no mail, no packages, nobody knows what's happening. People disappear and the devil knows where.

"'Well,' he says. 'Put one of your men on one side of the pass—there was just that one road, mud and stones—and another one on the other side. If you let my brother go through and you don't find him, you'll answer for it. To me. Clear?'

"He was dangerous as a live piece of ammunition, my Captain. A high-strung *bersagliere*. We *bersaglieri* were as fierce and quick at the end of the war as we were at the beginning. So, I choose two sharp soldiers and tell them to shout the name of the Captain's brother every second.

"'Don't you miss him, I tell them, or you are going to be shit before I have to talk to Captain Forti.'

"They go, I check once in a while, and I hear those two poor bastards shouting 'Major Forti! Forti Renato!', and the men going by, they turn around to stare at them with slow glances like sheep that have lost sight of the shepherd and keep moving on out of fear."

"I'll be damned! The Major almost escaped us, wouldn't you know. He must have thought that something bad expected him, being called like that by the military. But the two soldiers were on their guard, he stopped a moment questioning-like, and they talked to him real quick, and brought him to the Captain's tent. Oh yes, I can still see my Captain embracing his brother. What a moment. He, the brother, looked like he had been a prisoner alright, filthy and skinny and exhausted, with those feverish eyes. We had all seen a lot—a lot of ugly things. I'll never forget my Captain crying as he held his brother close saying to him: 'Renato, our Tino is gone.'

"And they both cry because their younger brother has just died of shrapnel wounds in my Captain's arms. That one was in the artillery."

I was enthralled by Great-uncle Anchise's story and my heart filled with awe. Even the listeners' eyes moist with tears seemed to confirm the power of heroic deeds remembered.

Now new worries burdened those country people who were left to face all the hardships alone. The women especially had to keep working small patches of land, try to save from the Germans' raids the animals they used to till the fields, avoid crossing the path of threatening soldiers, care for the elderly and the children, and do all that while the nights and the days were getting harsher, with little food and little heat in the grip of a savage winter. Shoes had been worn out. The clogs people wore to cope with the stony, muddy ground were made of leather uppers and wood bottoms covered by pieces of bicycle tires and did not keep out the cold or the wet. The children's feet itched with chilblains. The little ones' fast growing toes peeped out of openings cut at the top, and cracked open at the slightest encounter with stones.

My sister and I wore layers of scarves when we went out, our hands stiff and swollen by the cold. We devoured whatever food was placed before us. We slept in freezing bedrooms after warming the sheets with coal baskets hanging from wooden holders shaped like little domes or gondolas. When anyone moved out of the kitchen with its blazing stove to any of the other rooms, our breath made small clouds that rose and floated away. But the sheets upstairs were red hot, we had already

bundled up in our nightclothes in the kitchen, and we burrowed deep under the blankets in each other's arms, and slept happily until morning.

Spring in the city

I was waiting on the steps of the Fascist Youth Organization headquarters to have lunch with my father. Breakfast had been so early and so skimpy that first it soured in my stomach, then left me famished, a young wolf stalking. The spring day was sunny with white clouds sailing in the blue sky. The alert had sounded and most people had already walked in groups to the air raid shelter, the one at the Zecca. But I wanted to eat and I did not like being underground when things might be happening outside.

Then, as if by magic, everybody was gone. There was a long silence. In the heart of that silence a roar, louder than any I had heard before, announced the arrival of the plane formations. There they were, dark in the sun and hidden now and then by the clouds. They were enormous, this time. They were not remote as usual, they weighed low over the city. I felt the threat of that mass of metal hovering above and started moving slowly down the steps away from the door. I had gone only a few yards toward the shelter when I heard a deafening whistling sound, and as in a dream I saw a bicyclist who was pedaling fast toward me down the avenue. He jumped off his bicycle by me and I felt his hand come down hard on my shoulders. I found myself lying in the gutter that ran along the sidewalk under the towering trees, just as explosions filled everything around us. The air left my lungs in a sob, I gasped, I was suffocating.

Dust began to rise behind us in the distance. It was the first wave of the air raid, I knew.

The man shouted: "Run to the shelter! Run! Before the next wave!"

He jumped on his bicycle and disappeared down the avenue.

I ran. I knocked with all my strength on the closed doors of the shelter. Someone opened as another load of bombs shook the ground and exploded nearby. Screams of hundreds of women and children poured out of the shelter's depths with the musty breath of the underground, but the turmoil was invisible. The lights had

gone out. Bodies moved in all directions for no reason, or clung to each other. I could barely push through the formless mass. I walked on blindly trying to make a way for myself, trembling a little. From the depths of the tunnel a man's voice shouted my name. I kept walking. I was not afraid. I found my father's hand in that crowd and held it without a word.

The tunnel shook again and again. Loads of bombs exploded outside, and the screams rose again and again around me. It was well after noon when silence finally invaded the city and the refugees dared to open the shelter's door. Outside, a strange dust, heavy and white, enveloped everything. People streamed in the direction of the apartment buildings, walking slowly. They feared what they were going to see.

We saw. Majestic piles of ruins faced us, smoldering. The streets had widened to dusty rivers flanked by hills of brick and stone and lined by shreds of ancient trees. Water seeped here and there from broken and buried mains. I see a man who is walking home with a group of neighbors, right in front of my father and me. He stops and stands transfixed, looking at his destroyed apartment building. He raises a hand that holds a house key, in a useless gesture. His wife sobs by his side.

I saw those same planes very clearly, many years later, in a black and white photo on the pages of a history magazine that recounted the story of the bombing of Florence. The plane formations loomed on that paper, stilled forever. I realized, as I looked at the photograph, that I knew those planes, those very planes. Tall, white clouds over Florence, and the planes are coming out of them, short and massive, in a square pattern, "flying fortresses" doing "carpet bombing." Those were the expressions we used then. But the planes in my memory are not a photograph, they are real and they roar. I still see them as they arrive flying over Florence.

There were other faces of war that I became knowledgeable about after that: the smell of death, unmistakable, when buried bodies rotted under the rubble; the hunger, a low and steady presence; the cold that made your fingers and toes itch

and crack; the trains running slowly on the tracks, which had not been hit, right by the bombed-out streets, via Mannelli, via Masaccio, and destroyed buildings that had once stood all along them; the German soldiers and armaments filling the stations up and down the railway line, among civilians who kept their eyes on the ground; the long waits at night or at dawn in a small railway station smelling of sweat and burning wood, where Germans slept on the floor in their dirty uniforms; a huge water pump along the tracks where blond German youths washed on a frigid morning, laughing and shouting; the exhausting walks in the cold and dark when the railroad was cut off by bombing and the trains had to stop mid-run; the sense of uncertainty that tired everybody out; and the lack of trust, the fear of the other, the utterly primitive way of life.

Goodbye, Florence

The train was like a toy, down in the valley. It had stopped on a curve so the coaches leaned in an uncanny sort of abandon. My father and I sat by a bush at the top of a hill. The tracks sparkeld as they disappeared in the distance. The engineer and all the passengers were running up the hill away from the train. They were tiny shapes fleeing in frantic lines like ants. It was late afternoon, it was spring, the light was golden on the fields below, but the hill already threw shadows on the slope where the passengers were running. There was a loud buzzing above. One plane and then another dipped low over the quiet landscape and veered over the train. The shots drew long lines of red dashes. Puffs of smoke rose here and there. The train did not move, it was a helpless target. The passengers sat far up, hiding and watching. Florence was visible in the distance with its dome and towers glowing in the setting sun.

“What do we do now?” I asked.

When the planes left, we went down the hill and started walking toward Florence, a procession of people with bags and cardboard suitcases on the dusty road. The train was now a broken toy on a green carpet. That might be my last trip to Florence.

Later, in the Fascist Youth Headquarters, I heard that the boys who had left for northern Italy had traveled on a train that was machine-gunned from the air. I knew, now, what that looked like. They had scattered in terror through the countryside, someone said, and some had never returned to their platoons.

“Some of them we could not find anywhere!” I overheard a man in a black uniform exclaim under his breath.

I did not know what to think about that.

A few days later, the schools closed. Danger was becoming too great, and the director of my school told my father to take his daughter to a safe place and forget about degrees and diplomas. So we left the city, my father and I, and returned to our Valdarno home in March 1944. The alerts woke us up every night, and food could not be found anymore in the city. We took a rickety panel truck out of Florence at dawn, then rode a slow train on a stretch of surviving tracks.

Now we were walking in the splendor of late morning, up a shortcut in the woods. All around us the hills outlined a misty network of small valleys, rising in rows that faded gray-green in the distance. We were making our way along a path that was well traced and comfortable under our feet. My shoes got wet as soon as we turned off the pavement at the crossing where the main road left us. Each blade of grass held a gem in the light. Then the sun started to burn the mist as it rose higher. The air was thin and cool. Right and left, the twisted trunks of old and young oaks were covered with patches of green blue and whitish lichen. Broom and juniper grew in clumps rising above the underbrush. Tiny buds dotted the ground, and the grass, tender and erect, spread in large swaths where the woods opened up briefly. Seeing the countryside in spring was a new experience for me. We used to spend only our summer vacations in the house on the hill; long, hot, dry summers that made us children invent forbidden games out of loneliness and boredom. But that was a long time before. It was wartime now. I had learned many more things than I knew when I was a little child.

We were marching up the hill, our stomachs growling with impatience. No milk in Florence, and no bread. Coffee was a lost pleasure, my parents said. I had

just had some ersatz hot chocolate at a café before leaving the city in the dark morning hours. A cold breeze moved the leaves of a dying potted plant out front, the painted wood table inside was icy to the touch, and the hot liquid made filaments in the cup. Disgust and disappointment had made me gag. I had so much wanted to be reminded of the taste of chocolate that had disappeared from my memory.

But a good meal awaited us at the end of the path, I knew that. My mother and my little sister had created a home out of the semi-abandoned house that was now our refuge from the war. Our arrival was expected. The kitchen smelled of fresh bread, roasted meat, and tomato sauce. Fruit filled porcelain bowls. The family reunited after months of intermittent separations.

A vague sadness seems to spread a haze over that long-ago reunion. I don't remember my parents' faces at all as they were then. I remember only the colors and fragrances of that season, when our entire family began to live a country life, which I thought would last forever.

We had been in the country for just one week when my father decided to return to Florence to retrieve our suitcase with a few items of clothing and cancel the lease. He had heard that there had been yet another Allied incursion on Florence, and felt that it was time to leave the city for good. But it turned out that a bomb had fallen precisely on our apartment building that week; it had opened a huge crater where four floors once stood. Emptiness had replaced the main hall and the stairs and our room and the sun on the bookshelves and the kitchen with its bare table, and everything above and below our room. Untouched, perched on a ledge in the corner of two walls on the third floor, stood a lone chair covered with dust, with our suitcase sitting on it. Some firefighters had to haul it down, and they handed it to my father. He had to spend many exhausting hours on the road to make it back home.

Years later I—now a woman who lived very far away—returned to Florence for a brief visit. I walked with my lover on a hill near the city and into the garden of a villa to greet yet another spring. I had never been in that garden before, I told him.

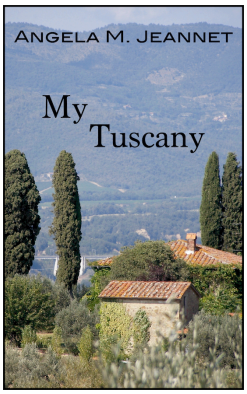
But suddenly I recognized the curving paths going up the slope, and the concave meadows, and the fountains, as if I had already been there once in a dream. The shadow of those soft outlines slept somewhere in my memory. And then I knew. That was the place I had seen years before on many winter nights, as the sirens blared and enemy lights moved among the stars. I had walked there once among frightened people, in another life and a different world.

I.2
Sartenna

A village in the Valdarno

There are three *piazzas* in the village. The oldest one faces the church; it is an irregular space with several sides and corners. Right across from the church there is the general store. Houses three stories high overlook the square with façades that sport peeling yellow and orange stucco. The village's old men stand in the *piazza* for hours every day talking; they always wear hats and caps, for warmth when it's cold and to keep cool when it's hot. They step here and there, hands in pockets, and occasionally one reads the newspaper while the others listen and make comments. Sundays the men, young and old, wait for the women who go to high mass. The church doors are left open even in winter if the weather is mild so that the men on the square or just inside the outer door can hear the priest's words and cross themselves at the appropriate times. When the mass is over, the men walk home following their wives. They can already taste the meal that the oldest woman in the family has prepared. She always attends early mass so that she can get back home before everybody else to do the cooking.

Those habits have not changed through the years. The meals may be a bit different nowadays. The aromas of rabbit and squab roasted on a spit over wood fires, of rosemary and garlic and olive oil grilling, used to spread a mouth-watering haze over the main street, the *borgo*. That was once traditional Sunday fare.



My Tuscany *follows a girl's coming of age during a dramatic period in European history. The events take place in Tuscany in the last years of the Fascist regime, during WWII and the early 1950s. At the heart of the story is a reflection on the indoctrination of young people, which has become a particularly sensitive issue in recent years.*

My Tuscany