

MELANIA G.
MAZZUCCO

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Some objects are magical. How they acquire their mysterious power to make people's lives better, no one knows. But everyone knows that they do, and they accept it, regardless of their religious beliefs. Rome abounds with magical objects: stones, doors, images, bones. They may be large, like windows, or small, like pomegranates. Others are minute: slivers of organic material preserved in dusty reliquaries or metal boxes, a whitish glow emanating from their tiny apertures; or shards in museum display cases, where explanatory labels neutralize them forever. Separated from us in this way, they fall silent and cease to work their wonders. They go back to being what they were: things. But not her. There she is, as large as life, in the shadows of the nave. She's waiting for you.

Piazza del Popolo is a stage. Immensely empty, it awaits a performance that never begins—until you realize that Rome herself is the show, and that you can be the star. Even though it's an open space, the piazza is enclosed, with just one real entrance, a proscenium arch of sorts. You have to take the stage, step into this monumental illusion, through the Porta del Popolo, just as everyone arriving from the north has done for centuries. Pilgrims, beggars, sovereigns, refugees, youths in search of their destiny. And you must enter it on foot, so you have time to leave the deafening chaos of the Muro Torto (or Crooked Wall) behind, and to be surprised by the sudden silence. Rome prefers pandemonium to music: rumbling, ringing, screeching, thudding, whistling, shouting. Cars, ambulances, motor scooters, jackhammers, bells, sirens, street sweepers, garbage trucks, all making noise. And all playing their own tune: we are no orchestra here. In Rome, even the streets shout full blast. But in Piazza del Popolo, you can hear your footsteps.

The obelisk is an exclamation point. It seems as if it has always been here, a mysterious meridian. Even though it was erected only in 1589, it precedes everything else. Spilling down the pink granite is a series of hieroglyphics, whose meaning we still cannot decipher. It sends a message, though, a surprising one: Rome welcomes you with a foreign monument. Yes, Rome, mischievous and arrogant, declares that she is so sure of herself that she can even be un-Roman. As if nothing, in Rome, can stay foreign for long. The crouching stone lions circling the obelisk's base doze—tamed, but not forever. There are only two constellations in Rome's zodiac: Gemini, with Leo rising.

Just like in a fairy tale, three roads open before you. Roads with concise, evocative names: Babuino, Corso, Ripetta. Together they form what is called the Trident. Yes, Rome greets you by driving a pitchfork into your heart. The tips of the three prongs are invisible, sunk somewhere beyond the white mass of the Victor Emanuel II monument. You hesitate, undecided. You're still a foreigner here, you haven't learned the Roman legends yet. Otherwise you'd know which road to take.

The two churches at the entrance to the Trident look exactly the same. Not by chance, they're called twins. You remember Romulus and Remus: Rome is born double, everything is a mirror image, one half of something else. But they're not identical twins, those two churches. They're fraternal twins; they look alike, they imitate one another, but they're not exact replicas. The one on the left is known as the Church of the Artists (no one remembers the real name any more: in Rome, city of popes, artists, and plebeians, the name one chooses—or earns—counts more than one's proper name). A magnificent portico separates the church from the piazza. The columns look like they were stolen from a Greek temple. But they weren't. They come from a bell tower, which stood for only a few days. Gian Lorenzo Bernini—one of the geniuses of this place, a ghost who accompanies you without your even realizing it—had had them made to embellish the bell tower of Saint Peter's Basilica. Towers, rather. Long before New York, Rome had her own twin towers, tall and presumptuous. But they disturbed the horizon line. Even the ground they stood on rejected them, causing them to topple. So they were dismantled. The columns were left up on the roof, though, to crumble in the sun. Then, toward the end of the seventeenth century, they were finally removed and erected to form the portico of the Church of the Artists. Which looks like a pagan temple. And, in a way, it is.

She has been there, on the high altar, since even before the roof was built. With her sweet, almost embarrassed smile. For centuries, the neighborhood women came to pray to her. They would light a candle and whisper something. If you want your wish to come true, no one can know what it is. Sometimes the women would return to offer her something, a token of their gratitude: a little necklace, a medallion, a coin. Rarely a note, which would allow everyone to read what had been a private conversation. Besides, she knew why she was being thanked.

Most often, for a baby. More than anything, women asked the Mother of all mothers for a child. And she, painted on a canvas that pretended to be an old wooden panel, clasping her own son in her arms, listened and understood. A smile always on her lips.

The women of Rome knew she was no ordinary Madonna (Madonnas were everywhere in Rome, in every church and often at crossroads). No, she was a miracle Madonna. She had even painted her own image. Rome was full of objects not created by the hand of man: God's self-portrait at the top of the Holy Stairs; the Baby Jesus at the Church of the Aracoeli; the Madonna of Saint Luke inside the Church of Santa Maria del Popolo. But this one was different. This time the Madonna interceded for the sake of an ordinary little girl. And just as she had helped her, so, too, would she help all women to become themselves. Which is what she has always done. And, if you believe, she will do it again.

The stories are all true, but only if you trust in them. With time, the women of Rome forgot that little girl's name; it didn't seem important. She was merely the instrument through which something else was accomplished. A bit like the Madonna herself.

Which is exactly why her name should be spoken—even more so today—because women's wishes and dreams are no longer shut away in their bodies. Now they claim the entire world. Her name was Plautilla Briccia. Roman, born on a summer's day, under the sign of Leo, a few hundred meters from this very church. Her father—painter, poet, author—wanted her to become a painter, too. So he taught her to draw and to paint. He wasn't rich, or famous, or powerful. And when he fell ill, he couldn't provide her with a dowry, for her to wed. He couldn't even help her make her name. But it occurred to him that he could do something greater. He could invent a destiny for her.

Like all writers, he invented a beautiful story. He told how Plautilla, when she was eleven years old, had begun to paint a Madonna and Child. Young and inexperienced, Plautilla couldn't manage to complete it, and eventually she gave up. But one night, the Virgin Mary herself came down from heaven and finished the painting for her. Plautilla, a chosen one, an elect, was consecrated to the Virgin, to

virginity. And to painting Madonnas. From then on, anyone in Rome who wanted a Madonna could turn to her. As for the miraculous painting, her father donated it to the Carmelite friars, so they could display it in their church, where it would work wonders. The friars accepted the gift, but with the passing of time, their tiny church proved inadequate for such a prestigious guest. So they moved her, first to another church, and finally to the Church of the Artists, which they built for her.

Plautilla did not choose to be a painter of Madonnas, or a painter at all. Nor did she choose virginity. In the seventeenth century, a girl couldn't choose. In the best of circumstances, she could be chosen. She hadn't painted a magical image, merely an image. Oil on canvas. With pigments she bought in a simple shop, and brushes made from hog bristles. But just as a scrap of ordinary canvas became a talisman because it was believed to be one, so Plautilla Briccia realized that believing she was a messenger would, in fact, make her one. She accepted—and in this she truly was the *ancilla domini* or handmaid of the Lord. And so she became much more than her father had ever hoped for. She became a painter and an architect in an age when there wasn't even a word for a female architect. She designed a villa, a chapel, and other buildings. And she is still—today even more than in her lifetime—a messenger from a world that is possible.

So, begin your visit to Rome here, in the Church of the Artists. Linger before Plautilla Briccia's *Madonna* before you venture out into the viscera of a city that is as passionate, proud, and skeptical as a woman. After all, writers and poets have always said that Rome is a woman—wilful, rebellious, seductive—like the vestal virgin that begot her.

