

One

With a look of grim determination, the slight, wiry boy scrambled doggedly up the steep bank, hauling himself towards the summit by clinging to branches of shrubs and sturdy tufts of grass. Having reached the top, he swept a hand through his mop of dark, untidy hair as he contemplated the next part of his journey, through the dense maze of brambles and Russian ivy. He was resolute not to give up on his quest, so began to pick his way as carefully as possible through the tangled and thorny vegetation, but, small and careful as he was, his hands and legs were soon scratched and bloody. He jolted with surprise when he disturbed a big green lizard which quickly scuttled off into the undergrowth, then spoke to try and calm a blackbird shrieking a warning of his presence. 'It's alright Signore Blackbird, I won't harm you or your family.'

Giovanni Mireliti was eleven years old, and quite different from his school peers. It wasn't his poor academic results which set him apart, in fact very few of his classmates showed any particular ability in maths, or Italian, or history. One main difference was that he didn't like football, neither playing nor watching. He never joined in with the

after-school games on the village sports ground, and was constantly baited for not having a favourite Serie 'A' team. But the main source of ridicule and contempt was his highly unusual passion for the world of nature. In this rural Italian Region of Abruzzo, few people, least of all schoolboys, knew or cared about the names of birds or species of snakes, but for Giovanni it was an all-consuming hobby. He had recently been involved in a fight with several boys at school when he saw them kicking a hedgehog around the yard.

He couldn't wait to leave school, because he knew exactly what he wanted to do afterwards. He would be a park ranger up in the mountains, showing visitors where the wolves, and chamois, and bears lived, and this ambition for the future actually encouraged him to concentrate and perform well at one school lesson – English. His friend, Filippo, had told him that many of the visitors who came to see the wildlife were from England or America, and even those from Germany, or Holland, or Sweden could speak English. As Giovanni stopped to detach yet another length of bramble that had caught on his tee shirt and arm, he imagined a conversation with an English tourist, remembering his classroom lessons:

“Good morning, my name is Giovanni. I am your guide today. What is your name Signore?”

“My name is Mister Smith.”

“Will you like that I show you” – no. Another word. Like tree. Wood. “Would you like that I show you where live the wolves, Mister Smith?”

Giovanni smiled with satisfaction at the future scene unfolding in his mind, then pressed on towards his goal.

Eventually he arrived beneath a stand of oak and acacia trees, peering up into the branches before deciding which one to climb. Not the acacia. Hard to climb, and bearing vicious thorns. He picked the oak tree he wanted, and began his ascent, helped by ivy, as thick as his arms, entwined around the massive trunk. Breathing heavily with the effort, and halting occasionally to check his next hand or foot hold, it didn't take long for him to reach a wide bowl about nine metres from the ground where a major branch spread outwards. Secure in his hiding place, he studied the neighbouring tree until he spotted the prize. Ignoring the discomfort of rough bark digging into his knees, and the fly crawling across his face, he waited and watched quietly, patiently, until he heard that beautiful call, those rich, liquid notes of summer song. "Trocadero, Trocadero" it seemed to be singing, then moments later it appeared on a branch, causing Giovanni to hold his breath at the beauty of it. About the size of a blackbird, but showing a dazzling pattern of sharply-defined yellow and black, a golden oriole, that's what Filippo had told him this bird was called. Filippo had explained how they flew back from Africa at the beginning of May to nest once again here in Abruzzo. Heart thumping, Giovanni now saw for himself that the other thing Filippo had said was true. These shy, stunning golden oriole build their nests so that they hang like pockets from a fork in the oak tree's branch. He watched in wonder as the bird carefully wove a strand of grass through the pendulous structure that would soon hold a clutch of three to five speckled pale eggs. Deciding he would return at the end of the summer to retrieve the empty nest for his collection, Giovanni waited until another strand had been

woven in before scrambling precariously back down the tree. He jumped the final metre, but realised too late that his shorts were snagged, and heard the sound of ripping cloth before painfully landing belly-first on the ground. Mamma is going to be furious, he thought, examining the torn shorts. He just hoped he would be home in time for pasta, otherwise Papa will be angry as well.

Giovanni made his way as quickly as possible back home, sliding most of the way down the bank in the process, collecting more scratches, before running the final stretch between two rows of olive trees, then scampering through the plastic-beaded fly screen into the main downstairs room of the family home.

Seated at a rustic pine table were his eldest sister, nineteen-year-old Felicita, alongside her fiancé, Mario. Opposite them was his other sister, petite seventeen-year-old Laura. His mother, Anna, was preparing food in the small adjoining galley kitchen area, while his father, Bruno, was ensconced in a well-worn armchair at the other end of the room, watching a television game-show featuring scantily-clad hostesses. Giovanni hustled quickly into the seat next to Laura, anxious to ensure no-one saw his scratched legs and torn trousers.

‘Did I tell you I killed a snake this morning,’ Mario said to Felicita, but doubtless intended for Giovanni’s ears.

‘If you mean that poor creature left dangling in the fig tree, it was a slow worm – a type of legless lizard – not a snake. Not very brave after all, Mario,’ challenged Giovanni.

‘Just in time, my lad,’ shouted Anna above the loud volume of the game show, cutting off any riposte from Mario.

Giovanni looked up at the clock on the wall above where Felicita and Mario were sitting. A couple of minutes before seven o’clock. He grinned, knowing his Mamma would have kept the spaghetti and home-made passata warm for him anyway.

‘So who’s going to win tonight, eh, Giovanni?’ smirked Mario.

Giovanni shrugged his shoulders.

‘Remind me, who’s playing?’ continued Mario.

Mario was a heavily-built twenty-three year old, a stubble beard disguising flabby jowls and a weak chin.

‘Don’t know, don’t care,’ muttered Giovanni, looking unblinkingly into Mario’s full face, and wondering how long the slob would last on a football pitch.

The game show having ended, Bruno turned the television off using his remote, and opened a new can of beer. Beads of sweat glistened on his bald head and high, flat forehead.

‘Where have you been?’ he asked Giovanni, just as Anna emerged from the kitchen area and placed a large dish of pasta on the table. She would cook a fresh batch for eight o’clock when she, her mother, and Bruno would have *their* evening meal.

‘Eh, been looking at little birdies again?’ sneered Mario, while Felicita served her fiancé a generous portion of pasta. ‘He should be learning to shoot them, not watch them, eh Bruno?’

Giovanni scowled while Laura took over the dishing-up duties.

‘Birds, animals, butterflies,’ shouted Bruno from his armchair, wiping beer froth from his mouth with the cuff of his grubby checked shirt. ‘That’s all the boy is interested in. I have one son, and he turns out crazy. What did I do to deserve this?’

‘You have two sons, remember?’ shouted Anna from her kitchen refuge, angrily pushing a strand of red-dyed hair from her face and tucking it behind her ear.

‘Two sons?’ responded Bruno. ‘I only see one. I don’t see two. Where is this other son, eh?’

Felicita, Mario, Laura and Giovanni busied themselves with their bowls of pasta. They were familiar with this argument. Felicita sprinkled more cheese on Mario’s dish.

‘You know fine well where our first son is. He’s in America, working hard, doing well for himself.’

‘And what’s this son of ours doing in America that’s so clever. What’s he doing, eh?’

‘Building houses in New Jersey. Earning good money. Making something of himself.’

‘So why’s he building houses in New Jersey? Why can’t he build houses in Abruzzo? Come to that, I need a new shed for the rabbits. Why can’t he build me a new shed?’

Anna sighed deeply.

‘Because you don’t pay him. What future does he have in Abruzzo?’

‘Don’t pay him? What you mean, I don’t pay him? I give him food, he’s got a room. All free.’

Bruno took a long swig of beer.

‘Anyway,’ added Anna, Francesco will be married soon.’

‘So that’s supposed to make me happy, eh? He marries an American slut and I’m meant to jump for joy.’

‘Emmy-Lou is not a slut, Papa,’ said Laura, unable to stop herself from fiercely joining the argument.

‘Oh yes, remind me, why don’t you. You and Mamma take all our money and fly to New Jersey to visit our son and this – this American fiancée of his.’

‘And you and Mamma will fly to New Jersey for the wedding.’

‘We’ll see about that,’ muttered Bruno, before tipping the near-empty beer can to his mouth.

Having demonstrated support for her elder brother in America, Laura defiantly gave encouragement to the younger brother sitting next to her.

‘Did you see anything interesting?’ she asked Giovanni.

His face lit up. He adored his sister, thinking her the most beautiful girl in the whole world, and although he suspected she was asking more out of sisterly love than from genuine interest, he proudly explained his sighting of the golden oriole.

‘Trocadero, Trocadero,’ that’s what they’re singing,’ he enthused.

‘Are you sure it’s not “you’re a hero, you’re a hero?”’ said Laura.

Giovanni beamed with delight at his lovely sister. She gave him a playful pinch on the cheek, smiling back at him.

Felicita tipped the last of the pasta into Mario’s bowl without asking whether Laura or Giovanni wanted any more, while Giovanni twirled the final strand of spaghetti round his fork and scooped it quickly into his mouth.

‘How do you know that what you saw was a – whatever you said?’ asked Felicita sceptically.

‘Filippo told me about them. It was just like he described.’

‘Filippo. Him and his biker friends, coming and going at his house,’ chipped in Mario.

‘Biker friends?’ called Anna.

‘I don’t know them, Mamma,’ shouted Giovanni. ‘I never see them. I only visit Filippo at his wood-working place, I don’t go to his home.’

‘Anyway, how come Filippo knows all that stuff about birds and things?’ continued Mario.

‘Because he’s clever. He reads books. He can speak English, and he’s been to America, and England, and Spain.’

‘If he’s so clever, how come a man his age has a pony tail, huh?’ taunted Mario. ‘And another thing, how come he doesn’t have a woman?’

‘His wife died.’

‘So, his wife died. That’s bad luck. Why doesn’t he find another wife? There’s plenty of women his age around here. Maybe there’s something wrong with the guy.’

‘Mamma, it’s not fair,’ shouted Giovanni.

‘What’s not fair?’ she called back.

‘If my sister marries a baboon, my nephews and nieces will be baboons as well.’

‘Why you little shit,’ growled Mario, getting to his feet and scraping his chair on the tiled floor.

‘Leave it Mario...’

‘Have respect for your elders Giovanni...’

‘Be quiet...’

‘ENOUGH!’ shouted Anna over the tumult. ‘Felicita, fetch a glass of wine for Mario. And put the bowl of cherries

you picked this morning on the table. Giovanni, finish your water. I won't have this arguing at dinner.'

Bruno switched the television back on. It was half an hour before the football match was due to start, but he would find something to drown out the family arguments. As he was flicking through channels trying to find a half-watchable programme, his youngest son, Giovanni, plonked his glass back on the table, jumped up, and ran to the doorway.

'Hear that, Laura? It's the buzzards. They nest every year in the big trees up on the hill.'

'That pathetic mewling noise?' spat Mario. 'You sure it's not a pigeon farting?'

Mario laughed at his own joke, as Giovanni darted back outside, his bright, dark eyes gazing up into the early evening sky.