

excerpts from

SOLITARIA
a novel

GENNI GUNN

Signature
EDITIONS

(excerpted from Chapter 2)



Three days later, David and his mother Clarissa land at Fiumicino Airport just before noon, exhausted by the nine-hour flight from Vancouver to Heathrow, the three-hour wait, and the two-hour flight to Rome. They stand by the luggage carousel, dully watching bags slide down the ramp, bags that appear uniformly black, bags that belong to everyone but them. Soon, Clarissa gathers a crowd of admirers, begging for autographs. She is a diva, a soprano who has sung in every opera house in the world, with every tenor of renown. She is revered here in Italy. “*Piacere*,” she says, signing tickets and itineraries, until their bags are loaded into a taxi, and soon they are on a train, heading to Belisolano, to her mother’s hometown.

“Do you miss it all?” David asks her when they’re settled in their seats. Clarissa retired five years ago, and now gives private voice lessons to protégés, and does the odd TV appearance and recital. “The fans, the glory?” David spent his childhood with nannies backstage, in hotel rooms, while they travelled the globe. Then came boarding school, and later university. By then, Clarissa was so well-buffered by handlers, the only fans and glory he saw were on TV.

Clarissa smiles. Ageless, her beauty natural — the smooth olive skin, the large sparkling eyes, her full lips. She has her hair streaked to hide the grey, and is not an ounce above her normal weight. Of course, she also has a personal trainer, and a room full of cosmetics. “Sometimes,” she says. “Other times, I wish I could be anonymous.”

The train pulls out of Roma Termini, crosses the city through backstreet railyards surrounded by graffitied walls and buildings: THAT'S AMORE! WELCOME TO ROMAYORK! A universal language of exaggerated puffy lettering, three-dimensional words crying out anti-everything slogans, gang signatures leaving their mark. Here and there, even advertisements are graffitied onto stone walls, an infiltration, like buying nose-rings at The Bay.

"It's changed," Clarissa says, "yet still the same. I love this city. This country. Home." She sighs. "This is your motherland."

David stares out at the Roman walls, the archways; ruins sweep past quicker than he can fathom. Six rows of pines, low buildings in yellows and reds, the roofs warm terracotta. Then suddenly, five minutes out of Rome, the city gives way to open fields, vineyards, olive groves, an expanse of green. He has no sense of Italy as a motherland or fatherland, although he spent many summers here as a child. "*Your* motherland, you mean," he says.

Clarissa waves her hand in circular motions, dismissing his statement. "Inside," she says, tapping her chest, "don't you feel the pull of your roots?"

He smiles. Now that she's here, Italy is home, though she hasn't touched ground in this place herself for years. In Canada, her version of Italy is one of colours and shapes, one that lacks the stories of human interaction, the past being something she does not discuss. Clarissa lives in the present and the future. She ignores the past, not through any conscious denial, but simply through neglect. How is it possible that she had no feelings for all she left behind? How could she not speak about her own mother and father, her own brothers and sisters and friends in Italy? David used to wonder. How could she not think of his father — of the nebulous affair that produced David, and that she has always refused to discuss?

"My roots are very shallow," he says. He imagines them tangled around him, exposed.

"How can you say that?" she says. "After all the summers you spent here. Zia Piera would die of heartbreak to hear you."

He shrugs. "I was a child." A small guilt tugs at him, because she's right. He thinks about those summers that began when he was three or four, and continued until his early teens. The large dark house, the inner garden, the walls that kept him in. Even then, already, Piera was solitary, demanding, a scrupulous guardian protecting him from imagined risk.

"She loved you more than anything," Clarissa says.

A swarm of birds trail the sky.

The oppressive heat of memory hangs between them. He does recall Piera's devotion, her joy at seeing him, despite the rules, the strict codes of conduct, her love a large, encompassing burden. He pats Clarissa's hand. "I know. It's true," he says. "I loved her too."

"I should have made you come more often," she says. "I should have made you feel the earth in your bones. This is home."

He lets her words hover in the air. He stopped coming when, in his early teens, Zia Piera would not allow him to leave her house and garden unaccompanied. She didn't want him spending time with his cousin Marco. Teresa's son. Vito's son. Marco the heartbreaker, who had already begun to gamble at fourteen. How attractive he seemed back then, with his easy laughter, his packs of cigarettes, his magazines of girls — all forbidden to David, who was twelve.

"*You are my home,*" he says, and smiles.

Clarissa sighs, but it's a happy sigh. She settles back to nap.

She did her best, David thinks. Her concession to the past was to enrol him in weekly Italian lessons so he could write letters to Zia Piera — letters at first dictated by Clarissa, then written in his own voice, and finally when he stopped visiting

her in his teens, letters written by him in his mother's voice. By then, Piera had receded in memory as people do when they're absent too long. Her letters continued for a while, mawkish and too familiar for his comfort. By the time he completed his university degree, he had stopped writing to her altogether, except for Christmas and birthday cards.

It's surprising to him that Clarissa is exhibiting this nostalgia. She is the consummate traveller, the woman whose home is everywhere and nowhere. She is rarely still, rarely what David calls *contemplative*. His childhood memories of her are fragmented, a series of departures and arrivals, marked by longing in between. Zia Piera was the constant, the bedrock, while Clarissa was unpredictable, unavailable.

All around him on the train, people read newspapers and books, speak into cellphones, all disconnected from each other despite their proximity. He thinks of Bernette thousands of miles away; he thinks of his uncle Renato, who lives in Australia and never comes home; of his father, who knows nothing of his birth, who could be the man sitting in the next compartment; of his mother and himself in Canada. People Without Borders. We are all scattered, he thinks, our family like organic shrapnel blasted across continents.

He assumes Zia Piera will have a bare-bones story to tell that will answer the question: *why did you tell us your brother Vito was living in Argentina, when in fact he has been dead for almost fifty years?*

Roman aqueducts flit by, still in use now, two thousand years later. How different Italy is, how alien from Canada where things are built for planned obsolescence.

During the 1960s, when it was very fashionable to modernize, square ugly buildings sprang up next to ones a thousand years old, their windows skeletal teeth in mock smiles. Roman roads laid with large near-white limestone blocks were

concealed under black asphalt to facilitate the burgeoning travel of multiple-car families. Now, the Italians have declared all this a travesty, and are going about removing every blemish on their historical landscape. Many cities do not allow cars into their historic centres.

He wonders how long it'll be before anything close to this awareness of history will permeate North America. His own city, Vancouver, is in constant mutation, buildings rising and falling. From month to month, the cityscape altered, the old vanquished. Glass towers loom beyond the false fronts of old houses, beyond the fake town squares and church spires of malls.

The train lurches around a corner, and he recalls spectacular train crashes on the evening news, and how they always occur on these fancy high-speed trains. A small town flits past, like a mirage or a *marriage*.



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8. *St. Humilitas* *Reproduction of Painting*

“This is an artist’s rendition of St. Humilitas. She was the abbess of the first Vallombrosan convent. She is portrayed here as a nun in a black veil, with a white wimple, a grey-brown habit and a lambskin over her head.”

‡ 1952. **Belisolano, Italy.** I had not slept well, a restless night, dreams in which Vito came to my bed, in which I welcomed him, sent him away. I awakened, my cheeks wet, Sandro stroking my back. I pressed myself against him, and he held me, but I felt no passion in the embrace, in his brotherly love. Six months into our marriage, during another night of restless dreams and tears, he had finally whispered that it was not my fault, that he was impotent, and had been for years. At first, I objected, citing the conquests he was known to have had, the beauty in Florence. “No,” he said, and began to weep. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I don’t deserve you. I don’t deserve anyone.” I lay beside him, stiff in the darkness, not knowing what to do. I could not go home, I could not shame him by annulling the marriage, I could not give up what he provided for us all. I thought about all this, my sacrifice, Vito. I would be like St. Humilitas, a woman just like her, born 700 years before, forced into marriage by her parents, left childless by the death of her two infants, a woman who converted her husband, and both entered a convent to live as brother and sister; a woman for whom the monastery life was not austere enough, so that she sought more punishment for

her imagined sins, until she had a relative brick her into a cell adjacent to the Church and leave a small hole through which she could observe the services and receive food and water; a woman who ate only bread, and sometimes herbs, and slept kneeling in the earth, her head against stone walls. I shuddered. No, my confinement would take a different form, a chaste life in this house, beside this man. "It's all right," I murmured. "It doesn't matter." We never spoke of it again.

I got up, finally, at 5:30 a.m., and tiptoed to the bathroom, where I stared at my flushed face in the mirror. The sun was not yet up, and the air was chilled. I dressed quickly, made an espresso quietly so as not to wake the housekeeper and Domenica, and at 6:15 a.m., Sandro drove me to the train station in Bari. My father still worked for the Sud-Est Line, and if I were to board in Belisolano, he'd want to know why I was going to Tricase by myself to meet my brother Vito.

This much I had told Sandro, implying this was another of Vito's foolish escapades, another bailout I would effect while there. At first, Sandro wanted to accompany me, but I had managed to persuade him that I needed to speak to Vito directly, sister-to-brother, blood-to-blood, to make him understand that he could not continue to usurp our resources, that he had to live up to his responsibilities, that this was the last time. Already Papà considered him dead, and had forbidden any of the family to speak to him or about him. Only Mamma whispered his name now and then.

Once the train had departed, I opened my purse, pulled out the letters and reread them. *I must see you*, the first one said. *I'm living in Tricase. You must come to me.*

Chug-chug, chug-chug, the train wheels lulled me into their rhythm. Chug-chug, *you must*, chug-chug. My own letter in response begged him to stay away. *Don't you recall your promise?* I wrote back. *Is it money you want?*

It's you I want, he said. You must come.

And when I replied once more to tell him *no*, he sent another letter — *If you don't come to me, I'll have to come to you*, he wrote. *I don't think your husband would like that.* Chug-chug, chug-chug. Rock walls flew past, black lichen spreading, like stains.



He arrived in a white car — a convertible — which he parked in front of the station. I watched him from behind glass: he was achingly beautiful, slender, his black, black hair unruly, his long fingers. Three children ran out of the station to gaze at the white Alfa-Romeo, to touch its sparkling chrome handles.

I smoothed my hair, though I had combed it six times before the train stopped at the station. I hadn't seen him since Daniela's death. Five years. I took a deep breath.

Vito threw open the station door, while I made myself remain seated inside. I was wearing a white linen skirt and shirt — like a bride — and delicate expensive sandals that clicked on the marble floor. When he saw me, he smiled, his teeth a dazzling white.

My chest ached, blood rose to my face — white fury, white noise. What did he think? That he could summon me any time he wanted, without responsibilities, carefree and laughing?

He took my arm and led me to the waiting car.

"It's not mine," he said quickly. "I rented it for the day." He looked like a film star, in a crisp white shirt, khaki cuffed trousers, and dark sunglasses which hid his eyes.

We drove out into the countryside, into a dream I'd had for so many years, I could hardly recognize it, the two of us below a white town on a hilltop, vineyards and olive groves, a stone house, pots of geraniums, and children's laughter rippling the sky.

He lowered the convertible top, despite my protests. I hung on tight to the kerchief around my head, feeling as I imagined Isadora Duncan did, moments before her scarf wrapped itself around the wheel of her lover's convertible, seconds before she was strangled. And I recalled her words, *People do not live nowadays. They get about ten percent out of life.*

Vito's hair winnowed in the breeze. "Let it go," he said to me, pushing the kerchief away from my head. "It's only wind. It'll do you good."

"How do you know what's good for me?" I said. "When have you ever thought about what might be good for me?"

Vito sighed, his mouth tightening. My words hung in the air between us, hot and bloated with innuendo.

I pulled off the kerchief and let my hair tumble in the wind. He turned on the radio and we drove without speaking through a countryside studded with white stones.

Here, in Puglia, the soil is rich but shallow, and lies on large horizontal extensions of limestone bedrock. *Terra rossa*. With few water courses, in winter the rains drain through the soil into fissures in the rock, and emerge from underground springs at the sea coast, creating fantastic, magical caves. This limestone landscape — this rock beneath our feet — is actually an underground filigree of grottos, crevices, and streams, of stalactites and stalagmites, the earth in constant formation. Above, left to its own device, the land would support scrubby woodlands and brush. However, as often happens out of necessity, people have transformed this rocky terrain into fertile fields.

As we rounded a bend, Vito pointed to the right. "Look. Doesn't that remind you of *Il Vigneto*?" he said. "Do you remember? The hours we spent working out there." He slowed down.

"How can you remember?" I said. "You were rarely home." I saw myself beside Papà, a basket of pebbles clutched in my

hand, while Papà hauled and stacked large stones along the perimeter of the field, creating stone walls. *Muri a secco*.

"*Il Vigneto*, imagine," Vito said. "No doubt, Papà envisioned a vineyard of the finest grapes that would make us rich." He laughed. "*Il Vigneto*, minus the grapes. Poor Papà and his silly dreams."

"Don't you be disrespectful about Papà," I said, my voice edgy. "He worked all day on the tracks, then went to the field to tend the tobacco. The man is a saint."

"He could have had fewer children," Vito said.

I shook my head. "And you could have a better memory," I said. "What about the shop? I suppose you worked there too." We were quibbling about petty things.

"It was hardly a shop," Vito said. "From what I recall, bags of food stored in a corner of the kitchen and sold to peasants in miniscule amounts." He rolled his eyes.

I crossed myself, because it was what Mamma would have done hearing Vito's blasphemy. Poor Mamma and Papà, all their sacrifices discarded. "Mamma adored you," I said. "You were her first-born."

He sighed. "Poor Mamma," he said.

We continued driving along the Murge, a vast sunburned landscape of perennial grasses patched with dwarf sagebrush. Here and there, large rocks bulged out of the earth, like giant prehistoric creatures hiding in the Mediterranean steppe. Once rivers flowed here and filled lakes and marshes. Now, however, all the water had seeped down through limestone cracks, and hardly any trees broke the horizon.

In the distance, flocks of sheep grazed the burnt pastures. We drove in silence, then he turned onto a rural road. In the distance in front of us rose a magnificent basilica, *Church of the Devil*. I knew the legend well: Lucifer had built this in a single night, furnished it with lavish paintings, statues, and carved

stone altars in a Faustian deal with a cruel old prince capable of executing his subjects for blocking his view. In exchange the prince was to offer a communion wafer consecrated to a goat representing Satan.

Vito parked the car and turned off the motor. I closed my eyes. "I need you," he said. "Come away with me." He reached across and covered my hand with his. I was tongue-tied and terrified too that I would be struck down by the hand of God, or perhaps the claws of the Devil whose church we sat in front of, smiling, as if we were already lovers.

"In the legend," I said, "the villagers were both curious and wary of a church built overnight. Of course, they wanted the treasures. However, when the mass began, even the evil prince couldn't defy God."

"Piera —"

"You can imagine how the Devil felt, betrayed," I said, taking a deep breath. "He made the church disappear, then sent whirling winds that dragged the bells of the church into the Canale del Rio. And do you know," I said, trying to still the tremors, "that during storms even today, you can hear church bells pealing from the bottom of the sea?"

"Piera, did you hear me?"

I got out, and he followed. We walked up the gravel path to the church. I looked up at the tall, blunt structure, its octagonal shape, thinking of the sun, how it moves during the year so that its shadow delineates the apses, the altars, the statues and paintings, and how such power, like love, survives through millennia, through homes and prisons. One cannot divorce the sun.

"You're my brother," I said.

"You can't deny what's between us," he said, touching my arm.

I moved away. "There's nothing between us."

His eyes narrowed. He shook his head. "You love me," he said, his voice confident.

"You're my brother," I said again, my voice cool and controlled.

"We could go away where nobody knows us. We could live as husband and wife."

"I already have a husband," I said slowly.

"I can't bear to think of that man touching you," he said.

"That man has saved our family," I said. "Who do you think paid all your foolish bills?" I turned away and walked back to the car. "Who do you think continues to pay the endless bills this family produces?" My voice was harsh. I got in and slammed the door. "You promised to leave me alone," I said.

"You don't love him," he said, following me. He slid in the driver's seat and started the engine.

"You're wrong," I said. "I do love him."

He turned me to him, hands on my shoulders. "Say you don't love me."

I shook my head. How could he not understand the sacrifice I had made for him? How could he not see the misery he continued to cause us all? "I want to go back to the train station," I said.

"Piera —" he began.

"Is it money you want?"

He flinched, as if I had slapped him. I reached into my purse and pulled out the envelope Sandro had prepared. Five hundred dollars. I slapped it onto the space between us. "Here," I said. "Take it, and don't ever threaten me again."