CONCEZIO DI ROCCO

By

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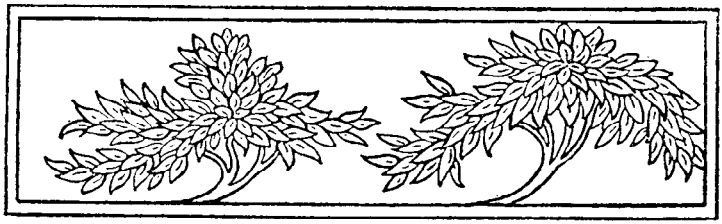

CONCEZIO DI ROCCO

"Who was there, Franco, tell me, who was there?" seems to be the first question I remember asking and the one which continues as the linchpin of my perspective of the world, since my world began at that time, one in which I remember seeing human events through the eyes and the presence of its characters. My grandmother had died, and the wake was held in her home. She was laid out on her bed, not in the center for she shared the bed with grandfather. She was to her side, fully dressed and half covered with freshly starched bedclothing. Her hands were folded, as in prayer, holding her mother's rosary beads, and at her side, on the night table, was a picture of her second child—who had died at the age of four after a very brief illness which started with fever then pustules, then difficulty breathing.

I couldn't go to the wake, mother didn't want me to see death. There was time for that. But,

still, I wanted to know for, somehow, I was fascinated by the thought of death, though I really didn't believe in it. Also, I wanted to be part of my family's life. With us, wakes and marriages, baptisms and holy days, were times we got together as one large group, to talk and be nice to one another. We sat down to eat together, we saw grownups smile, laugh, cry. They looked like us, and it hurt, but inside where we had pain and helplessness. When we cried, they always helped (or caused it). For us, it was different.

"Indeed," Franco said, "everyone was there: aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, 'compari,' even the people she hadn't spoken to for years." The women wore black, their hair combed straight out, their faces freshly washed. The men wore hats and dark suits with either a black tie or a black armband. Some had both. Everyone went first to grandma, knelt on the floor and prayed, then some kissed her forehead, some bowed their heads once more for a brief moment, some kissed the cross on her prayer beads. Everyone made the sign of the cross and then went to grandpa, mom and dad, and, lastly, uncle John. Mamma told them all how good grandma was, how hard she worked, how much she loved the children, and thanked God that she died quickly, without pain. But mamma just didn't mean it! She didn't want to lose grandma, not even one day early. She wanted to care for her, to cook for her, to have

her in the house. Then mamma would begin crying all over again, calling to God from time to time, begging Him to give grandma the peace she deserved and had given to others, and sighing that she knew it would be that way . . . "if you're really there, Dio Mio" . . . not because she doubted His presence. She was sure of His existence, and that His truth would guarantee grandma's stay in heaven.

During the wake, grandma was still alive . . . she was the reason everyone had come together. No one accepted the fact that she had died that morning, just a few short hours ago. In fact, they kept saying, "I can't believe she's dead: just yesterday we were together, talking about Piero's wedding" or "look at her, she looks so good! didn't she just move?"

The women brought food, soup made from chicken and beef, boiled oxtail, marinated eel, pork-bread, death cookies. Our women always did this when they went to a friend or a relative, for life or death, and they never visited the home of an acquaintance. The breaking of bread is our symbol of intimacy, for we never ate with strangers, in restaurants, for business purposes, and we only gave bread to loved ones and pilgrims.

Our pagan culture has, through the years, remained unchanged. At the death of a loved one, we always brought food for the immediate family

who, out of respect and because of grief, despaired, couldn't cook, refused to eat. This deep seated ritual of ours, as old as our custom of burying our dead and marking demise and events with stones, as we once "calculated" with stones, was relived at each wake, ceremoniously, and was as sacrosanct as the very memory of our beloved deceased. We brought food to the immediate family and they, only after refusing and crying and falling in grief, would eat . . . first just sipping or picking, and then with spoon and fork and knife, and then with wine in glass and word on lip. The death cookies, used since early Roman times, were set at the center of the table, then taken one by one, starting with the most senior member of the immediate family, and followed by wine, anisette, marsala. By this time, the grief was gone, and death became a part of our lives and the deceased died, becoming "la bonanima," the good soul. It was time for burial, we could now face the ground, inter her, mark the place with a stone, and go home to fold her clothing, put her linens in a chest, move her picture to papa's bedroom. At Easter, we would bring palms home from church, and they would be crossed over her picture, and changed yearly thereafter, as long as mamma and papa lived. From then on "la bonanima" would become a sanctifying prefix used as an introductory entreaty, or oath, every time we referred to grandma, or wished to be believed. All

of grandma's negative qualities disappeared, and would never again be referred to. Only if someone wished to offend us deeply would he do so, and then with assuredness that forever we would loathe him. Our dead were inviolable, they had gone to God. We would continue to revere them, pray to them, think of them as . . . almost holy.

Franco talked about how much things were changing, that the Savoia (that ruling Piedmont family which united Italy) had tricked Garibaldi, who had tricked us and that, now that our Signori no longer owned the land or us, we could no longer cut the wood freely for home or warmth, that we could no longer graze our sheep and goats without charge, that we were no longer "braccianti" (hands) but "cafoni" (humanoid asses). The "borghesi" in the North had made an agreement with those in the South leading them to believe that they, too, could take over the wealth and power of our newly disinherited nobility, and that we could become their workers. They had only to support Garibaldi's occupation troops in their battle against our "briganti," who, in desperation and frustration, had taken up arms to demand what had been promised them . . . by Garibaldi . . . in his epoch-making decrees shortly after his landing in Sicily and advance up the peninsula from Calabria into the Puglie, our home.

My family were neither "Signori" nor "borg-

hesi," "braccianti" nor "cafoni," "briganti" nor sheep. We would emigrate and, with us would begin the first mass exodus from Italy, the garden of the Mediterranean, the fountainhead of Western civilization since 200 B.C., a land into which people had poured since the beginning of time. In our century, we would leave.

Now that grandma was dead, the family would have to be restructured. Grandpa looked to America for work, and to give his children opportunity. Those who wern't already married would be urged to set up households, "acasarsi," very quickly.

Grandma really served all the needs our family had, and she directed our daily lives, marketing, cooking, sending us to church, giving us chores and play. We lived as a group, each of us fitting into the pattern, moving from one duty or responsibility to another as we grew older or married, or emigrated. In the family we played with one another only when we were very young, for as soon as we were seven or eight we began to work and then we worked with one another. Everything we did as individuals, in youth, we did to the extreme, loving and hating, crying and laughing, working, for the moderate were weak and couldn't inspire trust. This was strange, for, in the desires of our families the opposite was true. Here, all that mattered were health, a full cupboard, good children.

Grandpa went to America with papa and uncle John, and returned with papa, who then took Carmine, Michele and Francesca. Papa came back for Stefano, Maria, and Elena. When he arrived there was a dinner, and everyone came to hear him talk about America. I couldn't imagine what snow looked like no matter how many times he described it, throwing lemon sherbet into the air and spraying salt over my head, nor could I see the darkness lit by gas and electricity. How could men work with other men who couldn't speak their language? I would see, for now it was my turn. In America there was little need for men in their 40's and 50's, and great need for boys and young men. They worked harder, got less pay, had no responsibilities, and didn't join unions. There would be work for me, and I could help pay to bring the others over. Now I could become me.

In the south of Italy, we had lost our identity. The northerner mocked our culture, cut our trees, dried our land, banned our languages, erased our history, removed our industry. We couldn't develop with the rest of Europe, so we became a wasteland, infested with unemployment and banditry, where no one could grow. The southern man could not develop an identity. He was "domesticated" as a result of this total domination by the North. The home became his kingdom, it was there that he could rise, be heard, have an authoritative voice

and serve as a symbol of strength, for his family needed him if his country didn't. He became honor-oriented, developing codes of behavior and speech. Thusly, he lived out his role, obeying the "mores" of his culture, since his legal system was neither the result of his efforts nor expressive of his situation: no common law developed in southern Italy. The laws were imposed by the conquerors, from the Greeks through the French, and the promises of our northern neighbors (for judicial and economic freedom) were as political as the visions of the hereafter given by the papacy and the Bourbons.

"Emigration, after all, isn't like death, since one may return if he wishes," I said to myself. I knew that I would be joining my brothers and sisters and that soon the entire family would be united in Chicago. There was little if any sense of adventure, and no fear. Papa had done this three times now, so I knew exactly what would happen . . . and, anyway, I had no sense of distance.

Mamma came to the station with us. On the way, we stopped at the port of Bari to eat some clams and squid. They were alive when the fisherman gave them to us. We squeezed drops from a lemon onto the shellfish, saw them writhe and swallowed them quickly to feel the movement as they went down. It was fun, like biting through a ripe peach. Mamma kept hold of Bepe, my baby brother, holding his arm at the shoulder and keep-

ing him well within her skirts, looking at me as one more part of herself which was leaving, showing no grief or joy, but making me wonder whether this was still a family. It was being sliced over the years. She hugged me goodbye, and she and papa kissed with their cheeks, first one then the other, then they did it again. There were hundreds of people in that mass of ours, all with gunny sacks, kerchiefs, and bulging pockets (cheese and salami, bread and wine, oil). No one wore socks.

The ride to Naples took a day and a half. We rode in a wooden car which had benches down either side and two, back to back, in the center. Everyone looked grim, no one sang, friendships were not made. We ate bread and cheese, soaked in oil, and drank wine. After this, we took out dried olives, ate them, then drank some more wine. It was heavy, whitened with age, musty. Every six or eight hours the train stopped so we could relieve ourselves, walk about, rinse our faces in water. We cleansed our teeth with salt, and rinsed our eyes with water into which a drop of vinegar had been allowed to dissolve: the mouth and eyes were where the emigration doctors looked.

I really don't remember Naples, there was such a mass of people. I don't even remember the boat, since we seemed to flow from the train, through the station, onto the pier and into the boat. It all looked like a job or food line, with us stopping at

locks where we undressed, got examined, dressed, gave our names . . . mine? Concezio Di Rocco . . . and that was all.

The boat ride was long, very long, but not many of us got sick. At that time I learned that sickness was a luxury, one which we couldn't afford. We were neither impatient nor nervous, no one was frightened, and no one dreamed. This movement of villages, entire villages, made things seem familiar, relieved anxiety, so that it was difficult to know when we emigrated, and just when we immigrated.

At New York, after we finally landed, a crowd gathered around one of the older men from our village, a man who had been obvious because of his silence. I saw then, but only later realized, that he had survived through silence and that he had learned to lose. As the crowd moved toward us it broke along our group bringing him closer to me than he had ever been at any time during the trip. His face was the same, but now he was speaking: "Now I can work! I don't want money I find, money that's not part of my sweat and blood," he kept saying, as he kicked at a five dollar bill he saw on the pier. "This is America, now I'm a man, what's mine is mine. There!" And he spat on it, made the sign of the cross, and said, "I'll earn my money, 'se Dio vuole.'" There was only laughter. At the time, I don't think I understood him.

A bus took us to the train station, and the train to Chicago. We walked to Grand Avenue and Milwaukee, and then to Huron and May, the streets where people from our town lived. That night I slept at my sister's home, and the next day I went to work. At the end of the day I got paid, in change, and was told to come back tomorrow, that I had a steady job. The job was mine, it belonged to me. And now, for the first time, I knew fear . . . the fear of losing my work.

Now that I had my work, I was sure that nothing would make me lose it, or give it up, so I did what I was told, when I was told, and I got a raise only when the boss gave it to me. Work in a print shop was no different from anything else I had ever done. Things had to be moved, others loaded or unloaded, tanks had to be filled and machines oiled, gears had to be changed and sprockets replaced. I managed. The work day was 12 hours long, six to six, and we had half an hour for lunch. In order to start work on time, I got there at 5:30 in the morning, allowing me time to change clothing, sort out my tools, get to my part of the shop, and be ready to start when the boss called out. We stopped when he said "go home."

On Sundays I slept late, and then went to one of my relatives for dinner. We ate throughout most of the afternoon, ending by cracking nuts, drinking wine, and munching fruit. At night time, in

the winter, I went to bed, and in the summer either to the lake or dancing. Very often, we had picnics, always in one of the Forest Preserves, or feasts, at Santa Maria Addolorata and our Lady of Mount Carmel churches. The picnics were all-day affairs and the feasts went on for a week! For the picnics we prepared roast beef and hot sausage, brought fresh green peppers and loaves of bread. Someone would always bring a couple of kegs of beer and someone else rented, or borrowed, a truck into which we all piled, bringing the accordion, banjo, guitar, clarinet and saxophone. I'm sure we must have looked like a bunch of wild Indians, wearing undershirts and cotton pants rolled up to the knees, with our heads wrapped in knotted handkerchiefs and our skin blistering red. None of us could swim very well but we splashed and squatted and waded and waddled through the little lakes just north of Chicago throughout the hot weather. At home, we slept on the roof, the fire escape, the back or front porch, or on the floor in the middle of the house after opening all the windows so the air would flow over us like a breeze.

And then, it was my turn to marry. I had met this girl at one of our picnics, I visited her home on Saturday nights, and ate with her family on Sunday afternoons. We got engaged. A few months later, it was the church, the photographer, the hall. We had ten of our friends stand up for the wed-

ding, four bridesmaids, four ushers, a maid of honor and the best man. The week before the wedding we went to get measured for our tuxedos. The girls had gone to a dress maker long ago and were already arguing about the color and style, who looks good with a high neck and who looks fat with low heels, what they will do with the dresses after the wedding. The Saturday afternoon before the day of our marriage we all went to the church to practice under the direction of Father Lombardi, learning when to go up to the altar and when to kneel. The morning of the wedding I was confused. The day began in church with a solemn high mass, communion, and both organ music and a chorus. There were flowers on the altar, along the aisle at each pew and over Christ's head. This was funny, so I laughed. I had always seen our Lord's son with thorns for a crown; but, today, for me, and my wife, he wore a crown of flowers, which really looked good.

This was only the second time in my life I thought of Jesus as something other than a perfect, or a sad, figure. The other occasion was when I was a young boy . . . actually, it was the first time I kissed a girl. I had just finished serving mass when "il monsignore" told me to go to the storeroom, which was right behind the rectory, to get his vestments for vespers. Angelina, the cook's daughter, had been sent there for reasons which I don't quite

remember, certainly not to meet me. We actually came to the door at the same time, from different directions, so that we saw one another, the door, the lock . . . and around us . . . all in an instant, the same instant we slipped through the slightly opened portal, both feeling that we shouldn't be seen there and knowing what would happen if we were. Once inside, we just lived out the opportunity (one of my more cynical uncles once quoted Saint Francis as having said that "it's a sin to allow such opportunities to go to waste"), and kissed one another. My lips were sealed and my eyes wide open. Then, I froze with fear, causing Angelina to look up at me, follow my eyes, to see over her shoulder the benevolent face of Christ the Redeemer looking down at us. She just turned her shoulders round, took hold of the pedestal, and spun the Christ about so that He was now looking at the door. My frightened face turned into a smiling one just before I burst out laughing and picked up Angelina who had the gentle look of Saint Anne on her mischievous countenance.

Father Lombardi looked like a man who had a great message to give, and he waited for his time. It never came. We went to the photographer after the wedding ceremony, for we all wanted these pictures very much. Mr. Granada was a very precise man who did everything in just the right way, like someone who does it over and over again and

who knows he can't make a mistake. Each of us was molded into the proper form and set perfectly next to the others, all facing squarely the lights Mr. Granada had set in front of us. He kept us in the same position until our faces lost their expressions, at which time he flashed us into wax-like images, which he planned to press into paper and onto the metal back of pocket mirrors. After this, even the heat of August was a relief for our group, which got into four cars and drove down Ogden Avenue to Grand Avenue and then over to the hall, where we met rice and confetti with kisses and tears.

Cristina and I went to the table at the front of the hall, where the cake, liqueurs, sugar coated almonds, marriage cookies, and "bignet" were, and there we stayed for a couple of hours, to greet the guests as they came to pay their respects to her parents and to give us their good wishes. Each handed Cristina an envelope with varied amounts of money inside and with their names clearly printed on the outside. There was no card, we knew they wished us well, and no gifts were brought, these had been given to Cristina at the shower her friends had for her last month. Particularly close friends would be bringing things with them during their first visits to our home. The giving of money was not an expression of affection or well wishing, or magnanimity. It was an "obligo," a

duty, for one is obliged to contribute to the wedding, to make this day possible, since no one of us could afford such a party and a day such as this would not be possible without these . . . "contributi." After all, a father had to "give" his daughter a beautiful wedding, to celebrate her one great day in dress and deed. Someday, very soon, I would begin to go to weddings.

A perfectly hilarious, and stunningly serious, conversation flowed musically, even the gestures were musical, between two Sicilian women, "old timers," who had collected an audience which listened and asked questions, though carefully refraining from allowing the subject to change. The interest increased! In the countryside, away from the big cities of Palermo, Siragusa, Catania, so they told us, every night there was a wedding, a chicken died. Custom demands that the bride's mother hang out the nuptial linen on the morning after the wedding night, to show to one and all, for once and always, that her daughter was a virgin. The husband's family demanded it as part of the wedding agreement. Love of daughter and peace, best wishes to son-in-law, and an inability to tolerate suspense, behove her to wring a chicken's neck and spill his blood over the sheet. The newly weds would . . . eat better. Cristina knew the custom, I could see it in her eyes.

It seemed that Cristina and I were not yet re-

laxed with one another when our first child was born. It was just as well, for she changed completely, becoming a mother, interested in and captured by our son, to the point where her own person was neglected and our lives and relationships were secondary. We had begun to gain our own identity, and independence from her parents, a rather difficult accomplishment since, for economic reasons, we chose to live with them for three or four months after we were married. And then, when we moved, we took an apartment in the building they owned. Cristina became essential to Gigino and me, and then to Irene, and Vittorio, so that our matriarchal family soon became a typical one: I worked, was the source of authority and protection, disciplined the children; but, actually, it was Cristina who determined the course of our family, and she did this by being essential to each of us and by participating in, or withdrawing from, situations. Not only was she the provider of all our good and peace, but she taught us to love, to sacrifice, to abstain. In order to occupy properly this role, she must have more, be more, value more, thusly incorporating all aspects of female virtue in southern Italy . . . where the woman is not faithful to her man because of a deep and personal love for him. Rather, it is because she has been raised to be above pleasure in sex, pleasure in personal appearance, pleasure of anyone's company other than those in her family

and immediate circle. Virtue becomes her purple mantle, through which she rules, personifying love and sacrifice. She becomes the formidable vicar of the family, maintaining the husband as the symbol of authority or the paragon of whatever quality happens to be the subject at the time: "We had better ask your father's permission," "your father never would do that," "watch the way your father eats his chicken! first he cuts the joint, then he turns the leg toward him and slices the dark meat by holding the piece he is cutting off with the fork . . ." The father is necessary as the physical symbol (she generally does the spanking) and the law to which . . . *even* she . . . turns. How can the children disobey?!

As Cristina became more and more independent, caring for home and children, I gradually felt more at peace with myself and my world, owning land, voting, becoming economically secure (with my job) and paycheck, that is). I noticed that I kept turning to the law for strength, expression, protection, and that when all this happened I felt like a man, and it was strange, only because I felt the need to say it, as though I had not been one before, or I had lost my masculinity and only now did it return. But why? Yes! sure, I didn't lose it, but we did, all of us, all the southern men. It was taken when our brothers from the North freed us all. We had accepted the Savoia and their political system, con-

vinced that we were part of a social and political revolution, not just the exchanging of the Savoia family for the Pope, the Bourbons, the Hapsburgs. We joined them in the fight, in the total destruction of all foreign troops on Italian soil . . . though we had to wait until 1914-18 for the opportunity to drive the Austrians from Venezia Giulia. We helped to close the chapter on the last privileges of the noble classes and even tolerated the anti-clerical position of the Savoia, one which we did not share. Then, our bourgeois ("Signori") made an agreement with Cavour's officials, betraying the promises of Garibaldi. The "Signori," in turn, were betrayed by the northerners, who put them into a position of subservience and then classified all of us. In the language of Dante: the "Signori" who owned land became "terroni," those who were wealthy and exercised some influence became "baroni," feudal lords, and we all became "meridionali," southerners, so that forever we could be identified and kept at a proper distance. These were all deprecatory terms in the northerner's language. We soon were scorned, the subjects of prejudice, excluded from professional and social organizations, not allowed into major guilds as workers ("operai") or master craftsmen ("mastri"). Then, like whipped dogs, in awe of his speech and industry, we looked with love and respect to our northern master, making every effort to learn his language, speak with

his accent, gain his respect. There were exceptions: The Neapolitans and the Sicilians. They kept their dialects, esprit, love of life. Thusly, the southerner lost his earning power and pride, his accent was ridiculed, his dialect mocked, his dexterity and energy maligned. He was sent abroad to work elsewhere, but never allowed in the North, not even in menial positions such as maid or waiter or chauffeur. The actual destruction of 40 percent of the Italian population was, thusly, complete, for we were driven from our land, spread about the Western hemisphere. And then, one by one, northern industry moved to the South. The independence, the pragmatism, the irreverence of the northerner were considered expressions of arrogance . . . but were they? And yet . . . how could one curse his god? How could he trust a civil code? How could he accept things at their face value?

Yes, assimilation into American life, that is what we wanted, and we wanted it to occur slowly. Most of us were too much a part of our own eating and thinking habits, looking at the world as do people without a country who have no language, since we no longer lived in Italy and the people here, especially those from other countries who arrived with us, saw us as Italians. We learned American at work, on the street, on the radio, words we did not know were invented by substituting an Italian word or, more often, a familiar American word

with an Italian accent. The message to our children would be, "this is your home. You are of Italian blood, but this is your country. Remember, you cannot serve two flags."

My struggle was with life, for existence! I wanted to be alive at the dawning each day. Never did the future, or the changing world, determine where I went or what I thought. When I was a boy, there were horses and candles, but during my lifetime there came the automobile and the jet, the trip to the moon and a knowledge of the needs of my fellow man. This was too much for a man like me. The world had to be kept out.

As the years passed, I became silent, assuming the wisdom of diminished activities, of few material needs, a wisdom which became profound because I really said nothing, and thought less. Cristina kept right on with the children and their children, visiting, cooking, going to weddings and showers and wakes. My diet changed, only a little, but it changed so that I ate more boiled green vegetables, dressed with olive oil and lemon, rice with butter, calf's liver, and fennel. From time to time I accompanied Cristina, who remained active and exuberant as I became sedentary and inert, overcome with indolence. And then, a headache, severe, followed by a scream of "Dio Mio, mamma mia," and I was alone . . . but she never left . . . no one leaves an old man's mind. They are imprisoned in this old man's

thoughts, and they talk with him as he goes about his day, they are him, his "way of looking at the world through its characters."

On Ascension Sunday I took a terrible cold, coughing and sneezing, and ran a fever. My children put me to bed, where I stayed for one or two or three days, wetting my sheets with my sweat and being flattened under the weight of covers for my chills, waking up at nighttime and sleeping in the day. Then, my son sat down at my feet to read, so I called him, and, when he raised his head, I asked: "where is your mother? She knows I'm sick! Why doesn't she make me some soup?"

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