

High on the looming façade of Palazzo Leoni, a Capuchin monkey scamps along an iron bar, feeling chill metal sting his fingers. He is the only small soul who overhears, and later none will understand his chatterings for what they are. A warning. He wears a tunic of raspberry velvet, a small gold hoop in his ear and a manacle the width of a baby's bracelet on his ankle. Behind him he drags a chain, delighting in the rasping note it plays as it scrapes along.

Two days before Christmas. The sun hangs low but bright in a Madonna's-cloak-blue sky, a brooch pinned in place since the solstice. The monkey closes his pale lashes and turns his face to it. He tucks his hands under his armpits to warm them and lifts his nose to sniff the air, detecting in it the mineral clarity of oncoming snow. Then he sets off running, skinny tail held proud and curled, meeting the limit of his world with a clank before turning back. This he has done all morning, over and over. Hundreds of the cloistered women of Florence are doing the same. Taking their exercise. Walking back and forth along narrow rooftop loggias, meeting their limit and turning.

A sparrow dips out of the cloudless sky. Beyond it, peeking through a gap between drunken chimney stacks and terracotta rooves, the brass ball atop the Duomo glints. The monkey lunges, feels tail feathers brush through his grasping hands, and misses.

From here, with his God's-eye view, he sees all of the piazza. It's less square-shaped than coffin-shaped. Below him, an ever-replenishing stream of people are making their way north and south, their shadows stretched long beside them on the paved ground. Sunlight has crept over most of the piazza but there remains one shady corner where frost glazes the ground. There, the monkey sees the sturdy body of a maid bending over a stone well, smashing her way through a layer of ice with the base of her bucket. She appears at the same time every morning. He knows her by her thick waist and slow trudge.

His eye is caught, when he stops to itch his back with his toes, by the foreshortened figures of two men beneath him. He recognises one of them. They stand conspicuously still in a tide of movement, with their heads inclined together. One black hat. One red, adorned with a peacock feather. They're standing so close that the steam of their breath mingles into one cloud. Lovers, wonders the monkey? Their words drift up through still air to meet his *orecchiette* ears. He twists his earring. He listens in.

'I didn't take you for a sniveller, Alessandro.' Maffeo di Ser Gabriello Leoni speaks through a smirk. He is perhaps 40, built short and squat like a fighting dog, and is dressed entirely in exquisitely expensive black.

'Me, the sniveller?' Alessandro leans back to let out an extravagant 'ha!' His hair is cut blunt halfway down his neck and swings with him as he moves. He looks stylish from a distance, with his well-turned legs in two-tone hose. Up close, the grime on his collar and cuffs is visible, and the large repeating pattern of his doublet reveals it for an offcut of fabric once used as a bedcurtain. 'If there's a sniveller here, it's you. You're the one who keeps his hands clean.'

Maffeo doesn't generally tolerate insolence but he does so now, tucking his thumbs into the belt under his paunch and biting the inside of his cheek. The moment passes. The latent violence in his sinews melts away. 'Lower your voice', is all he says. 'The piazza has ears.' It's true. A voice can travel a hundred feet, bounce off any stone surface it meets and fly around corners. Not to mention float, like an archangel delivering a message, through an open window.

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