

Section II- Narrative  
"From Home"  
Amanda Marie Lasek  
Nineteen years old  
3782 Edenderry  
Troy, Mi. 48083  
USA  
(248) 528-3546  
laseks@comcast.net

**Amanda Marie Lasek**, born May 31<sup>st</sup>, 1983, is a college student at Western Michigan University. She is in the teaching program, and plans to teach primary school upon completion of this program. She is the daughter of Daniela Mularoni Lasek, vice-president of the *Comunità Sammarinese di Detroit*. Amanda's grandparents are Salvatore Mularoni of Faetano and Irma Pasquali of Montegiardino.

This past summer, Amanda had the pleasure of participating in the *Soggiorni Culturali*. This trip was a wonderful opportunity for establishing a connection with her cultural roots, which became even more important in the shadow of Irma's death in March of 2002. This past summer is also when I received my San Marino citizenship.

"From Home" is a short story based loosely on the events directly preceding her grandparent's emigration from San Marino, although most of the details are fictitious.

### **From Home**

"Irma, I got the money!" Torino walked into the garage, rented to them as a one-room efficiency apartment. Jobs weren't the only thing not be had in San Marino during the post-war 1950s. Grey cement walls, grey cement floor that was uncomfortably cool through Irma's house slippers, even in the summer. The rag rug, woven of Torino's old work clothes and dresses too small and too shabby to keep for Gilberta from Irma's sister Anna, sat in the middle of the room. Although the rug is pretty, Irma having carefully woven the blue from the shirts and the flower print from the dresses in an artful pattern, it only served to make the living space seem smaller and more cluttered.

Irma looked up from her work. With a the pink and beige checkered cloth in place, the large table was a place to eat, but with the cloth pulled back, and the rough-hewn wooden construction exposed, it was Irma's worktable.

Irma's auburn hair was pulled hastily back from her face, stray pieces curled and stuck fast to her forehead with sweat. She was up to her elbows in flour, kneading a difficult piece of dough, the result of an overabundance of flour, but not enough eggs.

"Are you sure, Torin?" Irma asked, dragging the sleeve of her faded green cotton dress over her forehead.

"It's the only way," Torino said, his jaw firm, not wishing to discuss the matter again.

Irma sighed, and turned her back on him to resume her kneading. "I know," she said into the dough, "I just wish it wasn't the only way."

"Johnny was practically forcing the money on me, Irma. It's his brother who owns Titan Cement. He needs guys to work. Needs them, Irma. Can you even fathom it? Not having to scrape for a job, but being needed." Irma said nothing, and Torino was just glad that she wasn't going to contest it.

The shutters on the one window of the apartment were pushed open, their blue paint faded to grey, chipped and fallen away in places. Late afternoon sunlight poured into the room, over the cradle placed close to the window; like a blessing from God.

Torino walked over to where Gilberta was sleeping, warmed by the sun, but cooled by the breeze blowing in through the window.

"Don't wake her, Torin," Irma said softly, but with a warning in her voice. "She was colicky all day today."

Torino turned towards Irma's profile. "She seems to be sleeping peacefully, now," he said, sitting in a chair situated between the stove and the table, to set about pulling off his work boots.

“Of course she is,” said Irma, sprinkling more flour on the table and going at the ball of dough with a flour-dusted rolling pin, which Torino had made for her from the branch of a very young tree. “She knew you were coming home and wanted to seem like an angel. Sleeping like that, it’s hard for even me to believe that she was fussing all day, except that my arms are still aching from carrying her.”

“Is it good for her to be sleeping near the window like that?” Torino asked.

“She’ll stay quiet no other place,” Irma sighed. “I went over to the house today to help out with the latest load of gypsum. I had Anna take Gilberta inside to be watched while we worked, because I don’t think it’s good for her to be around with all the plaster dust in the air. She barely stopped crying the whole time I was there, and I left Anna in a foul mood. My parents gave us some eggs, milk, and some lard. I’m just making strozza pritti for tonight but tomorrow we’ll have piada.”

Torino lay his head back against the cement wall of the house and closed his eyes. Only twenty-four years old and already his body felt overused.

“It won’t be like this, in America,” Torino murmured to her. Irma recoiled involuntarily, but straightened again and continued to mold the pasta. Torino noticed, but decided against calling attention to it. “I feel like I have been working for days, and have nothing to show for it. But now, with this money, we’ll really start living, instead of just existing.”

“You’ll still have to pay it back, Torino. At least before we didn’t owe anyone anything. Now we’re in debt. And why should it be any different over there than it is here? We’ll still be working just to make ends meet. And if it doesn’t work, then we’re alone in our failure. At least here we have family. I can work too, and we both make

what we need to survive!” Irma’s words came in a frenzied waterfall of worry. Torino dammed it by striking his fist against the table. The jarring blow made the rolling pin and the measuring cup jump, and Gilberta began wailing.

“Perfetto,” Irma growled, wiping her arms on her apron as she crossed to the cradle. She lifted the wailing child and attempted to soothe her.

Torino followed Irma around the tiny garage, talking intermittently with Irma’s shushing.

“Irma, I could work night and day and it wouldn’t make a difference in the way we live.”

“Shush...”

“There just isn’t money to be had anywhere.”

“Shush...”

“Do you think I like having to rent this garage? Paying money for a place that can’t conceivably be called a home for my family?”

“Shush...”

“I’m just as worried as you are about leaving, but this is not the life I wanted for us.”

Irma stopped her pacing and turned to face her husband. Gilberta had stopped wailing, but her body was still tense with sniffing. Irma could see in Torino’s face a look of quiet desperation. The look that displayed all the insecurities his pride would never let him voice. The same look he’d had when he asked her to marry him.

“I know, Torin,” Irma said soothingly, as if she was still trying to quiet the baby. “Here, take Gilberta for a while as I finish the strozza pritti. If she falls asleep again, you can put her back in the crib.”

Torino took Gilberta gently. In his hands, everything looked smaller, especially the baby.

Torino looked into his child’s face, seeing himself and his wife plainly. The baby’s eyes were closed, but even in slumber, she did not look peaceful. Her face was still puffy from her fit, her skin blotchy pink and white. She did not look healthy, and Torino knew it was difficult for Irma to get her to eat half the time.

Torino got a sudden, wild idea that even the air of San Marino wasn’t enough to sustain them, worn thin by too many people breathing it for too many years. He wanted to tell Irma his conviction that the air of America would be healthier to breathe, and keep their baby well; but when he looked up at her, bent over the table, making their dinner, he saw in her sweat that she was too pragmatic for such dreaming.

It was three days later, eighteen days before Torino had to use the borrowed money to secure their passage to America, that Gilberta came down sick in earnest. The sickness had begun gently, with only a small cough and general crankiness, and was not a cause of too much alarm to Irma, although Torino was always nervous when Gilberta fell ill, certain that every ailment was fatal.

“What are you worried about?” Irma would ask, seeing his face and wanting to reassure him. “She is sick all the time with something or other! I swear this child has made an art of being sick, and is not happy unless she is so. I’m the one who will be

breaking my back all day cooing to her and coaxing her to sleep. I'm the one you should be worried about!"

Irma would give him a wry smile on these occasions, and Torino would grin weakly and not look convinced. In the morning, after spending a night punctuated by Gilberta's hoarse coughing and lusty protestations of discomfort, he would be hesitant to leave for work; shuffle his feet in the doorway, running his hands through his black hair, as if his presence in the house all day would keep his baby's sickness at bay.

Irma would walk over to him, laying her cool hand tenderly on his cheek. "Torino, she'll be fine, as she always is. And if I don't know what to do, my mother will. She did have seven children, you know. Besides, if you worried yourself out of work every time Gilberta got sick, you would never work!"

And usually, Torino would just bend down and kiss Irma's forehead, allowing himself to be comforted by her certainty on how to take care of Gilberta. Yet this last time, Torino couldn't shake his misgivings, believing in storms that can spring out of cloudless skies, which only announce themselves with barely audible thunder.

His misgivings proved prophetic three days later, when Irma awakened him in the night. She was no longer so casual.

"Torino! I think it might be scarlet fever. There's a rash forming on her neck. She isn't even crying anymore, only wheezing, because she can't breathe very well."

Torino sat up and shook himself out of sleep. Irma was standing next to the bed, holding Gilberta and patting her back.

“Didn’t you see your mother today? What did she say?” he asked, his words wooly with sleep. He pulled on his work boots like an automaton, lacing them with the agile precision that comes with lacing work boots every day for fifteen years of his life.

“It wasn’t this bad today. She was still fussy, like always, and her cough was mild. There was a hint of a fever, but usually babies will be a little feverish when they are getting better. I want to go to my mother’s right now, she’ll be able to tell me what it is for sure. Anna just had scarlet fever a few years ago. If it is, my mother will know how to cure it.”

Torino helped Irma and the baby into the truck he drove for Johnny’s company and drove the three of them up the road to his in-laws house. He parked the truck beside the kiln used for making plaster, and knocked heartily on Primo and Maria’s door. Maria ushered Irma into the house with the baby while Primo kept Torino outside, smoking.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t be in there helping?” Torino asked, taking short, staccato drags off his cigarettes.

Primo shrugged his shoulders, running his callused hand over the white growth of beard already thick after yesterday’s shave.

“We would most likely just be in the way,” Primo said, no less nervous about sick babies than Torino, but with enough experience to know better than to panic. “It is best that we just make ourselves available in case they need something fetched.”

Maria pulled the covers back on her and Primo’s hastily vacated bed and lay Gilberta gently down on the red and white coverlet. Even in the yellow light cast by a single naked bulb in the middle of ceiling, Maria could see the distinctive signs of a red

rash spilling up from the baby's neck onto her face, giving the mouth a wide breadth. Maria touched her lips to the baby's forehead, and lay her ear against the baby's chest. Irma looked on, feeling like a child herself. Next to the wisdom of her mother, she was completely ignorant in the ways of the world.

“Mamma, what is it? Is it scarlet fever?”

“Yes, but not just that,” Maria said, wrapping Gilberta in one of the blankets from off her bed. “I think a croup has settled into her chest, as well. Her breathing is labored, which is why she isn't screaming. I can hear the congestion wheezing when she breathes. This is dangerous, Irma. You need to run her into the hospital in Citta. I lost your older brother to a case less severe than this one.”

Irma could feel the chill of panic in her limbs. Maria took up Gilberta, and placed her in Irma's arms. The fevered body of the baby brought Irma back to reality, in which she needed to remain calm if she was going to save her baby. Gilberta was whimpering weakly, and instinctively Irma began to rock her gently.

“The hospital in Citta has those humidifiers, so that the baby can breath moist air, to help her break up the congestion. That is what they used on Anna when she had the fever five years ago. Granted, she was older, almost ten at the time, but I imagine that it would be the same.”

“Oh, Jesu Christi,” Irma sighed heavily. “Will they give her some sort of medication? How long will she have to be in the hospital?”

“I'm not sure. The doctor will be able to tell you better than I can. Now, I am going to tell Torino to get the truck ready. You, keep patting Gilberta's back. Don't rub, as it might inflame the rash if it spreads onto her back. Hold the baby to your chest and

hum. The vibration might help to break some of the congestion up, or at least lull her into quiet.”

A sick child makes time crawl by. It is only a twenty-minute drive from Montegiardino to the hospital in Citta, but the whole way there Irma was acutely aware of the heat radiating from Gilberta through the blanket. The baby’s cough, shallow from too much congestion, accentuated the silence of the night. Looking over at Torino, she could see his profile set rigidly, focusing on the dark road so as not to think too much about things he could not control. Irma envied him his physical separateness from the sickness; the heat of Gilberta’s fever causing Irma to sweat, despite the chill prevalent in the wee hours of the spring morning.

At night, the hospital is minimally staffed. Only sickness visits the hospital at nighttime; injuries and accidents are complications of waking life.

The hospital was still, like the darkness outside. Irma’s ciabatte made soft clicking noises on the marble floor of the lobby. Torino’s work boots, with thick soles, didn’t make any sound on the marble at all, so cautious were his footfalls. He walked as softly as one does in church or a cemetery.

Sitting behind the white information desk was a woman, wearing the blue uniform of a nurse but the white habit of a sister. She smiled encouragingly, familiar with the types of bundles that Irma was cradling in her arms.

“The child’s name, age, and gender, please,” the nurse asked.

“Gilberta Mularoni, 13 months old, female.” The nurse recorded Irma’s words on a chart with a short pencil.

Torino listened while Irma answered all the nurse's questions. He ruminated ruefully at how such a mountain of worry could be reduced to a list of "supposed symptoms."

When Irma glanced over at Torino, and saw his face dark with his own thoughts, his eyes wide with displaced worry, his hair hanging heedlessly in dark clumps over his eyes. Irma felt, as she often did with matters concerning Gilberta, that she needed to be the one to keep her wits about her. When Irma had agreed to marry Torino, he had lifted her with one arm and swung her around as if she weighed no more than a small child to him. Irma had thrown her arms around his neck, closing her eyes tight and believing in his infallible strength. In this case, Irma must be the one with the strength while Torino clung to her neck for security.

After filling out the chart, the nurse lead Irma and Torino down dimly lit corridors to a small private room. Irma glanced from side to side as she passed the other rooms of the hospital. In one, she briefly saw rows of tiny children's beds with two chairs pulled to either side. Some mothers and fathers were holding the hands of their children, or sat sleeping, slumped over, heads lolling to the side. Some of the children were in the beds all alone, tossing and turning in their fitful slumber. Irma hugged Gilberta closer to her, and kept pace with the nurse.

The room the nurse showed them into was very small, containing only a table with medical implements, a stand for IV liquids, and another very small bed with two chairs. They were shown to a private room out of the fear of an epidemic.

"The doctor will be with you shortly," the nurse said, and left them.

“What does the nurse think?” Torino asked, wishing he had paid more attention while Irma was talking with her instead of letting his dark imagination run away with him.

“The nurse thinks that we are right, that it’s probably the scarlet fever aggravated by croup.”

“How do these doctors cure that? What are they going to do?”

Irma signed. “I don’t know, Torino. Maybe they’ll give her medicine. Maybe she’ll have to stay in the hospital until she is well. I really don’t know.”

“Didn’t Anna have this? What did you do for her?”

“Pray, Torino. With Anna, we had to pray. Sometimes children can’t be cured of these types of diseases and they die from them.”

Torino stopped asking questions he didn’t want to know the answers to, and Gilberta’s breathing seemed like the only sound in the entire hospital, and to Torino it sounded like the rumble of barely audible thunder.

The doctor’s shoes were soft black leather, and their soles made clicking noises on the marble floor of the hospital similar to Irma’s ciabatte. When he appeared at the doorway of the small room, Irma saw that he was a short and slight man with a kindly face and thinning brown hair. He didn’t appear old, but his manner suggested that he had spent many years in this hospital. His eyes spoke of incurable sicknesses in the young, injuries too serious to fix, and the undefeatable trials of old age.

The doctor placed Gilberta’s chart on the small table, and he introduced himself as Dottore Dante Melotti. His voice struck Irma as the complete opposite of Torino’s,

whom was often given to violent shows of emotion. Dottore Melotti had a voice like the ocean, which lapped warm and reassuringly at the edge of Irma's mind.

When he took Gilberta from her, placing the baby on the starched white sheets of the bed to be examined, Irma felt cold without the feverish body pressed against her chest. Gilberta contrasted starkly with the white sheets, the red rashy splotches seemingly worse every time examined, her full head of black hair damp in her body's futile attempt to cool itself.

Gilberta was quiet as the doctor examined her, only fussing when he took her temperature and used the cool metal stethoscope on her chest as she breathed. Even before the end of the examination, she began to doze, as if her body just realized that it was long past the time for sleep.

"It is good that you brought her in tonight, so we can start to treat her right away. Had you waited until morning, we would not be as well off as we are. The rash might have spread to her whole body, which can sometimes leave scars. We are going to have to keep Gilberta here overnight for a few days. We'll use a humidifier so that she can breathe continuously moist air, which will help her body break up the congestion. We'll also put her on an IV, to keep her hydrated while her body fights the sickness. Scarlet fever is a virus, and it will need to be allowed to run its course."

"How long will this take?" Irma demanded, more suspiciously than she meant to be. She was alarmed at the prospect of her baby staying overnight in a hospital for several days.

"A week, give or take a few days, as long as there are no other complications. With babies it's hard to decipher how bad the situation is, because she can't tell us what

is wrong. She will be monitored by nurses day and night, but you may also stay here with her if you wish. Only be aware that scarlet fever is very contagious, and while it is more common for the fever to pass from parents to children, it is not impossible for you to catch it from her. Taking care of yourself and sleeping at night will be the best way to guard against that.”

Irma glanced at Torino, and wondered if she looked at haggard as he did.

“Now, Signora Mularoni, there are small gowns in the drawer beneath the bed, if you would dress Gilberta in one of those. I will send in a nurse to start assembling the equipment for the humidifier and to insert the IV. I must speak momentarily with your husband.”

Torino rose meekly and followed Dottore Melotti. He looked like a giant next to the tiny doctor, but his clumsy boots made no noise next to the persistent clicking of the doctor’s smart shoes.

Irma knew what it was they needed to discuss, and she dreaded it. The matter of finances. Keeping a child in the hospital overnight was very expensive.

“More debt,” Irma sighed as she dressed Gilberta in the soft cotton gown of the hospital. The material was white with blue flowers faded from several washings. Irma mused foggily about how many babies might have worn this same gown, and wondered for how many babies this was the last thing they wore. Shivering, Irma gathered Gilberta into her arms; the doctor hadn’t said that Irma shouldn’t hold the baby.

When Torino returned, he not only looked tired, he looked older.

“What did the doctor say, Torin? How much is it going to cost?” Her eyes were insistent, but her voice had returned to the soft drone she used to quiet a fussy Gilberta.

Torino looked at his wife and his baby, and saw in them his entire world.

“The hospital visit, the IV, the humidifier... it’s going to cost us upwards of 60,000 lire.” Irma swallowed her panic, forcing her nerves into stillness so as not to disturb the baby. “If Gilberta has to be here longer than four days, it might cost more than that.”

“What are we going to do, Torin?” Irma’s voice was unfaltering. She placed Gilberta, dozing once again, onto the bed, and allowed herself to collapse gently onto the chair.

Torino knelt before her and took her hands in his. “Mirma, I have been thinking a lot about this, even before tonight and before Gilberta got sick. She is always sick, Irma. And although I was never old enough to help raise my brothers younger than me, I remember that the children were always more susceptible to illness when they were very little. We don’t know exactly what kind of living situation we’ll have when we get to America. We’ll be living at the mercy of friends and acquaintances of friends. What if she gets sick then? We have this money, Irma. We have 120,000 lire that I borrowed for our passage to the US. I think it would be best if I went first.” Irma began shaking her head, and Torino talked faster, knowing he had to use all the logic at once, because he was so uncertain of this choice himself. “I could work for a year. I could save up money to pay for your passage, and in a year, Gilberta might be stronger...”

“No, Torino, no! You cannot leave us here.”

“But Irma, be realistic. It is seven days on a boat. Seven days! When I was talking with Dottore Melotti, discussing how we would pay the bill, I told him our plans. He said that it wasn’t a good idea. Even if Gilberta is ‘well’ by then, and she can no

longer make other people sick, she will still be weak and susceptible to everything. Dottore Melotti said that there is a chance she could catch something on the boat which she will never recover from.”

“But Torin, how will you send for us? We will be in so much debt already. All the money you make you will need to use to get out of debt and to survive.”

Torino looked at Irma. She was a strong woman, evident in line of her jaw, the muscles in her arms. She sat, her shoulders rolled forward, dark circles surrounding her eyes, her mouth slightly slack. He wanted to comfort her. To hold her against his chest until the beating of his heart lulled her to sleep, as she held Gilberta.

“This is not so unheard of, Mirma. A lot of men go off to get settled and send for their families afterwards. You will stay here with your parents, taking care of Gilberta and making plaster, and in a year’s time, I will send for you.”

“Don’t go, Torin. Stay here. We can pay Johnny back the money some other way, maybe.” Without a baby in her arms, it was harder for Irma to fight the panic. She had been a wife and mother for only a short time, not even three years. And now, before she had even gotten properly comfortable with her position, it was all going to spin out of control. She didn’t even understand herself. She had spent twenty years of her life without a husband, and now she didn’t know if she could exist without him for even just a year. She was sick of being strong and sick of being brave, and although this wasn’t the life she would have chosen, she was not ready to part with it, because it was all she knew.

“Irma, you know that that’s not the way it works. I signed a contract when I accepted the money from Johnny. He only loaned it to me so that I would work for his brother for at least the amount of time it takes me to pay him back.”

Irma looked unmoved, and Torino began to get frustrated. He rose to his feet and began pacing around the little room. Even agitated, he was still cautious not wake the sleeping baby.

He couldn't express to her all that he was thinking. *I am scared to leave. To travel to a place where I don't speak the language, where I am a foreigner. I am scared to leave my family, worried about how you will survive without me, and ever more worried that you'll exist just fine without me.* "This isn't what I want," he floundered. "This is just the way things have to be..."

And Irma could see in his face his wild need for her understanding. His need, which outweighed her fear and uncertainty and loneliness. His need, in this case, that had to come before all other needs, because that is what marriage is.

Irma rose from her chair and placed her hand on Torino's face. She wanted him to kiss her then, but the nurse with the blue uniform and the white habit entered with the IV bottle and needle.

"If you could just stand to the right of the bed while I insert this needle into the baby's arm, it will make this process less shocking for her," the nurse said, hanging the bottle of clear liquid on the stand next to the bed.

The yelp that inserting the needle into Gilberta's arm produced was muffled by the mucus lodged in the baby's throat, but it was a normal baby response, unlike the whimpering that Gilberta had been issuing earlier that evening. For Irma, there was hope in Gilberta's indignant anger at being accosted by a needle in the middle of her sleep.

Gilberta spent the next four days in the hospital. Irma left her side and in the care of the diligent nurses for only eight hours a night. Torino would drive Irma to the hospital on his way into work at 6 a.m., and would pick her up from the hospital at 10:00 p.m. For those three days, Torino took his dinner at his in-laws house. Irma spent the short time at home packing meals for both she and Torino, bathing, and sleeping a fitful five or six hours a night. By 5 a.m., she was awake again, ready to be back with her baby.

The fever broke the third night in the hospital, and on the fourth night, Gilberta was weaned off the humidifier. When she breathed, Irma could hear the congestion rattling in Gilberta's chest, but at least she was breathing. The hospital bills totaled 74,700 lire. Torino had just enough money when he went to the office of emigration in Citta on May 17<sup>th</sup> to book his passage to the United States for May 31<sup>st</sup>.

For the rest of her life, Irma would remember those last two weeks with Torino as the calm before an impending storm. His departure loomed as dark clouds in her future, and she would lay next to him during the night, watching his body rise and fall with his breathing, counting the number of her heartbeats could fit inside just one of his deep breaths.

With his ticket, Torino was allowed one trunk for all his belongings. In those two weeks, Irma didn't work with her family making plaster. She spent every hour of daylight darning all of Torino's clothing, even his very old clothing, because his living situation was so uncertain, and Irma had daymares of Torino wandering around New York aimlessly without any clean socks. She sewed patches of cloth into the elbows of his shirts and the knees of his pants to reinforce them and help them last longer. She

starched his white shirts for Sunday mass and wrapped them in tissue paper to keep them fresh. From the previous winter, Irma had knitted scarves and gloves in thick black wool, as well as winter socks in fine, undyed yarn, and she packed these away, too.

And under all her practical fears, *What if he doesn't have a warm place to sleep? What if he doesn't have enough food to eat? What if there isn't as much work as he is expecting and he can't even make enough money to return to San Marino?* lay darker, more human fears, *What if he finds another woman to keep him company in the night, and forgets all about his wife and child back at home? What if America becomes his home and I can never see it as he does?* In between the layers of clothing, blankets, toiletries, Irma placed one of the black and white photos from their wedding, pictures of the mountains of San Marino, pictures of the countryside of their home, Montegiardino, and Faetano, the castelli in which Torino had grown up. She convinced herself that it was to help ease his homesickness. What she would never admit was that it was also to ensure that there was homesickness to be eased from.

Primo would be driving Torino to Genoa, where he would take a ship to the United States. After the trunk had been loaded and secured, Torino and Irma had a silent goodbye outside of the efficiency apartment that they had called home for almost two years. Gilberta slept inside, unaware that it would be over a year before her father would hold her again.

As Torino held Irma, he marveled again at the feeling of the small muscles in her arms and back, tense and unyielding under the soft cotton of her housedress. Her arms were strong out of necessity for the hard work her life was comprised of. Holding her strength, Torino was reassured that he was doing the right thing; convinced that there

would be no hard work without recompense in America, the so-called land of new opportunity.

Lack of sleep weighed too heavily on Irma's eyes, and she couldn't cry as she hugged Torino around the middle. He was an entire head taller than she was, and suddenly he was too big to take in all at once. Irma caught him in parts: the smell of his skin beneath his work shirt, the heat of his hands on her back, the fierce unwavering look in his blue eyes. Strength; evident in his shoulders, his stance, and the way he kept clenching and unclenching his jaw. Deeper than her fear and sadness, Irma felt an immense pride in her husband.

She stepped back from Torino, and when he looked down into her face, her pride smiled at him with encouragement. And although a year still seemed like an immeasurable length of time, Torino realized he was already gazing at the end of it.

As Primo drove away, Torino turned and watched Irma watch them go. She looked tiny next to their home, her brown cotton dress billowing against her legs, the dust from the road sparkling in the early morning sun. He did not see the dark circles under her eyes, the deep lines creasing her brow, nor her white knuckles clutched into fists; all he saw was beauty. It was an image that Torino would call to mind countless times in the next year, wrapping it around himself like one of her scarves or her blankets, helping to keep him comforted and lulling him to sleep at night.