

Presebbio

My family *presebbio*¹ is the finest, most beautiful, largest presebbio in my building, perhaps in all of Napoli, except for the Cuciniello², of course. My daughter Gabriella and I, we build together our presebbio each Christmas, year after year, until she dropped Baby Jesus in her pocket and she slipped away into the night, taking with her my joy and my light. Now Sofia (who is me) does not build that presebbio because since that night it has no soul, and you cannot replace a soul.

How did I come by a presebbio so fine as mine? Let me tell you. My good fortune in life was twofold. First, I married a poor uneducated man, much better than a smart domineering one because in my house, I am queen. Second, I come from a family of some means and I brought to my marriage one treasure and one gift. The treasure was my family presebbio, each exquisite piece carved in wood and painted by artists who draped the figures in clothes stitched by their own hand—a treasure I tell you.

But it would not be so large as it is today without my gift. Each year before the Feast of the Immaculate Conception (8 December, the day we start to build our presebbio), I go to Via San Gregorio Armeno. Here they sell fine presebbio pieces and cheap ones for tourists. I am no tourist. I know what I want, so I walk that long narrow road and I study each piece: the figurines (beggars, farmers, blacksmiths, whores), the angels (because who can have only two?), the animals (camels, oxen, dogs, cats), and the other objects, so small (loaves of bread, baskets, eggplants, plates of ravioli). I select only the best of them and give to myself each year two large pieces and six small ones. Via San Gregorio is priced for tourists, this means overpriced, and so, I bargain. I would fight, scream, cry, wave my arms about my

¹ The Italian *presepe* or *presebbio* (in Neapolitan dialect) resembles a Nativity insofar as it includes the Holy Family, the manger, the Magi, shepherds, and animals. Unlike a Nativity, a presebbio (prā'sebēō) extends the stable scene to include buildings and entire villages (like model train sets). What makes a presebbio different than a Nativity is the juxtaposition of the sacred and banal; in a presebbio, the Holy Family is surrounded by ordinary people living ordinary lives. The larger the presebbio, the more of ordinary life you will find. Particularly well known for this tradition, Naples hosts centuries-old art studios, where artists and their apprentices still sculpt presebbio figurines in terracotta and wood, after which other artisans paint the figurines and stitch their clothing by hand.

² According to italianways.com, the Cuciniello on display in the National Museum of San Martino in Naples features “173 people, seven pigs, one rabbit, two monkeys, 42 angels, ten horses and over three hundred small decor items.” The Cuciniello is the most famous presebbio in Naples if not the world.

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head, sometimes even pretend to faint. “I must have this precious piece,” I would wail. “Without it, my presebbio is nothing! *Niente!*” Always I win. I pay my price. As I said: a gift.

With so many new pieces each year, I soon must move our presebbio from the mantle to the game table and finally to the dining room table. Myself, my husband Luca, our son Pietro and, of course, Gabriella, we ate in the kitchen from 8 December until several days after the Feast of the Epiphany, which is 6 January, the day we take down the presebbio, wrap each piece in paper, and store it again in the basement. Taking it apart is not so easy as you might think because I live only two floors from the roof of my apartment building. Gabriella, she would carry pieces out our window and down the fire escape while I used the stairs inside, but even with her help, to take apart such a large treasure, this I cannot do in only one day.

I must tell you about the first time that Gabriella helped me. She was twelve years old, her first year as a woman. (Ah, the pain of it!) She was so excited to see the new pieces and listened while I told her the story of how I acquired each one.

“See this cat with her kittens? When the artist would not agree to my price, I collapsed to my knees and prayed to Saint Francis, pleading with him to soften the heart of this cold artist, make him understand that *this* cat, his creation, looks like the rebirth of our Stella, our poor mamma cat who only just died giving birth.”

My sweet girl was not proud of her mamma. She would never make up such stories, she said, and I believed her, but I also know that my stories made possible to purchase that cat with her kittens and let me tell you, Gabriella loved that wooden mamma cat. She carried the piece with her to the table, put it in front of her gnocchi and looked at it while we ate. When we set up the presebbio that year, she placed that figure right under the manger. Baby Jesus could reach out his fat little fist to pet mamma *gatta* and her *gattini* too!

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Year after year, my daughter and I, we built our presebbio. We made fields and mountains, streams and ponds, buildings in ruins, and a large cave, where we place the Holy Family. Gabriella, she said we must use fishing wire to hang an angel inside the cave over the baby and place another one outside over the mountain—very eye catching. In this setting, we place 50 people (including a toothless gypsy with one leg, my favorite), 40 animals (among them several rats because ordinary life is not without rats), 14 angels (Gabriella even put one over the whores, but most people do not notice this, *Grazie Dio*), and 200 tiny objects (small fish, a brass scale, a box of Marlboro cigarettes, which Gabriella placed in the hands of one of the three *Carabinieri*³).

Of course, I must tell you about the man Gabriella loved who changed our presebbio forever. I never liked him. An American, a soldier, a handsome blonde, and so quiet—who can trust a man like that? He was ugly, not his face but his soul, ugly like the hunger. My Gabriella, good like the bread.

“What are you doing?” I asked Gabriella this question on a night Matteo ate my lasagna, drank my wine then left my table and my home with no words from him. “He is not kind.” I said not only this thing to her but many things about that man. “He is too old for you!” (Ten years older than *gattina mia!*) “He is a man who will never marry or if he does marry, he will keep his wife as a servant and love only his mistress.”

But she was mad for him, so crazy in love that nothing I said could stop her from smiling; she was in the clouds, as we say. She thought only that I was protective, that I was worried he would hurt her. This was true, but it was more than that. I did not trust him, and I knew he was not the man for my girl, the light of my eyes. Oh, my heart would break when she looked at him. Such love I have never seen.

Let me tell you about the Christmas before Gabriella went to *Ammereca*. The presebbio scene was finished, and we had only to place the figures and objects.

³ A member of one of Italy’s primary law enforcement agencies.

Gabriella invited Matteo to join us. (*Mannèja!*) When she asked me, Mamma it is okay? I say, "He is welcome in our home, of course." (A small lie in this case was a kindness, no?) Well, it is how they say, the good are punished! His presence, it ruined the evening; he sat on the couch, ignored Gabriella, did not speak to me, nor to Luca or Pietro. He sulked like a spoiled child because Gabriella did not cuddle in his lap. His sullen face distracted her: she put Baby Jesus in the flower cart by the old woman in the straw hat. She became anxious. She hurried to place a figure or an animal, then rushed to Matteo. "Can I get you something, Matteo?" "*Ti amo*, Matteo." And still he did not speak a word, did not look at her. He only stared at the rain beating the window. When finally he left, she made excuses for him.

"He is leaving soon, Mamma. *Hai capito?* He loves me so much he cannot bear to be these last evenings without having me all to himself."

I rolled my eyes and shook both of my hands in the air, my fingers pressed. "If he loves you, he must want you to be happy, no? Does he have a family? Are they not important to him?"

The next day, she said to me, "Mamma, Matteo would like very much for me to go with him to Utah."

I said, "OO-tah? What is this place?"

"Near California."

Well, I know California, sure, but who has heard of OO-tah? I was not okay to let my daughter go to a place I never heard of with a man I did not like. I yelled, she cried, we stormed about the apartment, Luca behind us shouting, "*Stàtti cìtt!*" It was a long day.

That year, Gabriella did not take down the presebbio because she followed that man to that place. And I wept—oh, how I wept. I heard nothing from *mi cor* for many months, so many that I started to worry that her plane crashed or that maybe Matteo, he killed her. Luca, he told me not to worry, he said

she was okay, we would hear from her soon enough. We did hear from her, but it was not soon enough. In all the months she was away, she wrote to me only two letters. I received the first letter months after she left, only when the days became warm and dry. In this letter, she told me, do not worry, Mamma, I am fine, this place it is very pretty, the people here are nice, my English is improving, *e così via e così via*. I know from what she does not say that she is hiding something.

I said this to Luca and I stressed to him, "*Nun sacc' niente*," (means, "I know nothing"), and he said, "*se' pazz'!*" (means, "you are crazy")

She wrote a second letter only in September on the Feast of San Gennaro. In this letter, she told me she is coming home. "It is only me, Mamma. *Hai capito?*"

But no, *non agg capit!* I started to cry at the kitchen table because I was happy Gabriella was coming home but also because I was near to die from worry. I said, "She does not say, 'Matteo,' Luca! What does this mean? If she lived with him, lived in sin (and here, I crossed myself) should we not at least hear his name? If she married him, is she now divorced?" All the while, I am crying, waving my arms, praying to God through the ceiling. Luca told me, Sofia, calm down, so I cried louder and placed all the dishes down hard so they would make noise that made Luca jump.

Gabriella was home two weeks before All Saints Day. From the moment she arrived, she was different, and the difference was not good. She lost her light. She slept a lot and cried in her room. Before she went with Matteo to that place, my Gabriella, she was bright, always with a smile and easy to make her laugh. But when she came home from *Ammereca*, she was sad, quiet, angry. I never knew if she was to burst into tears or tear me into tiny pieces. Most strange were her questions.

"Mamma, what if Joseph did not take Mary as his wife? What if he left her in a strange land? What would she have done?"

I told her, Gabriella! *Basta!* This is crazy talk, blasphemy! But still she asked the questions.

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“Mamma, what if Mary gave Baby Jesus to a different mother? Who would he be then? And Mary?”

When Gabriella was in her room, Luca and I, we would sit in the kitchen and speak without making sound, using only our hands, shoulders, and faces to discuss: “What are we going to do with her?” We had no money to take her to a doctor, and I do not trust those doctors and would not accept the word Luca shaped with his mouth: “*pazz*’!” I shook my finger in his face and said, “NO! Shut your mouth!” I used no sound, but Luca knew I was yelling. Then I showed him what I thought was the problem: she is tired, she is sad, she is too skinny, she needs to eat. Luca, he shrugged his shoulders and said, “*Boh*.”

This means he does not know, or he does not want to argue with the queen.

So, Sofia the Queen invented a plan. One day, when Gabriella was again crying in her room, I went to the storage place in the basement of our building, and I began to destroy our presebbio. This was not so easy because this is a great treasure in my life. I did not destroy all of it but broke only things one could repair. For example, I broke the cave, I broke many figures (even that cat). I tore up parts of the grass and some of the dirty streets. I even broke off Mother Mary’s head. (May God forgive me!)

On the day of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, I woke Gabriella. “Come, *gattina mia*. You must help me. We must start to build the presebbio today.” I gave her no idea about the bad thing that awaited. She did not open her eyes, just rolled over, but I can be very insistent, and finally she woke up, put on her robe, and followed me to the basement. When she saw our presebbio, she was shocked.

“Mamma! *È terribile*! Who did this?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Well, I am old Gabriella. I must take it down all alone last year without you. You must accept I cannot do as fine a job as I once did.”

Now she was awake. “Quickly!” she said. “We must get it upstairs! We have only a short while to make the repairs!”

I shrugged like to me it made no difference, but I agreed to help her carry the wreck upstairs.

For many days I thought my plan worked. Every day, Gabriella woke early and worked late repairing the presebbio. And every day, she asked me to help, but I made excuses: I am old, so tired, I must make dinner. And then I quietly went away into the kitchen and left her working.

One week before Christmas, she finished the repairs, and our presebbio was complete, missing only Baby Jesus. Luca made such a fuss over the presebbio that year, insisting we take a picture. He moved us around finally settling on Gabriella next to the cave and my hand holding her arm.

I do not like that picture. One could say I hate it. When I see that picture, I see only that I was wrong. Gabriella fixed the presebbio, yes, but she did not fix herself. People are not so easy as things to repair. The girl in that photo is not my Gabriella. Her smile is not a smile. In that face, I see only sadness. For a time, I kept that photo in a tin in my kitchen where I once hid money for the presebbio pieces. When I was in the kitchen, that photo followed me. If I was looking in the fridge, it was behind me. If I was standing at the sink, it was above me. If I was at the stove, it was in front of my head. Years ago, I put that photo on the fire escape and burned it. I watched the presebbio curl up around itself and Gabriella melt away with it—her long legs, dark hair, and those eyes, the last to burn.

The last Christmas Eve we spent with our treasure and soul started so nicely. That year, Luca and I, we thought it best for Gabriella to have only our family so did not invite others. We enjoyed our *Cenone di Natale*—*spaghetti vongole, insalata, and rococo*—we played games and music. It seemed to me that night that Gabriella might become better. She smiled and laughed, not a true laugh, but a sound that said to me, ‘She is trying.’ She danced with her papà, with Pietro, with me. Although she was strange in her motions, crying while she danced, still I thought, ‘She will be okay.’

When it came time to put Baby Jesus in the manger, Gabriella insisted that she do it. She unwrapped Baby Jesus from the paper using so much tenderness, like he was a newborn. She held him for

a long time, staring at him, crying but laughing too in her odd way. Then she put Baby Jesus in her pocket.

“I need a moment,” she said. We looked at her. We did not know what to say nor why she had taken Baby Jesus. “Please. I am fine. I just need air. It is okay?”

“Of course, Gabriella.” But it was not okay; I was worried. Gabriella climbed out the window onto the fire escape, and I heard her go to the roof. It is not so easy for me to climb out that window, so I followed her using the stairs inside. When I reached the roof, Gabriella was standing on the building’s ledge holding Baby Jesus. I was afraid to breathe; she was so close to the edge.

I said very gently, “Gabriella, *mi cor*, please come to me.”

“Mamma look here,” she said to me. “Here is my baby—and so beautiful he is! You see him, no? Oh Mamma, I was so sad! I thought I left him, thought I gave him to another. I thought he was gone. But here he is! Look Mamma! Look how beautiful, my boy!”

These words, they fell heavy from the clouds, hurt me to my bones. I spoke to my broken treasure through my tears and with my love, as if my very heart were speaking to her.

“Gabriella, my treasure. Please come and show me your beautiful boy, okay? We will look at him together. We will carry him, together, okay Gabriella?” But she looked only at the Baby, held him as if he were real.

Then I saw that pointed rat, his black fur slick from the rain, scurrying in the dark along the ledge toward her, dragging his tail, ugly and long. I saw that fiend and wasted not one moment. I spoke fast but with great care, so I would not startle my girl.

“Gabriella, *bellissimu*, eh? Come, show me your boy. I must see him. Please. Come quickly now.” I took a step toward her as the black devil continued also toward her. I reached out my hand, motioning that I wanted to hold her baby, but that evil creature, he touched her before she saw my face.

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He brushed against her slender ankles, bare beneath her skirt, and his wet fur startled her. In her fright, Gabriella lost Baby Jesus, who fell first to the ledge then teetered off it. She looked first at me with pained eyes and whispered, “My baby, Mamma.” I took another rushed step toward her, but she turned her gaze toward the baby, and I ran to her but managed only to bear witness to her body following his down to the rain-blackened street below.

That year, our presebbio with no soul was suffered to stay on the dining room table from Christmas Eve until Easter Sunday. Every time I saw it, I cried. I cried so much that I had no tears left to wet my face. In that time before Easter when all of Napoli was celebrating, I was crying. When the women in my building came home from mass carrying olive branches, still I was home. On that day, Luca and Pietro, they persuaded me to rest, and while I slept, they took apart and wrapped the presebbio, descending to the basement quietly with each shrouded piece. It sits there still in the cool dark, my treasure. The light of my eyes lives there where I cannot see but only feel the presence, like my heart.