

I was eighteen years old and had just taken holy orders the summer Fra Gennaro found the girl. It was not the first time I had seen a naked woman. I had entered the Dominican order as a novice at fifteen, old enough by then to have tasted first love, the sweet warmth of a girl's pliant body in the shade of the olive trees above the village of Nola. A distant cousin, as it turned out; her family were livid. Perhaps that was why my father had been so ready to pay out for my education, though God knows he could ill afford it. Sending me away to the Dominicans in the city was cheaper than a scandal. We were given new names on taking our final vows, to symbolise the shedding of our old selves. I took the name Giordano, though most people just called me Bruno.

Naples in the summer of 1566 was an inferno of heat and noise, dust and crowds; a city of heart-stopping beauty and casual violence. Two hundred and fifty thousand souls seething inside ancient walls built to house one-tenth that number, the tenements growing higher and higher until their shadows almost shut out the sun because land was scarce, so much of it taken up by the vast gardens and courtyards of the palazzos and the religious houses. Tensions in the city

streets brewed and boiled like the forces of the great volcano that overshadows them. Even walking from one side of a piazza to the other felt like fighting through the front line of an advancing army: elbows and fists, baskets, barrows and hot, angry bodies jostling and shoving, trampling or crushing one another. Horses and carts ploughed through the heaving marketplaces while the sun hammered down without pity and blazed back from walls of yellow tufa stone or the flashing blades of knives drawn in exchanges of rich inventive cursing. The Neapolitans discharged the tension by fighting or fucking, often at the same time. Soldiers of the Spanish viceroy patrolled the streets, though whether their presence imposed order or fuelled the general air of aggression depended on your view of our Spanish overlords. It was a city stinking of hypocrisy: kissing in public was illegal, but courtesans were permitted to walk the streets openly, looking for business even in the churches (especially in the churches). Blasphemy was also punishable by law, but beggars, vagrants and those without work were allowed to starve in the streets, their bodies rounded up each night on carts and thrown into a charnel-house outside the walls before they could spread contagion. Thieves, assassins and whores thrived and prospered there and, naturally, so did the Church.

In the midst of this simmering human soup stood the magnificent basilica of San Domenico Maggiore, where the faithful could worship the wooden crucifix that had once spoken aloud to St Thomas Aquinas. San Domenico was one of the wealthiest religious houses in the city; the local barons all sent their superfluous younger sons there as a bribe to God, and many of my brothers dressed and strutted like the young lords they still felt themselves to be, keen to preserve the distinction of degree despite their vows. The deprivations of religious life were interpreted here with considerable lassitude; it must have been well known to the prior and his officials that a number

of the novices had copied keys to a side gate and often slipped out into the heat of the city streets at night, but I never saw anyone punished for it, provided they were back in time for Matins. Drinking, dicing, whoring – sins such as these were straightforward, easy to overlook in young noblemen with high spirits. It was sins of thought that the authorities could not countenance. In its favour, I should say that San Domenico prized other qualities than birth: it was famed as the intellectual heart of Naples, and a mere soldier's son like me might be admitted at the Order's expense if he showed enough promise as a scholar.

By early September, the city had grown heavy and slow, exhausted by the ferocity of the long summer's heat; people barely made the effort to curse as you pushed past them. There was a sense of apprehension, too; the previous autumn had brought a season of thick fogs off the sea carrying the contagion of fever and the epidemic had infected half the city. I had taken my final vows and been admitted to the Order in the spring, despite some misgivings on the part of the novice master, who confided to the prior that Fra Giordano Bruno had trouble submitting to authority and a taste for difficult questions. During my novitiate I had shown aptitude for my studies in the natural sciences, and the prior had set me to work for a while as assistant to Fra Gennaro, the brother infirmarian, in the belief that vigorous practical tasks – measuring, chopping and distilling remedies, helping to cultivate and harvest the plants used to make them, as well as tending to the ailments of those brothers confined to the infirmary – would occupy my mind and curb my wilfulness. In this he was mistaken; the more I learned about the natural world, its correspondences and hidden properties, the more my questions multiplied, for it seemed to me that our understanding of Creation, handed down from antiquity through the Scriptures and the Church Fathers, did not stand

up to the most elementary scrutiny and observation. Fra Gennaro regarded my questions with forbearance and a hint of dry humour; for the most part he proved an attentive, if non-committal, audience while I formulated my doubts and theories aloud and only rarely did he reprimand me when I overstepped the bounds of what he judged a God-given hunger for knowledge. Few of the other friars would have shown such tolerance.

Fra Gennaro had studied medicine and anatomy at the famous medical school in Salerno; he had wished to become a doctor and eventually a professor, but some years earlier his family's fortunes had shifted for the worse, obliging him to leave the university and offer his skills in God's service. It was not the worst blow Fate could have dealt him – he was granted considerable freedom to further his medical knowledge in his new role, though I understood there was some dispute with the prior over the morality of using certain Arabic texts – but it was not the life he had aspired to and, though he never voiced this, I sensed in him a restlessness, a wistful longing for his old world. He was barely forty, but to me, at eighteen, he appeared to possess a wealth of knowledge and wisdom that I yearned towards – and not all of it sanctioned. In his heart he was a man of science, and a Dominican only incidentally, as I felt myself to be; perhaps this accounted for the instinctive affinity that quickly grew between us.

I was skulking through the darkened cloister one starless night in the first week of September, clouds sagging overhead like wet plaster and a warm, sickly wind sighing in off the bay, when I glimpsed him on the far side of the courtyard, his arms bundled full of linen. He was heading not to the infirmary but towards the gardens, in the direction of the outbuildings and storehouses at the furthest extremity of the compound, where the high enclosing wall backed on to a

busy thoroughfare. Something in his bearing – his unusual haste, perhaps, or the way he walked with his head down, leaning forward, as if into a gale – caught my attention. Though I risked punishment for being out of my cell at that hour, I called out to him, curious to know what he was about. If he heard me, he gave no sign of it, though I knew my voice must have carried. Instead he kept his eyes fixed on the ground ahead as he hurried through an archway and disappeared.

I hesitated in the shadows, hoping I would not run into the watch brothers. They made a tour of the cloisters shortly after Compline to confirm that everyone was tucked up in his cell and observing silence during the few hours of sleep, then retired somewhere more comfortable until their second circuit just before the bell chimed for Matins at two o'clock. If they knew of the nightly exodus through the side-gate in the garden wall, they were practised at looking the other way. But for a friar like me, with no family influence to consider and a growing reputation for disobedience, it would be a mistake to be caught. I could easily find myself a scapegoat for those they did not dare to discipline too harshly.

The air hung close, heavy with the scent of night blooms and a faint aroma of roasting meat from beyond the walls. Through the silence I caught the soft murmur of conversation drifting from the dormitory behind me, the occasional burst of laughter, the chink of Murano goblets. Fra Donato entertaining his fellow aristocrats, I supposed. The wealthier friars – those for whom the Church was a political career built on contacts and greased palms like any other – often held private suppers at night in their richly furnished rooms. As with the nocturnal excursions, the watch brothers remained tactfully deaf and blind to this.

Footsteps echoed behind me on the flagstones across the cloisters, over the low whisper of voices. There was no time

to determine whether they were friend or foe; I slipped quickly along the corridor and through the archway where I had seen Fra Gennaro disappear. Here, behind the convent's grand courtyards, the grounds were laid out to gardens with an extensive grove of lemon trees. A path followed the line of the boundary wall, towards the side gate. If you continued past the gate to the far side of the trees, you reached a scattering of low buildings: grain houses, storerooms, the saddlery and stables. Beyond these lay a whitewashed dormitory of two storeys where the convent servants slept.

Without a moon, there was no hope of seeing which direction Fra Gennaro had taken, though if I strained my ears hard, I thought I could make out a distant rustling ahead among the lemon trees. The obvious explanation was that he must be attending to one of the servants who had fallen sick – but my curiosity was still piqued by his furtive manner and his pretence of not having heard my call.

Like every other novice, I had learned to navigate the path from the outer cloister to the gate in pitch-dark, feeling my way and calculating distance from the scents of the garden and the recognition of familiar landmarks under my feet and fingers: the twisted stalk of the vine that grew up the wall at the point where the lemon grove began; the slight downward incline as the path neared the gate. The footsteps persisted at my back, crunching on the hard earth. I moved off the path and into the shelter of the trees as two figures approached, fearing I had been discovered by the watch. But they paused a short distance away and I retreated further into the dark as I caught the wavering light of a taper hovering between them. Urgent whispers followed the scraping of metal against metal; I heard the creak of the gate and a gentle click as it closed again behind them. Novices or young friars heading out to the Cerriglio, the tavern two streets away, for a brief gulp of the city air before the Matins

bell called them back to piety. I craned my neck and looked up through the leaves, wishing I could see the moon; I had no idea how late it was.

The gardens were unfamiliar to me beyond the side gate and I stumbled my way through the lemon trees, unsure if I was even moving in the right direction, my arms held up to protect my eyes from the scratching branches. After some while I emerged into open ground and could just make out the bulk of a row of buildings ahead. A horse whinnied softly out of the dark and I tensed; there were grooms who slept above the stables and would be woken by any disturbance. Holding my breath, I edged my way towards the storehouses and stood stupidly, looking around. Had Fra Gennaro come this way? Most likely he was already in the servants' dormitory, tending to some ordinary sprain or burn. How foolish I would look, lurking here in the shadows as if I were spying on him.

Minutes passed and I was debating whether to knock at the servants' quarters when I heard the muted creak of a door from one of the outbuildings behind me. A hooded figure slipped out and set down a pail at his feet. I heard the jangle of a key in a padlock, though it was clear he was trying to make as little noise as possible. A cone of light slid back and forth across the ground from the lantern in his hand. From his height I was certain it was the infirmarian, though I waited until he was almost upon me before stepping into his path.

'Fra Gennaro.'

'*Dio porco!*' He jumped back as if he had been assaulted, stifling his cry with his fingers as the pail clattered to the ground.

'I'm sorry – I didn't mean to startle you.' I moved closer, pulling back the hood of my cloak.

'Fra Giordano?' He peered at me through the darkness,

his breathing ragged in the still air. 'What in God's name are you doing here?'

'I wanted to offer my help.'

'With what?' Now that he had recovered from the shock, I noted the hard edge to his voice. He was not pleased to have been intercepted.

'Whatever you are doing. I saw you in the cloister and you seemed . . .' I searched for the right word ' . . . burdened. I thought, perhaps—'

His mouth twitched to one side in a sharp noise of disapproval. 'You should not have been in the cloister. By rights I should report you to the prior.'

I lowered my eyes. We both knew it was an empty threat; I had given him better cause to report me before this and he had not done so. But he wanted me to know that he was angry.

'Forgive me, Brother,' I murmured. 'I was restless and needed a walk. When I saw you, I thought only to offer my assistance. I want every chance to learn. Is one of the servants ill? I could fetch and carry for you, if you let me observe the treatment.'

He did not reply immediately; only watched me with an unreadable expression, narrowed eyes glinting in the flame of the lantern. 'You wish to learn, huh?' He appeared to be weighing something up. After a moment, he stepped forward and gripped my upper arm so hard that I flinched away. His face loomed inches from mine, oddly intent; I could smell on his breath the ginger root he chewed to settle his stomach. 'There is much you might learn tonight, and I could use another pair of hands. But listen to me, Fra Giordano. I have been good to you, have I not?'

I nodded eagerly, unsure where this was tending.

'There are words you have spoken in my dispensary that anyone else would have reported instantly to the prior.'

Words that would lead you straight before the Father Inquisitor. I have let them pass, because I recognise in you a spirit of enquiry that, while yet undisciplined, is born not of rebellion but of a true desire for knowledge.’ He paused and sighed, passing the flat of his hand over his cropped hair. ‘In that you remind me of myself. That is why I have not reported you for voicing opinions that to others would fall barely short of heresy.’

I bowed my head. ‘And I am grateful for it. But—’

He held up a hand to pre-empt me and lowered his voice. ‘Then we are both agreed you owe me a debt of confidence. You could assist me tonight, but you must first swear that you will never speak of what you see to anyone, inside or outside these walls.’

My gut tightened with excitement as my thoughts raced ahead, trying to imagine what kind of medical emergency would demand such a level of secrecy. I stared at him.

‘I swear it. On my life.’

He peered into my face with that same fierce scrutiny, still holding my arm so tight that the next morning I would find a ring of violet bruises. Eventually it seemed he was satisfied. He gave a single curt nod and released his grip.

‘Wait here, then. I must go to the dispensary to collect my instruments and heat some water. If anyone should come by, make sure they don’t see you.’

‘Why don’t I come with you?’ I offered. ‘We could carry twice as much between us. Or, better still, they will surely have a fire in the servants’ dormitory – could we not heat a pail of water there? It would make sense to be closer to the patient.’

He made an aggressive gesture for me to be quiet. ‘The patient is not in there,’ he said, dropping his voice until I had to strain forward to catch his words. ‘If you are to work with me tonight, Bruno, there are two rules. You obey my

every instruction, to the letter. And you ask no questions. Is that clear?’

I nodded. ‘But why can’t I come with you?’

‘*Madonna santa!*’ He threw up his hands and stooped to gather his pail. ‘Because, as far as anyone knows, you are tucked up in your bed dreaming of saints and angels. Now do as I ask.’

He disappeared into the dark, until all I could see was the small spark of his lantern bobbing across the garden in the direction of the convent buildings. Silence fell around me, punctuated only by familiar night sounds: the snort and stamp of a sleeping horse, the drawn-out cry of an owl, the relentless, one-note song of the cicadas. Further off, a whoop, followed by a gale of raucous laughter from the streets beyond the wall. I pressed myself into the shadows of the outbuildings and waited. Where was this mysterious patient, then, if not in the servants’ quarters? I glanced across to the door Fra Gennaro had locked behind him. In the storehouse? Why could he not be treated in the infirmary, like any other . . .

A sudden understanding flashed through me, flooding my veins with cold. This man must be an enemy of the state, someone it would not be politic for us to be seen helping. San Domenico had a reputation for fomenting resistance against the kingdom’s Spanish rulers; it was well known that the more rebellious among the Neapolitan barons met regularly in the convent’s great hall to discuss the form of that resistance, with the ready involvement of some eminent Dominicans. Perhaps this secret patient was a conspirator who had been wounded in the course of action against the Spanish. That would explain Fra Gennaro’s insistence that I ask no questions. Pleased by my own reasoning, I bunched my hands into fists beneath my robe and slid down against the wall of the storehouse to squat on my heels, bouncing with anticipation.