

Tonia

Mary Messina

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Cover Photo: The photo is of Tonia (name has been changed) at the age of thirty , just prior to the family leaving the village.



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Dedicated with love to my family

Part A

One

Tonia greeted her neighbour familiarly as she walked out her front door and onto the small paved village square to the low wall that overlooked the valley. The morning mist was clearing slowly from the knoll as she watched, revealing the panorama below.

She took deep gulps of the unsullied crisp morning air and felt alive and invigorated as her lungs filled with the fine mountain air. The air was pristine, for industrial pollutants were not part of its makeup. She stood for a long moment looking down at the panorama before her, marvelling at its beauty, now, as she often had done, when she'd had the time to savour it.

Here she knew she belonged, as the air she breathed belonged. These, she knew, were her people, her kin; this, her land. How many centuries had her family lived on this knoll? Tonia had often wondered, in passing. She didn't know, of course, there were no written records of her genealogy; well, not until recent times, but she knew absolutely that here she belonged.

As she looked about her, she felt as one with the mountains and the valley. It was almost as though she imagined herself rising from the very soil she stood on, such was her empathy with this village. Just how far back their ancestry went, none of them could say precisely, she thought again, except to say that this was where they all belonged from *the very beginning*.

But which beginning? curious people would ask. *From the Stone Age?* Tonia knew nothing of any significance of prehistory, but nonetheless, she believed

her family was from indigenous stock, way back in time, probably back to Neanderthal man perhaps, she reasoned.

But *she* would simply say she didn't know, and leave it there while other villagers would insist, obscurely, with arrogant conviction, that *they* knew. "How many beginnings are there anyway, my friend? The very beginning, that's all we know. This is where we've lived, generation after generation, for hundreds and possibly thousands of years, from the *very beginning*," they would persist, in their fallacious conviction of its truth.

Tonia also believed that she was distantly related to nearly everyone in the village. She had to be, she thought, because prior to now, few villagers married outside their own village. Tonia knew that over the centuries, these villagers had mostly married their own and a peculiar kind of racial purity had developed. One would have assumed that this inbreeding, almost, would have resulted in a people of lesser intelligence, yet they were an intelligent people on average.

And there was among the villagers, a distinct likeness in the facial features of the village people as well; they weren't unattractive, with their pale olive skin and dark hair and eyes. Only the children had fair hair; but this darkened by the time they were six or seven. Strangers would comment about this likeness to each other on first visiting the village. *How bizarre! How does one tell them apart?* they would ask, exaggerating the perceived likeness.

But it wasn't just their looks, of course. Over the centuries they had also developed a unique manner of expressing themselves, in words and gestures that were

quite different from the neighbouring villagers. Though they shared the same dialect with their neighbours, they had words that were unique to them, words people outside the village would not use, even if they knew them. It was an unwritten code that identified the people from the village.

And Tonia felt there was a kind of permanence in the very physiology of the village as well. The village had developed on a mound of sandstone rock, fringed by a rocky river that had formed a natural moat in ancient times. The houses were nestled close to one another and were built from these same stones hewn from the hill, intensifying that sense of belonging and permanence that permeated life in the village.

Tonia knew enough of its history to know that this sandstone mound had been strategically placed for ancient invading armies. The ancient Greeks had invaded in 730 BC and had built a fortress there. And in time, the invaders co-existed with the indigenous until the ancient ancestry was all but forgotten. The Romans followed them, bringing with them a great deal of their culture and governance, and building the bridge to the ancient outpost that still stood there. These invaders were subsequently succeeded by the Arabs who revolutionised the irrigation system which allowed for the cultivation of, and processing of linen flax and hazel nuts in the valley, which brought great wealth to the ancient city and built its magnificent medieval palaces and churches. The Normans followed, also leaving behind their mark on its culture and in its architecture.

With all this grandiose history, it was ironic that Tonia thought of it as *a village*. She only had to ponder on the grandeur of the churches and the abbey to understand

its importance in medieval times. But the Twentieth Century dwarfed the achievements of the ancient peoples, and she could not believe it as anything other than a village.

Tonia suddenly reflected, too, on the religious beliefs that permeated every part of life in the village. Since the early centuries, Christianity had been the religion of the villagers. But Tonia knew it had not always been a Christian community. The ancient peoples had had other gods and rituals, though Tonia couldn't name them. But she knew they had existed. She understood too well, that in time, the Christian faith had subjugated the local religious beliefs, though it had not been able to completely eradicate the ancient rituals and superstitions, for they still abounded in the minds of villagers.

Any casual visitor would observe immediately that this was a village steeped in religious traditions. There were five churches within a short walking distance from Tonia's house, so there was no excuse not to go to Sunday Mass. It almost went without saying that the villagers all went to mass on Sundays. Besides, who had the courage not to? Hellfire awaited those who deliberately and without good reason stayed away! Tonia reflected now, quietly amused, as she contemplated life in the village. The church bells would chime and the villagers would be drawn to their compelling ringing. Some even heard in their ringing, they said, a clear message of doom if they weren't obeyed. Few dared resist their call to worship!

Statues of the saints were to be seen everywhere and were an indispensable part of the culture of the village. Small statues were nestled in little niches along the alleyways, both to protect its inhabitants and to remind people of the faith in which they were imbued. Moreover,

the statues in the church and public places were tangible links to the supernatural and were venerated deferentially by the villagers. These were the saintly people of the past, they said, who understood human suffering first hand and thereby could provide the people with an indirect link to God, who, to the villagers, was so remote, so unreachable, for after all, He was *God!*

And like the villagers, Tonia gave their priests courteous respect, for they were regarded as godly men of great learning. Many a time the priests had been sought for assistance in some delicate family matter where others dared not intrude. They provided both spiritual and temporal guidance in their times of dire need. Consequently, there was entirely no doubt in the minds of any of the villagers, least of all in Tonia's, that the priests were very wise and very learned.

Neither did the villagers bother themselves to try to understand God or church teachings; they left that to their priests, for they alone among them had the wisdom and knowledge to understand church doctrine and to explain such an indefinable concept as God.

Theological debates were simply not for the ordinary people in the village, thought Tonia. We are not learned enough to understand, she repeated to herself. It was best to leave it to the priests! In any case, the priests demanded unquestioning acceptance of church teaching, holding the powerful weapon of excommunication before them, if they should be so bold as to even question church doctrine. Anyway, the villagers had enough to worry about in their daily lives to concern themselves with obscure theological debate even had they been up to the task.