



The SEVEN
OR EIGHT
DEATHS OF
STELLA
FORTUNA

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Stella Fortuna the Second's earliest memory is of the day she almost died for the first time, the episode with the eggplant. Most of us have memories from when we are three or four years old – often foggy, impressionistic, colors or words instead of whole, solid moments. Stella had none of these. Her first memory was vivid, complete, and late: she was four and a half, and she was waking up in a shadowy brown room redolent with the sweet-rot smell of mint. She was in intense pain.

Later in life Stella would think that it was proof of a benevolent God that He had excused her from any recollection of the eggplant incident itself. It was somewhat regrettable that He hadn't seen fit to excuse her from its aftermath. But what kind of Heavenly Father would He be if He didn't help us learn from our own mistakes?

In the segment Stella doesn't remember, Assunta was frying slices of eggplant in her cast-iron trencher – her finest possession – over her open hearth. Little Stella, just tall enough to see over the lip of the frying pot, must have reached out and pressed her fingertips into the sizzling top skin of bread crumbs, then drawn back her hand in shock at the heat. In this jolting movement, the pan tipped toward her, splashing boiling olive oil onto Stella's right arm, oil that rushed through her dress sleeve and wrapped her from knuckle to chest. Stella might have cried out, but it is also possible she was silent, as later in life she was quietest during the worst times. Her baby sister,

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Concettina, was the opposite, and seeing Stella collapse by the fireplace she began to shriek for her mother.

Assunta rushed over to find the damage already done, red florets blossoming on her daughter's arm. Assunta tried to pull off the oil-soaked sleeve, but it had fused into Stella's skin. When she tugged at Stella's dress, the material resisted only slightly in her hands before springing upward, the flesh releasing, choosing fabric over arm, and blood spilled out so suddenly that neither of them, mother or daughter, even screamed.

Stella was unconscious during Assunta's dash down the mountain to Feroletto. Deep in her physical memory Stella knew the waddle-jog, waddle-jog of her mother in a hurry, her wounded daughter clutched to her chest; imagined Assunta's asthmatic breath freckling her face with spittle. The gallop was an aerobic one, three-quarters of an hour over the uneven weather-soft ground of the donkey path through the mistletoe-laced jungle of alder and ash. Later everyone told Assunta she had been crazy to take the child down the mountain, that she should have gone to fetch the doctor instead. But she worried it would be too late if she waited for the doctor to gather his things, that he wouldn't take her seriously if he couldn't see Stella himself. And who can say she wasn't right?

Assunta ran down the mountain the day of the eggplant for another reason, too – because she had not run that December day five years earlier. Because last time, she'd hesitated through the danger. Last time, she had let someone else – her husband – talk sense into her, and so

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she had woken the next morning to find there was no longer any reason to worry about whether the doctor was worth the expense. If this second Stella died, at least it would not be because her mother had not run.

So – and this was a story often retold in Ievoli, because everyone likes stories about feats of heroism by distressed mothers – Assunta picked her daughter up and ran.

Stella remembered nothing of the eighteen hours she spent in the doctor's surgery, where twice during the night she was nearly lost. Skin graft science was new and risky – it took the doctor more than an hour to explain to the frantic mother why she should let him cut into her daughter, that if he did not she might never heal and faced a dangerous chance of infection from the open wounds.

Stella would remember nothing of the blankets they used to soak up her blood – so much from a small body! How could there be any left inside? – or her skin lifting away from her arm in tidy packets, as unresisting as late-July squash blossoms prized from their whorls. Stella would recall nothing of the graft, when the doctor sliced his knife into the good, pure flesh of her left arm and then, when he needed more, of her buttocks. Later, Assunta couldn't quite describe the procedure the doctor had performed, as she had not been allowed in the surgery – she had been incoherent, slapping her own face and ululating with preemptive grief.

It was just as well Assunta didn't know more about the execution of the skin graft. The whole precarious operation was performed in that candlelit back room by

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that squirrely bachelor doctor in a mountain village without running water where the canon of conventional medical wisdom included no concept of antiseptic beyond a squeeze of lemon juice. Assunta could have no idea how fortunate she was that the doctor, with his small hairy hands and his odor of chicken skin, had left his village to be educated far away in Sicily, despite everything his father had told him was generally unsavory about Sicily, but where a medical program had been flourishing for almost five hundred years, and where skin grafting science had been pioneered.

During her nightlong vigil outside the surgery door, on which she pounded periodically, Assunta convinced herself that her daughter was dead and that the doctor was hiding from a mother's wrath. Delirious with her own failure – first one Stella, and now the second – she clutched her own torso, feeling the stiffened death-cold first Stella in her arms. Her hands vibrated with the memory of that morning; she felt the ringing of the church bells in the skin of her palms, which would never caress either of her Stellas again.

When the doctor finally emerged he found Assunta lying in front of the door, half her face pressed into the unswept floor, asleep with her flaming eyes open. Each hand was a slick-knuckled fist containing a skein of her own uprooted black hair, oily from clutching. From that day on Assunta wore a kerchief over her head to cover these bald patches, and also the gray hair that grew back in, even though she was only twenty-five.

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Fifteen, twenty years later, when Stella rolled up her sleeves before washing dishes, she would pause to mull over the scars. She never remembered her arms without them, but they were still interesting to her. Her right forearm was swathed in wrinkled brown skin, white around the edges of the skin graft, like an independent island country on an antique map. On the left arm, the scar was less obvious: the meaty outside was pinched into a scientifically precise line, straight as if it had been made with a ruler until you looked very closely to see the bric-a-brac of hand-stitching. The suture marks became more visible in the summer, when her skin tanned around them.

She often wondered: What had made her – almost five years old, old enough to know better – put her hand into the pan for a piece of eggplant? Greed? Hunger? Curiosity? As an adult, she knew those were the three things that motivated her most often. She just couldn't believe she would have made a mistake like that, even as a child.

Even stranger, where had her mother been? Assunta was skittish, overloving, like many mothers who have lost children in the past. Stella had almost no memories of her childhood in which Assunta was not standing by, or over, or behind. There was no explanation for why Assunta had left her daughters unsupervised by an open fire and a vat of boiling oil – except, perhaps, bewitchment.

Minty brownness, heat. Stella's arms were beginning to wake, throbbing where they lay on the coverlet. Even as the brownness settled over her, her newly won consciousness was already compromising itself, sparkles

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rising in her vision as the terror of her pain set in. It was a frustratingly imbalanced pain, the right arm burning with imaginary heat, radiating a halo of raw untouchability, the left arm rippling with the acute pinching sensation of surgically sliced skin.

The smell of mint was the most familiar point of orientation: spicy near-rot, at once fetid and antiseptic. The second Stella had broached the world in a cloud of mint just like this one, mint her grandmother, her first human contact on the other side of the womb, had tied in a bundle around her neck. There was nothing better than the stench of mint to ward off the Evil Eye. The smell would always call up Stella's most ineffable memories, sunset-dim walls, the oppression of sweat-tangled blankets, blood pounding in and around her – a foggy, green-brown arc of connected traumas.

There in that double pain was Assunta, leaning over her, marking the cross on Stella's forehead with her thumb. Assunta's breathy whisper dipped into Stella's consciousness, binding her into the present, to the pain that roiled and bulged as her nerves came back to life. Assunta inhaled deeply, sucking air through fluted lips so the whistle of her breath was audible, deliberate. On each exhale, she chanted voicelessly, fast, slurred lines of an eerie poem whose meaning Stella couldn't quite grasp. It was the un fascination, the incantation to banish the Evil Eye curse that must have been fixed on her forehead.

Around Stella's sickbed sat Nonna Maria, Stella's miniature godmother Za Rosina, and her Uncle Nicola's wife, Za Violetta, who held the unhappy two-year-old Cettina on her lap. Stella, groggy with pain, listened as her

mother told her side of the story. 'I don't remember looking away for even a moment,' Assunta insisted. 'It's such a strange thing. You know I would never leave the girls alone.'

Za Ros placed her warm palm on Stella's head like a benediction. 'Who has fixed the Eye on you, my *piccirijl*?' she asked.

Stella was still learning to identify rhetorical questions. 'Cettina,' she replied, glancing at her grimacing sister. The answer came out with no forethought, but seemed like it might be correct as soon as Stella said it.

All four women laughed quickly, saying 'No, no' to shake away that bad idea.

'Listen, *piccirijl*,' Za Ros said, her voice gentle. 'Saying someone cast the Eye on you means you are saying they intended you great evil, so we don't name names, all right? Instead we ask *il Signore* and the saints to protect you and turn the Eye away.'

Stella studied her aunts' faces, trying to figure out what she had said wrong.

'Ah, but maybe she knows, Ros,' Za Violetta countered. She was a hard, round woman with clear, mean brown eyes. 'Why shouldn't she say if she knows? Why shouldn't she protect herself if she knows who to protect against?'

'Violèt!' Tiny Ros's voice rose, which was unusual. 'You have to protect yourself from the whole world! *Invidia* is everywhere.' She lifted her hands, and all the women thought they could see the miasma hanging over them in the dust-filtered late-afternoon light. 'Jealousy can come from anyone, even someone who loves you. But for you to

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point a finger at someone and say that they have cursed you is as bad as for you to curse them yourself. *Capit'?*

'You remember that, *piccirijl'*," Nonna Maria said to Stella. 'You can only name someone else's sins if you know those sins yourself.' This was a proverb; Stella would hear her grandmother say it often. 'You make sure you are good, but you don't worry whether other people are good or not because they must make their own peace with God.'

The *mal'oicch'*, as it's called in Calabrese, the Evil Eye, is the bad atmosphere generated by suppressed resentments, jealousy with the power to wound, ruin, craze, or even kill. The *mal'oicch'* is particularly dangerous for blessed or beautiful or wealthy people, who often seem to have the best and worst luck because of all the accumulated jealousy, *invidia*, around them. The truly good among us may experience no distress at the good fortune of our loved ones, but for the rest of us jealousy is shameful, secret, and poisonous. The Mediterranean is home to diverse ancient religions and ethnic cultures, but the Evil Eye is one thing Maghrebians, Andalusians, Sephardim, Greek Orthodox, Turkish Muslims, Palestinian Arabs, and Catholics of the Italian Mezzogiorno comfortably agreed upon. In Ievoli, the *mal'oicch'* was simple, sinister, and sometimes eradicable with some quasi-Christian witchcraft.

Assunta wondered if it was true, what Rosina said, if it really was impossible to guess who might be behind an *invidia* without being the source of it yourself. She did not know how to protect her children against her own misjudgments, but the Evil Eye, at least, she knew how to keep away. The curse she worked, mint in hand, was a

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string of magical words she had learned from her mother, sacred words that could never be written down, not even here, a century later. The voiceless, sucking rhyme to which Stella opened her eyes that horrible brown morning would become so familiar that Stella would hear its rhythm in the dark when she was drifting off to sleep. Even as an adult, especially on off-tempo nights when it stormed or was too hot or she felt that itch of unrest, she would hear her mother's breathy chant.

Stella never learned the charm herself; she didn't have Assunta's gift of open spirit, and never really believed. Without faith there are no miracles, just coincidences.

Assunta performed the rites, but privately she wondered if it was not the Evil Eye that had hexed her daughter. Perhaps defensively, she had convinced herself she never would have left the girls alone with the boiling oil if she had been in her right mind. Every moment of every day she felt the phantom of her dead daughter dragging on her conscience, her limbs heavy under the weight of her guilt and grief. She knew this phantom existed in her head and heart only; Assunta did not believe in ghosts, because she had restored her perfect faith in *il Signore* and knew that He was caring for the first Stella in Heaven.

Well, she had almost restored her perfect faith.

This episode with the eggplant – this was a moment when it seemed an awful lot like she had been haunted.

What if Assunta had brought on the eggplant attack through her own neglect – by loosening her grief for her

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lost Stella once she was distracted by her other, living children?

She took out the photograph the portraitist had brought and she hung it on her wall in the corner where the sun wouldn't fade it. She made an altar on her kitchen counter, where she kept a candle burning whenever she had money for candles.

If there was, in fact, a ghost Assunta was trying to appease, though, this altar did not do the trick. After all, the boiling oil wasn't the worst of the second Stella's cursed bad luck; it was only the beginning.

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