

**MATTEO  
RIGHETTO**

*Soul of  
the  
Border*

Translated from the Italian by Howard Curtis

PUSHKIN PRESS

# 1

THERE ARE VILLAGES that smell of misfortune.

You just have to breathe in their air to recognize them, air that is murky and thin and defeated, like all things that have failed.

Nevada was one such village, with its handful of men and women living in hovels that clung to the steep slopes on the right-hand side of the river, hovels half-hidden by ragged woods and scattered here and there among the *masiere*: those little terraces, reclaimed from the mountainside, that descend towards Enego to the east of the Asiago Plateau, and then plunge into the Brenta and Sugana Valleys.

It was on these *masiere*, demarcated by walls built up from the chipped stones that spring from that earth in greater profusion than moles, that the locals grew tobacco. They had been doing so for generations, for centuries, because there above the Brenta Valley tobacco grew well and was of better quality than any other in circulation, which was why it had already replaced the timber trade by the seventeenth century, at a time when down in the valley, from north to south, bubonic plague was raging and it seemed as if there was no future for anybody.

## 2

AS THE NINETEENTH CENTURY drew to an end, only three families lived in Nevada, and one of them was the De Boers.

Augusto was the head of the family. He was born in 1852, when his land was under Austrian rule, in the same house he would live in all his life and to which he would bring his wife Agnese, the daughter of peasants from a place called Stoner: four houses clinging to the Asiago Plateau. With her he would have three children, two girls and a boy, all born in Nevada, in that very same house.

Augusto was not a tall man, nor was he bulky, but he was endowed with surprising, inexhaustible strength. With five blows of an axe, he was capable of felling a spruce twice his age. He had a thick black moustache that concealed his mouth, which was often busy chewing tobacco. He spoke so little that often he was silent for days on end. Whenever his lips moved, all conversation around him ceased. His words were as final as tombstones.

He had grown up in poverty, narrowly avoiding pellagra, and had seen dozens of men and women, including his father and mother, survive the hunger and famine that had beset the mountain dwellers over the years.

That might have been why Augusto De Boer felt the burden of responsibility on his shoulders and lived every day in the full awareness that the fate of his family, for good or ill, was linked to his, like the branches of an oak to the trunk.

That was why he thanked God twice a day, in his way. He did it when he got out of bed with the first song of the thrushes and set off to work on the *masiere* and when he returned in the evening, bones aching with fatigue. Then he would eat a chunk of polenta and little else, arrange the firewood in the stove and go to bed.

Lying in bed with his eyes closed, he would listen to the song of the nightingales out there in the woods and feel a burning pain in his back from the day's labours.

**A** GNESE WAS THREE YEARS younger than him and had never been back to Stoner since leaving. Her hands were stubby, the skin red and chapped on the back, the palms covered in little cracks. She always walked fast, as if in a hurry, with her head down. Few people had seen her hair: once black, it had turned white suddenly, and she wore it swept back into a bun and hidden under a dark kerchief tied under her chin.

She prayed a lot, even when she worked in the fields or stirred the lumpy, ochre-coloured polenta in the pot. She prayed above all to the Virgin Mary. Some summer days, she would return home from the *masiere* so tired that she did not even have the strength to eat, and so she would make dinner for the others and sit down by the stove or else on the steps outside the door, and there she would rest, moving her lips in a long prayer. She was a sensitive soul and, despite the strain of living at these heights, she was amazed and enchanted every day by the beauty of nature's little things: a dandelion, a hazelnut, a jay's multicoloured feather. She had never received any gifts, and she wished for nothing, except to see her children grow up healthy and good Christians.