

## A PAIR OF EYEGLASSES



“As long as there’s the sun ... the sun!” the voice of Don Peppino Quaglia crooned softly near the doorway of the low, dark, basement apartment. “Leave it to God,” answered the humble and faintly cheerful voice of his wife, Rosa, from inside; she was in bed, moaning in pain from arthritis, complicated by heart disease, and, addressing her sister-in-law, who was in the bathroom, she added: “You know what I’ll do, Nunziata? Later I’ll get up and take the clothes out of the water.”

“Do as you like, to me it seems real madness,” replied the curt, sad voice of Nunziata from that den. “With the pain you have, one more day in bed wouldn’t hurt you!” A silence. “We’ve got to put out some more poison, I found a cockroach in my sleeve this morning.”

From the cot at the back of the room, which was really a cave, with a low vault of dangling spiderwebs, rose the small, calm voice of Eugenia:

“Mamma, today I’m putting on the eyeglasses.”

There was a kind of secret joy in the modest voice of the child, Don Peppino’s third-born. (The first two, Carmela and Luisella, were with the nuns, and would soon take the veil, hav-

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ing been persuaded that this life is a punishment; and the two little ones, Pasqualino and Teresella, were still snoring, as they slept feet to head, in their mother's bed.)

"Yes, and no doubt you'll break them right away," the voice of her aunt, still irritated, insisted, from behind the door of the little room. She made everyone suffer for the disappointments of her life, first among them that she wasn't married and had to be subject, as she told it, to the charity of her sister-in-law, although she didn't fail to add that she dedicated this humiliation to God. She had something of her own set aside, however, and wasn't a bad person, since she had offered to have glasses made for Eugenia when at home they had realized that the child couldn't see. "With what they cost! A grand total of a good eight thousand lire!" she added. Then they heard the water running in the basin. She was washing her face, squeezing her eyes, which were full of soap, and Eugenia gave up answering.

Besides, she was too, too pleased.

A week earlier, she had gone with her aunt to an optician on Via Roma. There, in that elegant shop, full of polished tables and with a marvelous green reflection pouring in through a blind, the doctor had measured her sight, making her read many times, through certain lenses that he kept changing, entire columns of letters of the alphabet, printed on a card, some as big as boxes, others as tiny as pins. "This poor girl is almost blind," he had said then, with a kind of pity, to her aunt, "she should no longer be deprived of lenses." And right away, while Eugenia, sitting on a stool, waited anxiously, he had placed over her eyes another pair of lenses, with a white metal frame, and had said: "Now look into the street." Eugenia stood up, her legs trembling with emotion, and was unable to suppress a little cry of joy. On the sidewalk, so many well-dressed people were passing, slightly

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smaller than normal but very distinct: ladies in silk dresses with powdered faces, young men with long hair and bright-colored sweaters, white-bearded old men with pink hands resting on silver-handled canes; and, in the middle of the street, some beautiful automobiles that looked like toys, their bodies painted red or teal, all shiny; green trolleys as big as houses, with their windows lowered, and behind the windows so many people in elegant clothes. Across the street, on the opposite sidewalk, were beautiful shops, with windows like mirrors, full of things so fine they elicited a kind of longing; some shop boys in black aprons were polishing the windows from the street. At a café with red and yellow tables, some golden-haired girls were sitting outside, legs crossed. They laughed and drank from big colored glasses. Above the café, because it was already spring, the balcony windows were open and embroidered curtains swayed, and behind the curtains were fragments of blue and gilded paintings, and heavy, sparkling chandeliers of gold and crystal, like baskets of artificial fruit. A marvel. Transported by all that splendor, she hadn't followed the conversation between the doctor and her aunt. Her aunt, in the brown dress she wore to Mass, and standing back from the glass counter with a timidity unnatural to her, now broached the question of the cost: "Doctor, please, give us a good price ... we're poor folk ..." and when she heard "eight thousand lire" she nearly fainted.

"Two lenses! What are you saying! Jesus Mary!"

"Look, ignorant people ..." the doctor answered, replacing the other lenses after polishing them with the glove, "don't calculate anything. And when you give the child two lenses, you'll be able to tell me if she sees better. She takes nine diopters on one side, and ten on the other, if you want to know ... she's almost blind."

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While the doctor was writing the child's first and last name—"Eugenia Quaglia, Vicolo della Cupa at Santa Maria in Portico"—Nunziata had gone over to Eugenia, who, standing in the doorway of the shop and holding up the glasses in her small, sweaty hands, was not at all tired of gazing through them: "Look, look, my dear! See what your consolation costs! Eight thousand lire, did you hear? A grand total of a good eight thousand lire!" She was almost suffocating. Eugenia had turned all red, not so much because of the rebuke as because the young woman at the cash register was looking at her, while her aunt was making that observation, which declared the family's poverty. She took off the glasses.

"But how is it, so young and already so nearsighted?" the young woman had asked Nunziata, while she signed the receipt for the deposit. "And so shabby, too!" she added.

"Young lady, in our house we all have good eyes, this is a misfortune that came upon us ... along with the rest. God rubs salt in the wound."

"Come back in eight days," the doctor had said. "I'll have them for you."

Leaving, Eugenia had tripped on the step.

"Thank you, Aunt Nunzia," she had said after a while. "I'm always rude to you. I talk back to you, and you are so kind, buying me eyeglasses."

Her voice trembled.

"My child, it's better not to see the world than to see it," Nunziata had answered with sudden melancholy.

Eugenia hadn't answered her that time, either. Aunt Nunzia was often so strange, she wept and shouted for no good reason,