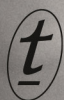


BIANCA PITZORNO

THE
SEAMSTRESS
OF SARDINIA



TRANSLATED BY
BRIGID MAHER



My Love, Light of My Life

I WAS SEVEN years old when Nonna began entrusting me with putting the finishing touches on the garments she sewed at home for her clients, during those periods when she had no jobs that sent her to work in other people's homes. She and I were the only members of the family left alive after the cholera epidemic that had taken from us, indiscriminately, my parents, my brothers and sisters, and all my grandmother's other children and grandchildren—my aunts, uncles and cousins. How the two of us managed to survive, I've never known.

We were poor, but that had been the case even before the epidemic. All our family ever had was the strength of the men's arms and the dexterity of the women's fingers. My grandmother and her daughters and daughters-in-law were well known in the city for their skill and precision in sewing and embroidery, and for their honesty, cleanliness

and reliability when they went to work in domestic service in the homes of the upper classes, where they showed grace and competence as maids while also taking care of the wardrobe and linen. And almost all were good cooks. The men worked as day labourers—masons, removalists, gardeners. In our city there were not yet many industries offering work, but the brewery, the oil mill, the flour mill and the endless excavation work for the aqueduct often required non-specialised labour. As far as I can recall we never went hungry, though we often had to move house and huddle together for a while in squalid hovels or *bassi* in the old part of town when we couldn't afford to pay the rent on the humble flats that people of our class usually lived in.

When the two of us were left alone I was five and my grandmother, fifty-two. She was strong, and could have earned a living as a maid in one of the houses where she had worked as a young woman and left a good impression. But she would not have been allowed to keep me with her in any of those homes, and she did not want to leave me in one of the orphanages or charitable institutions run by the nuns. There were several in our city and they had a dreadful reputation. Even if she had only worked days as a maid she would not have had anyone to leave me with. So she took a gamble that she would be able to support us both with her sewing work, and she did so well out of it that I cannot recall wanting for anything during those years. We lived in two small rooms partly below ground level in the basement

of a noble *palazzo* in a narrow cobbled street of the old town, and she paid the rent in kind, by cleaning the entrance hall and four flights of stairs. My grandmother spent two and a half hours on this task every morning, getting out of bed before dawn, and only after putting away buckets, rags and broom would she start on her sewing.

She had set up one of our two rooms in such a smart and seemly way that she was able to receive clients when they came by with an order or, occasionally, for a fitting, though in most cases she would go to their houses, with tacked-up clothes over her arm and pincushion and scissors tied to a ribbon around her neck. On those occasions she would take me with her after a thousand exhortations to sit quietly in a corner while we were at the client's house. This was because she had nobody to leave me with, but also so that I could watch and learn.

My grandmother's speciality was full sets of linen for the home—sheets, tablecloths, curtains—but also shirts for men and women, underwear, and baby clothing. In those days there were few department stores selling such items ready to wear. Our biggest rivals were the Carmelite nuns, who were especially skilled at embroidery. But my grandmother also knew how to make day and evening wear, jackets and overcoats for women. And also, by reducing the measurements, for children. I always went around smartly dressed, neat and clean, unlike the other little urchins who lived in our laneway. But despite her age, my grandmother was

considered a sartina, a little seamstress, someone to go to for simple, everyday items. There were two true, important dressmakers in the city who, in competition with each other, served the needs of wealthy, fashionable ladies, and who each had an atelier with various employees. They received catalogues with patterns, and sometimes even fabrics, from the capital. It cost a fortune to get something made by them—the kind of money Nonna and I could have lived on for two years or maybe more.

And then there was one family, the lawyer Provera's, that went so far as to order the wife's and daughters' ballgowns and other dresses for special occasions from Paris. A real extravagance, because it was well known that regarding everything else, including his own wardrobe, *Avvocato Provera* was extremely mean, even though he boasted one of the largest fortunes in the city. 'More money than sense,' my grandmother would sigh. In her youth she had worked for the wife's parents. They too were extremely wealthy—for the wedding they had bestowed on their daughter Teresa an extraordinary trousseau worthy of an American heiress, all of it straight from Paris, along with a princely dowry. But evidently their son-in-law was only disposed to invest in the elegance of his womenfolk. Like all gentlemen, the lawyer went to a tailor for his clothes, but the work of a tailor was utterly unlike ours: the textiles, cuts, sewing techniques and apprenticeship rules were all very different. No woman was ever admitted to that trade, perhaps because modesty forbade women from touching men's bodies to

take measurements—I don't know—but that was the tradition. Two completely separate worlds.

My grandmother was illiterate. She had never been able to allow herself the luxury of going to school and now, although she would have liked to, she could not offer me the chance either. I needed to learn quickly to help her, then dedicate all my time to work. The alternative, as she often reminded me, was the orphanage, where, yes, they would teach me to read and write, but I would be living as though in a prison—suffering the cold, eating poorly—and then, at fourteen, when they sent me on my way, all I would be able to do was work as a maid, living in somebody else's house, my hands in cold water all day, or burnt over the stove or a hot iron, doing exactly what I was told, day in, day out, with no prospects and no hope of improving my lot. Whereas by learning a trade, I would always be able to maintain my independence. The thing she feared most, my grandmother admitted to me many years later, just before she died, was that if I went into domestic service living under the same roof as a family, I would be molested by the master of the house or by his sons.

'I'd be able to defend myself!' I declared defiantly. Only then did she tell me the tragic story of her cousin Ofelia. When her master propositioned her, Ofelia rejected him, slapped him in the face and threatened to tell his wife. As revenge and in order to pre-empt any accusation, he took a gold cigar case from the drawing room and hid it in the

little room where she slept. Then he got his wife to accompany him on a search of the maid's humble possessions and upon their 'discovery' of the cigar case the girl was fired on the spot and sent on her way without a letter of reference. The lady of the house told all her acquaintances about the theft. News spread and after that no respectable family ever wanted to employ the 'thief'. The only job Ofelia was able to find was as a scullery maid in a tavern. But there too the drunk patrons made her life difficult, making unseemly demands, fighting over her, getting her mixed up in brawls. One evening she was arrested, and that was the beginning of the end. Due to the prostitution laws brought in by Cavour and Nicotera, police regulations were extremely strict. They put her under surveillance and, after the third brawl, which was no fault of her own, Ofelia was forced to register as a prostitute and go to work in a bordello. There she fell ill and a few years later she died in hospital of the French disease.

For my grandmother, recalling that story was like reliving a nightmare. She knew how fine the line was between an honourable life and a hellish one of shame and suffering. When I was a child she never spoke to me about it—in fact, she did everything she could to keep me ignorant of sex and its dangers.

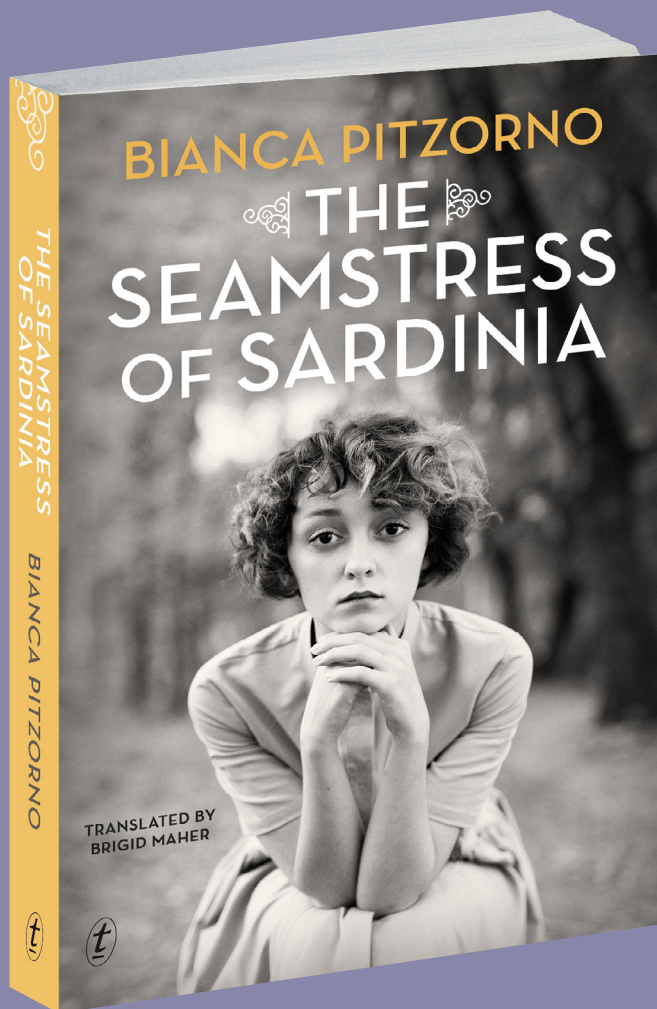
But very early on she began giving me needle and thread, and a few scraps of fabric left over from her work. Like any good teacher, she introduced it to me as a game. I had an old papier-mâché doll in a terrible state. I had inherited it

from one of the cousins who had died; she had been given it by the lady her mother worked for. I loved this doll deeply, and it pained me to see it all bare and covered in scratches. (My grandmother had removed its clothes one night and hidden them.) I was eager to learn how to make this doll a shirt at the very least, a headscarf, then a sheet and later an apron. My aim was an elegant dress with pleats and lace trimmings, but this was not easy and in the end my grandmother completed the job.

But in the meantime, I had learnt to sew perfect hems with tiny, identical stitches, without pricking my fingers and getting blood on the light white cambric of baby clothes or handkerchiefs. By the time I was seven hems were my daily task. I was happy to be told, ‘You’re an enormous help.’ And the number of garments my grandmother could complete in a week grew from one month to the next, and so did her earnings, albeit modestly. I learnt how to do hemstitch on sheets, monotonous work that allowed my mind to wander freely, and pulled thread embroidery, which required more attention. Now that I was older my grandmother would let me go out alone—to buy thread from the haberdashery, to deliver completed garments—and if I stopped for half an hour on the way back to play on the street with other girls from the neighbourhood, she would not complain. She did not like leaving me home alone for too long, however, and when she needed to spend the whole day sewing at a client’s house she would bring me along, on the pretext of needing my help. That kind of work was

advantageous because if it was a dark day we could use all the candles and gas lamps we needed without worrying about the cost. And at midday we would be given lunch, meaning on those days we would also be saving on food. It was always a good lunch—pasta, meat and fruit, far better than our usual meal. In some houses we had to eat in the kitchen with the maids, while in others the meal was served just to the two of us, in the sewing room. We were never invited to eat with the owners.

Usually in those wealthy, elegant homes there was, as I said, a dedicated sewing room, well lit, with a large table for stretching out and cutting fabric, and often there was even—marvel of marvels—a sewing machine. My grandmother knew how to use one—I don't know where she'd learnt this—and I looked on fascinated as she moved the treadle up and down in a rhythmic motion and the fabric slid quickly under the needle. 'If we had one at home,' she would sigh, 'just think how much work I could take on!' But we both knew we'd never be able to afford one, and in any case there wasn't the space.



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