
Opening Extract from...

Girl Reading

Written by Katie Ward

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This is a book for David.

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You can never say with certainty whether what appears to be going on in the collective unconscious of a single individual is not also happening in other individuals or organisms or things or situations.

C. G. Jung
'Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle'
(*Collected Works*, volume 8)

Simone Martini

Annunciation, 1333

She arrives glowing from the effort of running, strands of red hair coming loose from her kerchief (she tucks them in), marks on her neck like bruises on fruit. A few minutes late but not enough for anyone to mention it. Is almost surprised to find herself in the wards once more amid illness and suffering (on an evening such as this). Her mind is elsewhere. She accepts a dish, a spoon, instructions to feed a patient who rasps with each breath, whose sores stink, who has for eyes one piercing brown bead and one sagging black hole. Familiar and strange, ordinary and violent.

She does not smile encouragingly at the invalid to finish her meal, does not add to the whispered hubbub of the stone halls. They labour together in silence. The crone chews and swallows slowly despite the impulse of her body to reject what it consumes; the girl holds the spoon out, withdraws it, rests it; the food on the plate scarcely diminishes. Candle flames are

skittish in the draught, creating the impression of hasty movement.

The old woman speaks; the girl is roused from her private thoughts. Who are you?

My name is Laura Agnelli.

That is not what I asked.

A patient in a bed further along screams with pain. There is a disturbance. Some run to her aid, some are disgusted and afraid to be close by.

Laura offers one last mouthful to her charge, wipes the remnants from her bluish lips. I am a daughter of Santa Maria della Scala hospital.

You are a foundling? What is your history?

I have none.

You have a name though.

The rector himself named me Agnelli. It means 'lamb'. He is over there. Laura indicates, without pointing, Rettore Giovanni di Tese Tolomei, a man as wide as he is tall, his thumb tucked into his finery as he makes his inspection of the wards.

The woman swivels her eye towards him, then back to the girl. You were plucked from a crop of innocents by that man?

He showed me compassion because I was weak. He held me in his own arms and gave me his blessing, so I am told.

I am surprised he did not mistake you for a ham.

Laura frowns at the crone. He saved my life.

Did he?

And the lives of many foundlings, before and since.

But he bestowed his favour on *you*. It is not an honour I would wish for a daughter of mine.

The patient's pillow needs rearranging, the bedclothes have slipped down; Laura sets them right, noticing as she does so how cold are the limbs beneath.

The old woman winks her eye. What else do they tell you?

That it was Our Lady who inspired him. The rector heard me crying, held me and foretold that I would take religious vows – and that one day, I would bring rewards to Santa Maria della Scala hospital and the whole city of Siena.

The woman raises her good eyebrow, exaggerating the unevenness of her face; Laura covers the marks on her neck, uneasy.

What do the other children make of it?

They never say.

How did you come to be called Laura? Did your mother call you this?

I know not.

Maybe when she could provide nothing else, she gave you this name – Laura – hoping you would like it?

Yes, you might be right.

She did what she thought was for the best, like all mothers who bring their babes here and turn them over to Signor Rettore. *Suffer little children to come unto me.* (The woman shuts her eye, while the other socket hangs open still.) Yes, I can see her perfectly, even though she is doing her best to hide. Her head is uncovered, she lets her hair hang about her shoulders like the fallen woman she is. Pitiful. But we should not be too harsh on her; it is only because she is using every fragment of cloth to keep the infant warm. She is giving it her blessing before she parts with it: *I hope you will be spared the pain I knew*. Is that all? Such a small request, for such a small wriggling bundle! And yet it is worth a dozen of Signor Rettore's grand pronouncements. She looks tired . . . poor thing has not slept in days. She should sleep now, I think.

Laura counts the lengthening spaces between the woman's breaths, stays by the bedside for many hours until it is over.

*

What pretty feet you have. Like two pigeons with their wings folded and their heads tucked in. Do you dance?

Not often. Not well. When there is music, and I am moved to.

I imagine you bouncing and bobbing like a wheat stalk in a breeze, and afterwards I imagine you rosy and out of breath. What pretty knees you have too. There is no doubt about it, God intends you to be a bride. *My* bride.

You are making fun of me.

I would swear to it. Pretty legs. Where the heart goes, the body has to follow.

What did you say? What are you doing?

The magnificent cathedral is the envy of every city state. It matches the ambitions of those who built it, and the saints themselves would nod their appreciation. The Duomo is absolutely Siena's, and Siena is absolutely the Virgin's. How they flourish under her protection.

A man stands before the high altar but he is not here for mass, and he has no awe in his heart. He is inspecting something he has seen hundreds of times before, his objectivity strained. Wealth does not impress him, for he is wealthier than most. Lavish decorations hold few surprises these days. His arms are folded across his chest like a farmer's, his gargoyle features contracted in a scowl; a short lump of a man. Were it not for the fine weave of his tunic, the opulence of its colour, the ornate trim, he might be mistaken for a pilgrim or even a beggar. He senses a presence in this marvellous place (how it glitters, how it is still!) but it is no angel or deity: it is the laughing ghost of a man he knew extremely well in life.

The altarpiece is the *Maestà*, the enormous panel showing the Madonna and Child upon a throne, adored by a host of angels and saints. It is surrounded by smaller storytelling panels and drenched in gold. For the faithful, the *Maestà* is a channel to the

Virgin: she sees out of those very eyes, hears their pleas through it. On the day it was installed in the Duomo, there was a procession led by the bishop, the priests and friars around the Campo, attended by the Nine, the entire Commune, the citizens of Siena. Resplendent, it passed through the crowds. Bells rang, alms were given to the poor, prayers were made to Our Lady, our advocate. It is Duccio's (old master, old rogue). Simone Martini snorts.

Simone Martini? I've heard of him! He was Duccio's pupil.

This is the best accolade he can hope for now. One wants to be trained by the greatest living artist, and then to transcend him. That will not happen.

Simone examines the icon, trying to see it as a peasant would, as a monk would, as a lord, a foreigner, a child, a dog. He tries to see it for what it seems to be and for what it is. He tries to see its multiplicity in order to see its truth, but the truth eludes him like incense. It is before him, around him, above him, but vanishes into air. He is morose.

A new commission for Siena Cathedral. Something *different*. He is getting what he wants, and he does not like it. He does not like the serpent of his vanity being provoked by a bishop's crozier.

Vescovo Donusdeo dei Malavolti glides towards the artist, extends his hooked hand for Simone to kiss the episcopal ring. The bishop has an ancient face but his frailty comes and goes. Sometimes the sharp edge of his willpower is visible, which can be dangerous; sometimes he is as meek as a kitten, which can be lethal. When the formalities are over, he extends a trembling pat of reassurance to the artist's arm and wheezes, It warms me, Maestro Simone, to see that you have begun your work. That is what I like about painters, they always have their most valuable tool on their person: their imagination. You cannot help it, can you? You are making lines and filling shapes with pigment even

as we stand here. If I were a betting man, which naturally I am not, I would say you have made up your mind what the finished piece will look like. But I must rein in your impulses, though it grieves me to, for I would be intrigued to know what the farthest limits of your creativity can do. It is the Opera del Duomo, you see. You know what they are like. Some of them can be resistant to innovation. They mean well, of course, but it would be remiss of me not to repeat, for appearance's sake, the prescriptions they have made.

Prescriptions?

Prescription, guidance, what you will. You know best, and I trust you will interpret their expressed wishes suitably. They are not as brave as you and me. Were it my choice, I would say go and do your best, give to the cathedral whatever your genius can conceive of, and be as radical as you dare. They ought to listen to me, but they do not. I am too lenient with them. I sympathise, Maestro Simone, I do. Having someone restrict what you can paint must make you feel as I would feel if someone restricted my prayers.

I would not want my prayers inhibited either. What are the instructions?

Hardly worth mentioning. As I have stated already, you are to paint a functioning altarpiece which celebrates our principal protector, the Virgin, and represents an episode from her life. In due course there will be four new altars in the cathedral, each dedicated to one of Siena's auxiliary patrons, starting with Saint Ansanus – and then Saint Savinus, Saint Victor and Saint Crescentius. Each altar will feature a moment from Our Lady's history. Yours is the first commission. I insisted to the Opera del Duomo that you should have the honour.

You flatter me, Vescovo. So far, these are reasonable specifications.

I am glad you think so. The next point is one I am sure your

expert eye has already discerned: that the new altarpiece must be in harmony with Duccio's *Maestà*, and naturally in keeping with the traditions of the faith. How do you fellows say? The spatial relationship, the style, must not depart from his. There should be accord.

Simone takes some steps away from the bishop, and faces the spot where his altarpiece would be installed relative to Duccio's: to the side of it; smaller in size than it; dedicated to a relatively obscure saint instead of the Virgin herself; replicating his old tutor's hand. Vescovo Donusdeo is correct; the artist had indeed guessed as much. Simone says, What if I am engaged in another commission? I am in great demand.

The bishop laughs. Who in Siena would put his own interests above the needs of the Church? Tell me the name of the man who is attempting to commandeer you, and I shall personally intervene. It must be at the preliminary stages of negotiation in any case – I spoke with your brother-in-law, and know you not to be under contract at present.

Simone remains rigid, and silently curses Lippo.

Besides, the patronal altars of Siena will become supremely famous. After the first has been dedicated, artists will flock from miles around to beg for the next commission. People will expect it of you, Simone, as Siena's famous son, to make a panel for the Duomo. The question is not whether you paint one, but *which one* you will paint. I suspect that you would prefer to be the pioneer, and to have the freest hand. Have I not said, moreover, that what the Opera requires of you is something quite new?

You wish me to create an icon that maintains tradition, and yet is entirely original?

I am relieved you understand. You are capable of it.

The artist gazes at Duccio's legacy.

The bishop shares his contemplation briefly and sighs. It is a

remarkable object, a singular tribute to the majesty of Our Lady. Do you think I am blind as well as old, my dear Simone? Do you think bishops arrive in office fully formed? Every day I walk in the footprints of my predecessors.

Have the Nine been informed of this project?

I am sure somebody has conveyed the news. You know how easily these things get about.

Are they aware the Duomo is appropriating some of their imagery?

Their imagery . . . ? I am not sure I follow.

Well, you say there shall be four altars dedicated to Siena's patrons – and citizens will come here to the cathedral to petition the saints through prayer, and the saints in turn petition the Blessed Virgin Mary and she in her turn is their advocate to God. True? I am simply wondering if the politicians could view this arrangement as – evocative.

You amuse me. What a cynic you have become. You have such a low opinion of people, and for what reason? I am sure such a misplaced and petty notion would not occur to any of the Council of Nine. And if it did, shame would prevent them from saying it aloud. And if they said so, I would answer, the Church is staking a claim only to that which she already owns.

Simone senses the bishop's enjoyment in being able to rehearse his argument.

But let me explain something to you, in strictest confidence. I know you will appreciate the spirit of it. Siena is a beam of marble supported by three columns: the Town Hall, Siena Cathedral and Santa Maria della Scala hospital. If one of these cracks or weakens, the other two must take more of the strain, so all is kept stable. Coincidental that you and I should visit this topic now, when I was debating it with Rettore Giovanni di Tese Tolomei just yesterday. He and I have had many productive conversations on this matter . . .

He notices how the bishop leaves the ribbon of his remark hanging in space, inviting someone to tug it. You have concerns about the Nine?

Certainly not. The oligarchs do a fine job. Legislating, scrutinising decisions, collecting taxes, arbitrating – how shall we say? – *disputes* regarding boundaries and livestock, and so on. Custodianship of these mundane matters is, I suppose, a necessity. And yet, even the ruling classes must acknowledge that truth is to be found not in the letter of the law but in the Word of God, and that the richest currency is not vulgar struck metal but what is scored into men's hearts. You count real wealth by good deeds and by saved souls, by charity and by faith. The Council of Nine, through no fault of their own, do not understand how transient they are. Their world is unstable, fickle. When the government of fair Siena has fallen twice-twenty times, the poor will still seek respite at her hospital, and sinners will still pray for salvation at her church. *These* are permanent. *These* endure. I know it absolutely, and Signor Rettore is of the same mind. It is our moral obligation as Christians to act in accordance with what a perfect God has decreed, not with what imperfect and fallible men have frivolously decided. *Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.* (The bishop pauses, waiting for the other to concur, but Simone remains dispassionate.) I hear unsettling rumours.

Rumours are rarely of the reassuring kind.

I ought not to repeat them, because I do not believe them, they are too ridiculous. But you are a well-connected man and they will reach your ears sooner or later, so I really might as well tell you; apparently the Nine are planning an assault on the hospital and the cathedral. Not one of physical force, you understand – one of diktat. For Siena's hospital: a meticulous inventory of their assets and a regimen limiting their tax-free

entitlements. For Siena's cathedral: the creation of a new 'official', a secular bureaucrat who would mediate between the church and the Nine, and be ever present. Well, it is very far-fetched.

And devilish?

Must you be so glib, Maestro Simone? I do not concern myself with the little schemes Siena's government might or might not be concocting, I have no time for it. But Signor Rettore and I agree that our institutions, or rather God's, could cooperate much more. We acknowledge that we can be of unique help to one another.

There. The bishop has all but told the artist he and Rettore Giovanni di Tese Tolomei have formed an alliance. No, Simone sneers inwardly, more than an alliance; they are in cahoots. He pictures the handshake: one hand gnarled and sinewy, covered in the spots of age, clasping the other, plump and pink, the jewels on their knuckles knocking together. What Vescovo Donusdeo dei Malavolti says next confirms his suspicions.

I understand you are planning a trip to Avignon, Maestro? If you manage to have a private moment with the Pope, please convey my personal greetings to him as his humble servant, admirer and brother.

You are misinformed. I have not yet made up my mind about going to Avignon. If I make the journey, I will of course pass on your message.

I hope you will also consider putting in a good word for Santa Maria della Scala hospital. The Holy Father is able to bestow favours on the agencies performing God's works, you know.

Yes, I am aware.

I was holding a light aloft for you. Our Lady would want you to remember Siena's hospital to the Pope, I guarantee it, and I shall entreat her to speak to your better judgement.

The painter re-examines the sallow features of the bishop, and

wonders what precisely the rector of the hospital has offered him which has him so enthralled? Something more than mere strategic advantage. It has a filthy-dark quality to it, and moves Simone to change the subject. Tell me, Vescovo, when does the Opera del Duomo expect their new altarpiece?

By the feast of Saint Ansanus, on the first day of December.

That is less than two years hence, but not inconceivable.

Considerably less than two years. They want it by this coming feast of Saint Ansanus.

Simone Martini stares at Vescovo Donusdeo but does not speak. The acquisition of materials, carpentry and gold-beating alone would normally take at least a year.

If the bishop perceives a problem, his face does not betray him. He waits serenely for Simone's reply.

The artist's mind turns to the wife he will neglect if he accepts this commission, and intuitively he recalls her birthday and the gift he gave, her intake of breath when she saw it, the gratification to have chosen a present she adores . . . and his annoyance when she insisted on having her fortune told (it was her birthday, he could not refuse her whim) . . . A card was turned over for him, *La Papessa*. He says aloud, I have a condition before I agree.

A condition? The bishop crosses himself and mutters a prayer. Maestro Simone, I am not a well man. I cannot vouch for what will happen if you presume to make demands. But you may make a request, and I shall take the matter to the Opera for discussion.

I want to do an Annunciation.

He recoils. Oh, my dear Simone. Extraordinary. I am amazed. What an idea. Oh. I am struck by your audacity. Are you sure this is what you want me to tell them?

Do you not think the Opera will approve? Did they not specifically request something new?

The bishop's serenity appears to have deserted him; he succumbs to a vicious cough.

The artist does not enquire after the bishop's health, remarks instead, Funny that you should approach me now, when I am actively considering retirement from painting – did I not mention it before? – in order to spend more time with my wife. She tells me I have made my mark on the world. I take her views very seriously.

Vescovo Donusdeo puckers his dry mouth and draws his hairy eyebrows together, two caterpillars meeting on a leaf. Eventually he says, Can you do it?

Simone does not need to look at Duccio's *Maestà* any more; every inch of it is committed to memory. He nods.

The bishop throws up his hand in surrender and agitation. I do not know. I shall have to make a very thoughtful argument. Some may call it controversial, but if it were done correctly, if it conveyed Our Lady's obedience and piety . . . on balance I am cautiously optimistic that the officials of the Opera del Duomo could be – how shall we say? – *persuaded* to take a risk on a talent as unique as yours. After proper consultation and prayer, of course. An Annunciation, then! Congratulations, Maestro Simone, we are thrilled to have engaged you for this commission. There is one further detail I ought to tell you, although it is of such little consequence.

Three girls, including Laura Agnelli, kneel or crouch by baskets of almonds, shelling and grinding. It is hard, repetitive work. Imelda calls it peasant work, and moans that the land labourers should do it, not the daughters of Santa Maria della Scala. The almonds they have done are paltry in number, while the almonds left to do seem hardly to have reduced in volume. They will be at this for hours, aching and numb afterwards, sick of the sight and smell. The time would pass better were talking permitted.

The noise of the scraping makes discreet conversation difficult; nonetheless Imelda manages to mutter some of her complaints into Gisila's ear.

When I am married I shall have servants, and if they displease me I shall not flog them but make them grind mountains of almonds, then I shall feed the almonds to the pigs.

Servants and pigs? Almonds to dispense as punishment? What a daydreamer you are, Imelda.

Why should I not? Look at what they make us do. We are no better than slaves. As long as we are here, they own us body and soul. What have I to lose by indulging my dreams, when they take practically everything else?

We are the fortunate ones.

Are we? Do you think they love us as God's children? We embody our parents' sin. We are the offspring of harlots, beggars and adulterers – and they treat us as such.

What happened to Guido? I thought you liked him. He certainly fancied you. Or is a boy raised at the hospital not good enough for you any more?

I can do better than Guido. There are plenty of men outside this compound, you know. You just have to make sure you are not caught. (Laura quickens the rhythm of her labour to drown out Imelda's nattering.) Guido is immature, and his breath smells horrible. Is it too much to ask for a husband who has whiskers and a kiss which does not suffocate me? I expect at least that of a man – and that he will have a legitimate lineage and a fat inheritance coming his way.

Gisila laughs at her friend's bad temper. Then take comfort in your dreams. Think of the servants you will have one day, and how you can mistreat them, if it cheers you up. Think of your fine furs and your enormous house with a balcony, and your own mare to ride. Think of what your husband will look like, whether he will be dark or fair, whether he will be lean or broad. And

think of your father-in-law, who will be elderly and will dote on you.

I do, every day. If God loves me, he will send a rich man to save me from this hell. And when I am married, I shall definitely have a big—

Imelda stops short of naming the thing she will have, for the rector himself is visible in the passageway speaking to a gentleman neither of them recognises. The stranger is distinctly handsome, with black hair and brown eyes, dressed in a plaid kirtle and a red chaperon, with a buckle on his belt that gleams. Gisila cannot resist it and whispers, Your prayers have been answered, Imelda; here he comes now to take you to his mansion.

Imelda presses her attractive mouth to stifle the giggle, and permits herself a look of admiration at the man in conference with the rector, surely here to make a donation and so avoid paying unwanted duties. It is the rector's method to show off the charity and industry of the hospital, to emphasise the spiritual benefits of generosity to Santa Maria and to make people part with more than they initially intended. He is as skilful as a market pickpocket.

Then he does something surprising. He abandons his visitor momentarily in order to come over to the three girls (there is an increase in speed and purpose under his gaze). He clears his throat. Laura Agnelli, come with me, please.

Laura obediently wipes her hands on her apron, stands, follows.

Behind her back, the malign eyes of Imelda and Gisila meet, then separate. It is not unheard of that a man comes to the hospital and points to the young woman he wants as though selecting fish for the dinner table. Usually there is some semblance of paying court and an opportunity for the girl to refuse, followed by a wedding. *Usually*. However, Rettore Giovanni di

Tese Tolomei is fond of saying the well-being of the hospital is more important than the well-being of any one individual – many times his actions have demonstrated the sincerity of his belief.

Imelda murmurs savagely, I thought she was going into a convent.

The rector presents Laura to the visitor, who looks her up and down and answers yes, she will do. The rector continues, Laura, you are to go with this man to his master. You are to do whatever they ask of you for as long as they have a use for you. They will give you your meals when you are there. You will be submissive, patient, meek and conduct yourself as though the Blessed Virgin were standing at your side. This is a privilege and a test, and it will be a shame upon us all, not to mention a personal offence to me, if your behaviour is not immaculate. In fact, it may have serious repercussions for your future. Do you understand?

Yes, Signor Rettore.

And Laura goes with the stranger. Perhaps, she acknowledges inwardly, into danger.

They do not walk far, up and down the city slopes, through the narrow streets, the stalls and relative safety of the Campo. He does not speak. It is when they go into a house and ascend a stairway into a private room (the door locked behind her) that Laura's heart jumps and she sends silent prayers to the Virgin to protect her, and if she cannot protect her then to limit her pain and suffering as far as possible, and if she cannot do that, then to grant Laura the strength to endure whatever is to take place.

The room is sparse though large, like a tradesman's workshop or rented storeroom, with enormous windows letting in Siena's glorious sky above and commotion beneath. It is occupied by a second man, significantly older, a hunched gnome who does not acknowledge them nor interrupt his inspection of documents. Laura looks for a bed, but there is none, just