

By: Lana Elsehemi

The Clink

I shrugged, thinking that perhaps time was like a bottle—more specifically, a wine bottle. I watched Violetta for the last half hour of dinner, staring into the bottom of her glass as if searching for her future there. Instead, she found nothing but her own reflection—eyes blank, staring into a glass that seemed almost too full for the small talk at the table.



Violetta had left the village long ago, but her absence hadn't stopped her from leaving a trail of disruption. There were whispers about her mother and my father—though no one spoke them aloud anymore. I pretended not to hear, just as I pretended not to see the way she'd act like it never happened. I couldn't say I blamed her for leaving either. Life here had grown stagnant, and the only entertainment was the tedious spectacle of pig wrestling, a pastime that, after a while, ceased to hold any appeal. I, however, had stayed. Not that I hadn't thought about leaving. But what was the point? The world was far away, and I had made my peace with what little we had.

Violetta had been different. She spent her time terrorizing her father, the self-appointed mayor, or carrying out her own brand of charity work—stealing the pigs in the middle of the night, one by one, until there were barely enough left for the *Venerdì Sera PigMania* (Friday Night PigMania) that she so disdained.

I was out behind the barn, cleaning up after that night's match. I grabbed a few discarded glasses from the crowd, who'd been drinking the night away. People watched pigs wrestle, but they weren't animals themselves. Some of them had class.

“Blast,” I muttered, glancing down at the stain on the hem of my skirt.

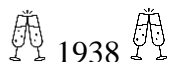
“Hard to get that out, Piccola,” Violetta said, her voice light with a laugh, as she appeared from behind the hedges, tossing me another plastic cup. “Found these. Thought you might need them.”

“Thanks,” I said, fumbling a bit as I reached to catch it.

“Mhm,” she nodded, bending down to inspect the dress with an almost clinical precision. “Tsk, this won't do.”

“For what?” I asked, tugging it away from her fingers.

“For our trip, Piccola,” she said, her eyes glittering with some unspoken plan. “What else?”



“Do come in,” the man at the door says, adjusting his coat as he ushered me inside. His bow tie seemed a bit too tight, and his starched white collar was too stiff for my liking. “May I take your coat?”

I nod and hand it to him, “Grazie.” The hall was smaller than I remembered, though grander than anything I had in my own home. Everything seemed to have shrunk—like the house, with all its rich wood paneling and heavy curtains, was becoming a relic of a time long past.

“Third hall on your left, Piccola.”

I stop in my tracks, “Pardon?”

“Third hall on your left, Signorina,” he repeated, more precisely, his tone slightly clipped.

I forced a smile, nodding in acknowledgment. I hated the name “Piccola.” It always felt dismissive, like I was nothing more than a child—small and insignificant.

As I made my way down the hall, my fingers brushed against the faint, faded marks on the doorframe—*Piccola, age 10, Violetta, age 11*. They were still there, just as we’d scratched them years ago. It was a small thing, but I felt a strange pang that Violetta had kept them there, undisturbed. It was the only thing left that belonged to our shared history.

“Well, Piccola,” Violetta’s voice broke my reverie, as she appeared behind me with that all-too-familiar smirk, “Kind of you to come.”

I straightened, turning to face her. “Of course,” I replied, though the words felt stiff, and my throat tightened. “I’m so sorry for your loss, Violetta.”

“Mm, don’t be,” she said, her voice far too light for someone who had just lost a father. “He was a brute, really. Always needed to have control—even from the grave. Meanwhile, I was left here to hold this crumbling place together.”

“Oh, so you’re taking the house?” I asked, trying to keep my tone neutral, though it came out sharp. I didn’t mean to sound bitter, but the thought of her inheriting this decaying mansion stirred something deep inside me.

“I am,” she said flatly, her eyes distant. “But I’m having it bulldozed in a week or so. The land is worth more than the house, so seems like the sanest thing to do.”

“Right,” I muttered, my voice barely a whisper, “Of course, makes sense.”

“Regardless, Piccola, what have you been up to? It’s been far too long,” she says, turning her focus elsewhere.

“Oh, not much,” I lean on the doorway behind me. “Took over the farm. PigMania’s still doing well enough for this time of year.”

Her lip curled in distaste. “You’re still part of that... grotesque sport?”

“It is my family business,” I rolled my eyes. “Not all of us can run off and pretend to be someone we’re not.”

“We’re going to be late for dinner,” she interrupted, a sudden sweetness to her voice. “Why don’t you follow me? My mother will be thrilled to see you.”

Completely dismissing our conversation, I comply.

“Oh, and by the way, Piccola,” she turns just enough for me to see her smirk, “Your hem is stained with mud from your pigs.”



“What trip?”

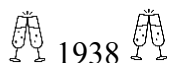
“The one I’ve been planning,” she said with a certain finality in her voice. “For our future.”

I bent to pick up the rest of the glasses, and shook my head, “What, this some more of your grand schemes? Sure, we’ll leave this town, and we’ll definitely get into a university. I’m sure the whole world’s just waiting for girls like us,” I grabbed at my skirt.

“Some men wear skirts you know,” She shrugged nonchalantly.

“Just think Piccola,” She grabbed my hands, and I dropped the glasses, “You could get out of this stupid pig business. We could see the world. Read books, meet interesting people, and become something other than extensions of our fathers.”

I brushed the hair out of my eyes, “It would be nice,” I mumbled, “Alright, so what exactly do you have in mind?”



“Piccola, darling,” Mrs. Riva purred, her skeletal hands grasping my face and planting two quick kisses on my cheeks, “It’s so good to see you, why I was just planning to stop by your little farm this weekend.”

The words hung there, but I didn’t respond.

Her eyes flicked to mine. “You’ve kept your distance,” she added softly, too casually. “Not a surprise, I suppose.”

“Don’t,” I said, my voice tight. “You don’t get to do this.”

Mrs. Riva smiled, her expression almost pitying. “You’re right, Piccola. I don’t.” She turned her attention to her daughter, “Violetta why don’t you make yourself useful and grab your friend a drink,”

Violetta lowered her eyes, muttering a quick “Yes, Mama” before slipping out the room.

“Piccola how is your father doing?” Mrs. Riva asks in a low voice, pulling me closer.

“Well thank you,” I say awkwardly, I hated talking about him with her.

“Of course. I’ll just have to stop by soon.”

She leans close to me, “I have to admit, I was planning to come by and see you regardless, to ask you something, but I don’t think I need to tell you what’s at stake.”

“I know,” I said, my voice trembling, though I wished it didn’t. I’d known this moment would come, but it still caught me off guard.

“Good. Then you’ll understand when I say this house has always been ours. The family legacy, the money. I’ve done everything to protect it.”

I nodded, feeling that knot in my chest tighten again.

“I want you to help me,” she whispered, eyes gleaming with something dark.

I turned to her, and my voice barely escaped. “Why would I do that?”

“Because you’ll be providing for you and your father, ,” she said simply. “Take Violetta’s place, and everything will be yours. The house. The future. All of it”

I stared at her, my heart hammering in my chest.

I had to say something. But the words died in my throat, The room felt smaller suddenly, like the air had thickened. And before I could gather my thoughts, Violetta returned.

She saw my hesitation and smiled coldly. “It’s never too late to choose a different path, Piccola.”

“Piccola, could you get the door?” Violette’s voice muffled from the other side of the door.

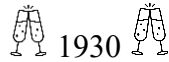
“I got it dear,” Mrs. Riva stood, opened the door and walked out. Looking back at me as if to hypnotize me into agreeing.

Violetta walks in, arms shaking from carrying the tray of coffee and biscotti.

“Help yourself,” she says, sitting herself down across from me.

“Grazie,” I say reaching for a cup, “Violetta, so tell me, what did you learn over there with the Dutch?”

Her eyes flicker, as if detecting whether or not my intentions are pure, “How about you tell me,” She leans over the table, speaking softly, “What my mother asked of you.”



“We’ll run away to the Netherlands,” Violetta said, twirling around me as if she were about to burst into song.

I laughed, “For what?”

She handed me a pretty beat up article, the headline reading: *German-born Dutch Anna Maria van Shurman, proficient in fourteen languages, becomes the first female student at Utrecht University in the Netherlands.*

She looked at me and beamed, “If she could, why can’t we?”

“Letta, you’re mad. Our fathers don’t even let us go to the next town on our own. And you think we can just leave, get into university?”

“Yes,” she said, face stone cold.

“Then you’ll have to give me more than a newspaper.”

“Piccola, I have it worked out,” she said, a slight desperation creeping into her voice. “I’ve been talking to Stefano.”

“Your butler?” I asked,

“Yes,” she said, her tone almost dismissive. “He has a cousin in trade. He’ll take us. Once we’re there, we can work for room and board.”

“Work,” I scoffed. “You’ve never even tied your own shoes, and now you want us to work?”

“Piccola, if you’re scared, that’s fine. But don’t make yourself a pig-sitter for the rest of your life.”

I was tired of her pretending that she could survive that life, I was fed up with her illusions, with her pretending that this was some grand plan. “I’m not doing this, Violetta. And neither are you.” I turned to leave.

“Oh yes I am,” She raced after me, and grabbed my arm “And so are you,”

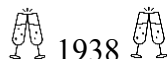
I shake her off, “No, no I’m not, and if you go, I’ll tell your mother.”

She laughed bitterly. “God Piccola, you think she’ll care? She’ll cry over it for a day, and then spend all her precious time with your dad and your stupid pigs.”

Shocked and hurt I spat, “At least she cares about someone, maybe you should be more like her.”

She let go of my arm, “Very well, do as you wish but I’ll be long gone by then, Piccola.”

And she was right.



“Nothing, Letta,” I say, forcing a smile to mask my unease. “Just catching up. I haven’t seen her in a while, you know.”

“Right, of course,” she replies. “Does it bother you? What they did?” Violetta asks, her voice low as she watched me from across the room.

I swallowed. “It’s been years, Letta. You think I care about that anymore?”

She didn’t answer, just flicked her gaze down to her glass.

I could feel the weight of the words she didn’t say. The unsaid things hung between us like the thickest of fogs. She had always been better at pretending—better at convincing herself, and me, that it didn’t matter. But it had. It always would.

She rises abruptly from her seat. “Listen, if my mother asks, tell her that nothing will stop me from erasing every inch of this house.”

Her voice was calm, but there was a razor’s edge to it, a quiet menace that sent a chill through me. She leans in closer, her breath warm against my ear. “And I mean it. Asking you was a futile attempt.”

I turned my head slightly, searching her eyes for something—anything—that resembled the girl I once knew. “Why, Letta? Why don’t you just let your mother live here? Let her spend her time in a place she knows.”

“Because I don’t want to know this place anymore,” she snaps. “Any part of me that’s him or her—I need to start fresh. This house has to go.”

My heart sank. She had always been so certain, but now... I couldn’t stop her from leaving all those years ago. How could I stop her now? No one could—not even death itself.

 A week earlier in 1930 

“Father, just listen to me!” Violetta pleaded, grabbing at her father’s sleeve, desperation in her voice.

“That’s enough,” he barked, not even bothering to look down at her. “You’ll stay here as long as I see fit.”



“Dear, listen to your father,” Mrs. Riva said, patting her daughter’s hair as if to warn her to be silent, “We are our family’s legacy, and we stay put.”

“Joanne,” Violetta’s father muttered, his words slurred as he took another swig from his scotch glass, the amber liquid glistening as it spilled onto the vintage rug, “Stop acting as though it’s your damn legacy. It belongs to Violetta, and she won’t abandon it for some foolish childhood dream.”

Mrs. Riva’s eyes darkened at the words, loosening her grip on her daughter’s hair.

Violetta’s father seized the opportunity, grabbing his daughter’s chin and yanking her away from her mother’s embrace. “You want to be something, Violetta? Be a damn Riva.”

“Being a Riva means nothing if it means losing myself,” she whispered, her voice barely audible but cutting through the thick air like an unspoken truth.

 1938 

“Hello, darlings,” Violetta’s mother glides into the room without knocking, her presence ethereal in a way that unsettled me. “Violetta, your cousin Vito came by to share his condolences and left a bottle of wine.” She gestured to the bottle in her hand, her fingers delicate as porcelain. “I thought we could share it—toast to your father. What do you say?”

Violetta remains silent, her expression unreadable.

“That sounds great,” I say quickly, feeling the tension coil in the air. “Why don’t Violetta and I check the kitchen for a corkscrew?”

Once we reach the kitchen, Letta halts, her gaze fixed on the markings I admired earlier. “You truly were a part of me, Piccola,” she murmurs, eyes distant. “I wish you had come with me that night. You have no idea how incredible life can be.”

“Where did you go, Violetta?” I ask, curiosity and regret mixing in my chest.

“Everywhere,” she answers softly, her gaze dropping to my heels “I spent months in Amsterdam, cleaning for room and board. That’s where I met Rio. We traveled across Europe, learning languages, meeting people. We lived, Piccola. And I wish you could understand that.”

“Sometimes I wish I had gone too,” I admit, the longing palpable. “But I’m comfortable here. I can’t ask for more.”

“Why not?” she questions earnestly. “Why don’t you come back with me? I’m going to Amsterdam again for some work. We could do it together.”

“I’ll think about it,” I assure her, meaning it more than I want to.

“Did you girls open the bottle?” Mrs. Riva calls from across the hall.

“Yes, ma’am,” I shout back, and we head into the dining room.

Letta sits beside her mother, with me across from them.

“A toast,” Mrs. Riva proclaims, raising her glass. “To my husband—the life he led and his legacy, even in death.” She turns to her daughter. “May he always live through the closest thing to him: his daughter.”

Letta scoffs, her eyes darkening. She clinks her glass against her mother’s, then swallowed her drink in one go.

“Not very ladylike, Violetta,” her mother reprimands. “Apologize.”

“To who?” Letta snaps, a bitter edge to her voice as she pours herself more wine. “Piccola? Sorry you have to be here for this, Piccola, but I hope he’s rotting in hell.” She lifts her glass, the remnants of wine swirling ominously.

Mrs. Riva says nothing, her gaze locked on Violetta, calculating.

“Mama,” Letta murmurs, her arm resting heavily on the table, “I don’t feel well.”

“Ah, Piccola,” Mrs. Riva commands, her tone shifting. “Do you mind fetching Stefano from the gates? And take this.” She places a small pouch on the table, her eyes narrowing. “Give this to him on your way out.”

I nod, my pulse quickening. There was no time to hesitate. I almost forgot the pouch in my rush, but panic gripped me, and I went back to retrieve it.

I didn’t see it coming—didn’t see what was about to unfold.

“If you’re not careful, you’ll suffer the same fate as your pathetic father,” Mrs. Riva snarls, her grip tightening around Violetta’s hair, “Should’ve stayed with the Dutch.”

In that moment, her neck failed her, landing forehead first on the table before her. Blood splatters staining Violetta's sleeve with the aftermath of betrayal. Violetta now sporting a crimson canvas, the truth of her mother's intentions spilling forth.

I freeze, unable to comprehend the horror unfurling before me. I hesitated; I shouldn't have.

"Oh Piccola dear," Mrs. Riva says, attempting to cradle her daughter's head, "She just had a bit too much to drink. Hit her head, but she'll be fine. Stefano will stitch her right up don't you worry," she laughs in a panic.

"She'll be fine," Stefano says, with a truthful gaze, "Truly."

As Stefano tended to Violetta, his hands steady but grim, I stood frozen, the pouch still clutched in my trembling hand. The smell of wine and blood mingled in the air, sickly sweet, as Mrs. Riva straightened herself, a shaky smile plastered across her face.

"She'll be fine, Piccola," Mrs. Riva repeated, her voice dripping with a mix of dismissal and something darker. "But really, it's best if you go now. We'll handle this."

My feet felt rooted to the ground, but I couldn't ignore the way Violetta's eyes flitted to mine, a quiet plea hidden behind her exhaustion. I hesitated, wanting to stay, wanting to ask why she had come back at all. But her mother's hand was already waving me off, and Stefano's sharp gaze warned me not to intervene.

So, as Violetta had done all those years ago, I left.

I lingered just outside the gate, the pouch burning in my hand. The air felt heavier than it should, as though the world itself was holding its breath. When the door finally creaked open behind me, I turned, expecting Stefano.

It was Violetta.

Her sleeve was rolled up, exposing a bruise that marked her with her mother's actions like a declaration.

"I'm done," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "This house, this family—it's all poison. I should have stayed gone."

"Letta..." I began, but she shook her head.

"I'm leaving, Piccola. For good this time. No letters, no visits. You'll be fine without me."

"But what about—"

She cut me off, her gaze softening for a moment. “You don’t owe me anything. Just... don’t let them drag you under.”

Without waiting for my reply, she turned and walked down the path, her footsteps echoing against the stone. I stood there, watching her silhouette fade into the darkness, clutching the pouch as though it held answers I’d never understand.

And just like that, Violetta was gone. She left behind the burdens she came to abandon—her past, and the fragments of a friendship neither of us knew how to mend.