



A NOVEL BASED ON THE LIFE OF
MARIA MONTESSORI

“A well-written book relates the compelling and inspiring story of Maria Montessori.”

— *Kirkus Reviews*

THE SOUL OF A CHILD

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Chapter One

THE SOUL OF A PARENT

Maria Montessori lay with her head in her mother's lap. It was the end of August 1874, and Maria and her mother had spent the morning walking the hills of Chiaravalle looking for juniper berries. They had stopped to read from Antonio Stoppani's book *The Beautiful Country*.

Stoppani was Maria's great-uncle. Although Maria had yet to meet him, she felt she knew him from the stories her mother told.

"Your great-uncle is a philosopher priest, my darling," Renilde Stoppani Montessori was saying as she played with her daughter's dark curls. "His head is in the clouds, and he thinks about eternity. Yet his feet are on the ground, and he writes about nature. He writes about our country, so alive with natural beauty we all take for granted. His eyes are like yours, bright with curiosity. Someday you will meet him, and you will see. Tomorrow you will be four years old. He sent you this book for your birthday."

Both mother and daughter were tired after their long hike. They had walked to the top of the highest hill in Chiaravalle in Italy's province of Ancona. Renilde carried a basket covered with a red checkered cloth. In the basket were a bottle of water, a round of Parma cheese, three empty jam jars, bread she had baked that morning, and Stoppani's book. They passed a farmer who gave them a bunch of purple grapes from his vineyard. Afterward he watched them walk up the hill that overlooked the sea. He saw the thick book sticking out of the basket. Leaning on his shovel, he wondered why anyone would bring a book on a picnic.

Renilde had covered the ground with the cloth. She opened the book to read. "Don't fall asleep, my dear," she told Maria. "You may rest, but not sleep. Eternity will allow us plenty of time to sleep. I'll read to you from your uncle's book while you rest."

She began, "The beauty of the country of Italy cannot be underestimated . . ."

As Maria took in the words, she looked out over the Ancona harbor. She saw old women dressed in black walking near the ancient fountain in the plaza. From Maria's perspective, they looked like ants. She saw ships bobbing in the harbor. She imagined smartly dressed ships' captains supervising the loading and unloading of carts filled with dried tobacco leaves and goatskins.

Maria's father, Alessandro Montessori, was in charge of tobacco sales for the government. He was a proud civil servant. Maria and her father often took long inspection walks in the tobacco fields that spread out for miles around Chiaravalle.

Now her eyes focused on the three jam jars that sat on ground in front of her. Inside them were the real objects of the mother-and-daughter hike. Renilde and Maria had found three

chrysalises and put them in the jars with juniper berries, twigs, and leaves.

The night before, at dinner, Maria had asked her mother, “What is a chrysalis?”

“A chrysalis is a shell a caterpillar makes around himself. He creates this shell as a way to protect himself while he grows the eyes, legs, and antennae he needs to become a butterfly. He does this by eating a protein soup—”

“Please!” Alessandro interrupted. “Let me eat my soup in peace! What kind of dinner discussion is this for a four-year-old girl?”

“Alessandro, our daughter asked me a question. I am merely answering it.”

“I would like to change the subject to something more pleasant,” he replied sternly.

“But Papà, we are going for a hike tomorrow to find caterpillars!” Maria protested.

“I said enough. We won’t discuss whether hunting for caterpillars is a suitable activity for a little girl.” Alessandro looked pointedly at his wife. Maria turned to her mother, who put a finger to her lips.

Renilde began to eat her soup. Maria did the same. Later, as Renilde and Maria said their goodnight prayers, Renilde told her daughter, “All things alive, including the caterpillar, must be protected so they can grow. When they are protected, each part of the caterpillar can find its potential.”

“What is *potential*, Mamma?” asked Maria, leaning her head on her mother’s shoulder.

“The best that we can be. Good night. May the Lord bless

you and keep you safe. May the Lord look after all children, especially those who are poor and in harm's way."

On the hilltop, in the warmth of the afternoon, Maria considered the word "potential" and stared at the three jam jars. As she rested on her mother's lap, she wondered what her father would make of the caterpillars. Suddenly she saw a tiny movement, a cracking of the chrysalis. The sun touched the horizon of the Adriatic Sea. Her mother closed the book and began gathering the jars and their picnic. It was time to walk down the hill to their stone house in Chiaravalle.

Alessandro would be home in an hour. He would be hungry and ready for an early dinner. Tonight was the monthly meeting of his military colleagues. They had all fought with Garibaldi to free Italy from Austrian control. The gathering included officers and enlisted men. As Alessandro often told his wife and daughter, "We all fought equally for the glory of Italy. Loyalty has no rank."

There were fifteen of the veterans, and they all lived in or near Ancona. The Montessori house was the most convenient place to meet. And Alessandro had been their commander.

"What exactly is the purpose of these meetings?" Renilde had asked more than once. She didn't look forward to the muddy boots and cigar smoke. "Besides loud stories, drinking, and card playing?"

"These men are my family, my brothers in arms," Alessandro always protested, "You owe them eternal gratitude. They unified our great country. I am honored to have them in my house and you should be, too. We meet to remember, to commemorate, to never forget the sacrifice, to always be prepared."

“I think you meet to tell old war stories and drink wine,” said Renilde, chuckling.

“We are soldiers,” answered Alessandro, shrugging. “That is what we do.”

Maria and Renilde arrived home as darkness fell. They immediately went to work. Maria didn't need to be asked. Her mother had taught her to be of assistance. The Montessoris had no household help; Renilde didn't believe in it. “Why should we pay someone to do what we can do ourselves?” she said.

Maria pulled a stool to the cupboard and brought down plates and bowls. She placed them on the table. Renilde lit the stove. Maria carried a pot of ribollita, a soup made of white beans and pancetta, to the stove. Soon it was simmering and filling the house with the smell of basil and thyme. Meanwhile, Renilde laid out her husband's red shirt on a chair. He wore it to all the meetings in honor of Giuseppe Garibaldi, the great Italian general and a father of the fatherland.

Alessandro burst into the room excitedly, as he always did on meeting nights. He picked up his daughter, who was waiting for him by the door. “And what the devil are these?” he said as he sat down at the table. He pointed to the jam jars. “Don't tell me we are having leaves and worms for dinner.”

“No, Papà,” said Maria. “They are caterpillars. And they will soon be beautiful butterflies!”

“Please put them away from the dinner table and let us say our prayers and eat. My men will be here soon.”

Maria carefully carried the jars to the butcher block next to the sink. The Montessori family said grace and ate quickly. After dinner, once the table was cleared and the dishes were

put away, Maria and Renilde went upstairs to a small bedroom, where they sat knitting. They did this every evening. They gave what they made to the poor.

Soon the small house was filled with the sound of boisterous voices and the smell of tobacco. The slap of cards on the table and the pop of corks being pulled from bottles signaled it was time for Maria to go to bed. Renilde opened the door of the room where they had been knitting. Voices wafted up.

Alessandro had taught the men the card game Trappola. Having quickly dispatched the minutes of the meeting, the men got down to the game. Maria sneaked downstairs and stood behind her father, glancing at his hand.

“Say aces, Papà. Aces!” she said excitedly at one point. Absorbed in their hands, the men had not noticed her presence. Her father winked at his friends, as if to say he was indulging his little girl. He followed her whispered advice for a few hands. It was always right.

“That little mite can’t really understand the game, can she?” asked Roberto, one of the former enlisted men.

“She seems to be beating the hell out of you!” said Emilio, taking a swig from a silver flask.

Roberto bristled. “Alessandro, it’s time for prayers and the sandman for your little card shark.”

Maria reluctantly began walking up the stairs. Then she turned around. “Papà has already won,” she said in a clear, steady voice. “He has accumulated three hundred points. Count them yourself.” The astounded players did just that. Maria was absolutely correct. She sat on the top step, watching as they played and listening to their war stories.

Roberto was saying, “‘As Hunters of the Alps,’ I said to this Austrian priss, ‘Catafalmi is ours!’ I heard Garibaldi himself say,

‘Here we either make Italy or we die!’” Roberto made a sweeping gesture, as if he were wielding a saber. The jam jars that held the caterpillars fell to the floor and shattered. Stepping back in inebriated confusion, Roberto smashed two of the chrysalises under the heel of his boot.

Maria raced down the stairs. She stood in front of Roberto, glaring up at him, a tiny creature in a white nightgown facing down a giant in a red Garibaldi shirt. “You’ve killed my caterpillars. You’ve smashed them. You’ve broken their homes.”

The drunken ex-soldiers were shocked into silence. Then Roberto said sheepishly, “Little Maria, what’s the fuss?”

Maria looked at him coldly. “You have murdered my caterpillars.”

Alessandro called upstairs sharply, “Renilde! Where are you? Get this child to bed, for God’s sake.” He glared at Maria. “Apologize immediately. No child talks to an adult that way in my house.”

“It’s late,” said Roberto. “We should all be getting home.” It was not late, and the card-playing and camaraderie usually went on for many more hours. But the joviality had left the room. The men bid a hasty goodnight.

Maria went to her room and lay on her bed. She could hear the sound of glass being swept up. Her window was open, and as Roberto left the house, she heard him say, “We stood up to Garibaldi. But I wouldn’t want to face that little mite on the battlefield.” As the crunching of their boots faded away, Maria heard voices in the kitchen below.

“She should be playing with dolls, not collecting worms,” said Alessandro. “You are spoiling her.”

“They are caterpillars, not worms,” Renilde answered, speaking calmly. “It isn’t spoiling to encourage her mind, her curiosity,

her intellect. Alessandro, she is reading at the age of four. She understands what she reads. She is already doing complicated math. You saw her at the card table tonight.”

“It doesn’t give her the right to be disrespectful to adults. I won’t have it!”

Maria climbed out of bed and walked down the stairs to the kitchen. Her parents were face-to-face in a tense standoff. Maria dragged a chair between them, climbed onto it, and took her mother’s hand. She placed it in the palm of her father’s hand and closed his fingers around it. Maria’s dark eyes met the eyes of her parents. There was a long moment of silence. Alessandro smiled in spite of himself. He took a long look at his daughter and said, “We’ll never get up for Mass tomorrow if we don’t all get to bed.”

The quarrel was over.

Mother and daughter took special care to dress beautifully for Sunday Mass the next day. It was Maria’s fourth birthday. They knew Alessandro took pride in the appearance of his family. It was important to him to present a picture of rectitude and propriety. Renilde brushed her daughter’s dark curls into a mass at the nape of her neck. She tied them with a yellow grosgrain ribbon.

Maria and Renilde wore matching white crinoline dresses. Alessandro was dressed in his military summer whites. As they walked the six blocks to the service, their neighbors commented on what a handsome trio the Montessori family made.

After the Sunday service, Alessandro proposed a surprise trip to Loreto, a small town by the sea that had a famous chapel. Perhaps it was a way to make up to his wife and daughter for the night before. Or maybe it was a birthday treat for Maria. Either

way, they happily agreed. They boarded the train in the small brick station at Chiaravalle.

As the train sped around the bay, Alessandro told Maria the story of the Greeks who brought purple dye to Ancona. Then Renilde told the story of how angels, fearing for the safety of the Virgin Mary's home in Nazareth, had flown the sacred house to the safety of Loreto. Around it, a beautiful basilica had grown.

"Actually, it was brought by boat to save it from marauding Saracens," said Alessandro as the train sped by the sparkling Adriatic.

"Why must you always contradict me?" asked Renilde.

"In any case, it is a holy site. It was saved. And we will see it!" said Maria, already familiar with the ways to smooth over family quarrels. Her heart was pounding with excitement. She didn't want anything to ruin the day.

"It is where redemption began," said Renilde. "It is one of the most important and sacred places possible. It is where Mary came to know she would be the mother of our Savior. It is the true heart of Christianity—the house where Mary was educated, where she received the Annunciation, where the angel Gabriel appeared."

The train chugged up the final hill to Loreto. As the town came into sight, the Montessoris sighed with pleasure. They could see the top of the Basilica della Santa Casa. It was surrounded by green rolling hills.

A hush fell over the family as they made their way toward the white marble outer walls. Inside, in a low voice, Renilde pointed out the cupola, the treasury room, and the angels painted on the ceiling.

As they stood before the small three-sided room inside the basilica that had been Mary's home, tears came to Maria's eyes.

A painting of the Virgin Mary holding her child, the baby Jesus, was full of such tenderness it seemed to Maria to be the essence of love. “Mamma, see how she is holding her child,” she said to Renilde. “From protection, love can grow.”

The family was quiet as they made their way back to the train station at Loreto. The trip to the shrine of the Holy House had felt like a benediction. “Mary said yes to God there,” Renilde reminded them. “And we must ask ourselves, what do we say yes to? What is our purpose in life, the reason we were put here, the mission God has given us?”

The sun had almost set as the train made its way into the harbor below Chiaravalle. Alessandro cleared his throat and said, “This is as good a time as any to tell you that I have been transferred to Florence. The department of finance has determined that is where I can best serve. Maria can begin her schooling in a more sophisticated atmosphere than the school at Chiaravalle.”

Renilde didn’t speak. She leaned her head against the horsehair seat of the train. She stared at the last rays of the sun across the water in the harbor. She held her daughter’s hand and decided the move would be good for Maria.

That night, as Maria and Renilde knelt to say their prayers, Maria felt something cold against her knee. She lifted the bed skirt and saw a jam jar. Inside, a contented caterpillar was clinging to a stick.

“I found him in the garden this morning,” said Renilde.

“Can I take him to Florence?” Maria asked. “So he can grow into a butterfly?”

Renilde nodded. “With enough love and protection, all creatures can find their potential.”



A month later, the Montessoris moved to Florence. The beauty of the city appealed to Renilde and four-year-old Maria. The soaring architecture beckoned them to long walks through the winding streets, crossing the Arno on the Ponte Vecchio.

The streets of Florence, while filled with prosperous business people and political leaders, also teemed with the less prosperous and the forgotten. There were no beggars in Chiaravalle, and Maria had never before been confronted with the plight of the poor.

Mother and daughter walked all over Florence, from Piazzale Michelangelo to the Basilica of Santa Croce. Each day, they encountered the open-air museum of some of humankind's greatest architectural and artistic accomplishments. They also saw, in the faces of the destitute, some of the lowliest and most needy. Renilde did not shield her daughter from these sights. The children in particular tugged at Maria's heart.

As their first days in Florence sped by, Maria kept close watch on her caterpillar. It began to shed its cocoon. As the skin around the caterpillar became more translucent, Renilde and Maria could see the orange-and-brown wing markings of a butterfly.

One morning, Renilde announced, "Today we will make our first visit to the Santa Maria del Fiore. We will climb Giotto's bell tower and release our butterfly." It was a hot day at the end of September. Alessandro wanted to stay home but was talked into the excursion by his wife and daughter.

They had seen the outside of the Florence cathedral, but nothing prepared them for the beauty of the interior. Maria carefully held her jar while they climbed the 414 steps of the campanile. Renilde and Alessandro stopped frequently on the

claustrophobic stairwell to wipe their faces. Maria kept a slow and steady pace.

They were rewarded at the top with a stunning view of Florence. They could see the massive dome designed and built by Brunelleschi. They could see the red-tiled roofs stretching out over the city, and the mountains beyond.

As her parents caught their breath, Maria looked at her jar. A butterfly had emerged. Its wings were beginning to move. She removed the lid and held up the jar. Seeing the beautiful creature climb to the lip of the jar, she whispered, "All things, when protected, can reach their potential."

The butterfly moved its wings slowly in place. Its wings began to flutter. It hovered briefly in mid-air just above Maria's head. Then it flew into the blue sky above Florence.

Five months later, Alessandro strode into the vestibule of their second-story Florentine apartment. He was beaming. It was late February 1875. The chill of early evening was lessened by the smell of ciambotta, a vegetable stew that Maria had prepared all by herself.

Maria ran to him to show him a small book she had finished. "It shows how to make five different meals, with measurements and pictures I drew myself!" It was bound with thin ribbons.

"What will you do when you start school?" her father asked with a laugh. "You will be teaching the teachers! I am sorry I am late. But I stopped off at the Café Gilli to celebrate."

"Celebrate what?" asked Renilde.

"I have been promoted again," he said proudly. "I still think you will be teaching the teachers, little Miss Maria. But you will be doing it in Rome. That is where we will move in the summer."

Chapter Two

THE SOUL OF CHILDHOOD

When the Montessoris arrived in Rome in August 1875, the city was in the midst of Risorgimento fever. The unification of Italy was nowhere more visible. Rome had always been a center of learning, culture, and power. It was now the capital of a newly unified country. Victor Emmanuel II was king, and Italy was poised for rebirth.

The growth of Rome attracted a massive cadre of workers to build new housing. Liberal reforms were undertaken, and Alessandro Montessori was the beneficiary of an expanding government bureaucracy. Rome was determined to bring Italy into the modern age.

Not all reforms were equal, however. Education lagged behind. Primary and elementary education were left to the quirks of individual communes. Teachers were poorly paid. Schoolrooms were dirty. Administrators were fired or changed at the whim of local politicians. Schools had few curriculum standards and no unified philosophy of education.

Urban schools and their students fared better than rural. The school systems in Northern Italy were, for the most part, more progressive than those in the south. But in general, all schools in Italy at the time were woefully inadequate. The illiteracy rate, especially among Southern Italians, was staggering. The vast majority of children did not attend school after third grade.

Almost all public elementary schools followed the John Lockean principle that the mind of a child is an empty vessel into which adults must pour reason and knowledge. John Locke was a seventeenth-century English philosopher whose ideas about education had a profound effect on Western European thinking. His notion of the child's mind as a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate, provided a guiding principle for educational methodologies: if the young child's mind was a blank slate, the teacher's job was to fill it.

Maria Montessori was six years old when she began her education at the public school on the Via di San Nicola da Tolentino. Located in a middle-class section of Rome, it was better than most.

The outside of the building was gray stone. Inside were two floors with brown walls, worn terra-cotta floors, and rooms in which writing tables were attached to wooden benches. There were few books and no pictures or paintings. A large blackboard stood at the front of every classroom. A glowering teacher stood before the blackboard. This was the dismal setting where Maria and thirty-nine other six-year-olds found themselves.

Some children had hornbooks. A hornbook looked like a wooden paddle and was covered with a thin sheet of transparent mica. The alphabet was painted on the paddle. The vowels and

consonants were written on the first sheet of mica. The Trinitarian formula, "The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost," was also written on the sheet, along with the Lord's Prayer and Roman numerals.

The children sat quietly. Their hornbooks dangled by strings from their chairs. Not all the children had hornbooks, so those who did shared with their classmates. The morning was long. The teacher, a wizened woman with skin like a dried apple, droned on and on about the first three letters of the alphabet. The students were called to the board one by one to repeat and write the letter A.

It was boring. Maria thought about her Uncle Stoppani's book. She copied the letter when it was her turn, but did so with a lackluster energy, like the other children. Whatever excitement they brought to the first day drained away.

At twelve o'clock, the children were let out into a small, crowded courtyard with their lunch pails. There were no swing sets, balls, or baskets. There was nowhere to sit. The small square of stone baked under the noonday sun. A hazelnut tree provided the only shade. The ground was covered with dropped hazelnuts.

The children clustered under the shade of the hazelnut tree. They sat listlessly after finishing their lunches of buttered bread and pancetta.

Maria had an idea. "Let's play Fazzoletto Peo Peo using hazelnuts!"

Rafaella, a small blond girl with long braids, yawned and said, "How do you play it?"

"We all sit in a circle, and one person who is It walks around the circle and drops a hazelnut behind someone. That person jumps up, runs in the opposite direction, and the winner is whoever gets back to the empty space first."

The children, except for Rafaella, jumped up to make a

circle, chattering with excitement. They listened with attention to Maria's quiet but assured directions, and the game began. Squeals of laughter filled the yard as the children cheered, ran, and clapped.

Rafaella stood aside, watching. She was jealous of the success of Maria's suggestion. After a few rounds, she stepped into the circle and said, "Let's drop lots of hazelnuts so lots of children are running in different directions all at once."

Maria went to stand beside Rafaella. "That idea is neither safe nor logical," she said. "Someone will get hurt."

None of the children knew what the word logical meant. But they were persuaded by Maria's calm and authoritative manner. They ignored Rafaella. She stamped her foot in anger and walked back into the schoolroom.

From that moment on, Rafaella was Maria's challenger and competitor. Maria mostly ignored her. She had no interest in competition for competition's sake.

Near the end of Maria's fifth year in school, the teacher announced contests in spelling and mathematics. There would be prizes for the best students. She encouraged the students to sign up.

Rafaella's name was first on the list. Maria didn't bother signing up. She did well enough in school. But her true joy came at the end of the day, when she was released to the loving arms of her mother.

Maria rarely mentioned the events of the day at school. They were too boring. Instead, she spoke about the things she and Renilde saw on their walk home: the flowers and trees, the mass of Roman humanity they passed along the way.

Maria noticed every detail. One neighborhood girl had

a physical deformity. She was a hunchback. She didn't attend school. Maria spoke with her often and befriended her.

When the contests took place, Raffaella won the blue ribbons. Her parents, who were friends of the Montessori family, bragged about their daughter's prowess. Alessandro was livid and later complained to his wife.

"Maria was reading at the age of four! She could add, divide, and do complicated math! I know that for a fact. I made a killing at card games because of her. Why did she not compete? Why is she spending her time with hunchbacks? Why isn't she doing normal things?"

"I don't know, Alessandro!" Renilde Montessori said. "Perhaps you should ask her yourself."

From her bedroom on the second floor of their apartment, Maria could hear her parents argue. She walked slowly down the marble stairs, worn by generations of occupants. She came to the bottom step and faced her father.

"Papà, competing for a ribbon has nothing to do with learning. I love learning. But ribbons don't matter to me because I teach myself. Regina, the girl with the hunchback, has taught me so much. She has a bright mind. I am learning about her by seeing how she learns."

Renilde looked down, avoiding her husband's eyes. He was a proud man. Maria understand this as well. She looked down at the floor. They waited. Finally, Alessandro sighed.

"As a soldier who risked his own life, and those of his men, to unify this country, I know it is not enough to fight," he said sternly. "One must win! Not for self-glory, but for the greater glory of our country. Never forget, in all that you do, you are representing the proud Italian empire. It is not enough to learn. You must lead! Accept challenge. Go right to the heart of it.

Don't ever back down or back away. Do you understand what I am saying? Never forget this."

Maria put her small hand into her father's large, battle-scarred hand.

"I will never forget, Papà," she said, meeting his eyes, "I will be a leader. For the glory of Italy."

Maria did what she could to keep her promise to her father. During her elementary years, she was an outspoken and undisputed leader, in particular on the playground. She was never shy about voicing her opinions, popular or not.

Some of her peers called her bossy. Maria often smiled at this, saying, "In my opinion, you aren't even born yet." Whether or not they agreed with her, the other students listened to her. Maria's determination and authority blossomed.

When she was ten years old, Maria contracted a serious case of pneumonia. Renilde sat by her daughter's side day and night. After nearly a week of high fever, Maria opened her eyes and said, "Don't worry, Mamma. I won't die. I have too many important things to do."

As Maria approached womanhood, Renilde marveled at her daughter's self-possession. She encouraged it. Her father was less enamored of his daughter's forthrightness, but he took great pride in her beauty and intelligence.

In late May 1882, nearly twelve-year-old Maria was walking down the steps of her elementary school when she saw Renilde running toward her. Her mother was waving a piece of paper. She looked breathless and excited. She enveloped her daughter in a strong hug. "Uncle Stoppani is coming here to Rome! He will stay with us!"

During the next week, the entire Montessori family prepared for the visit. Antonio Stoppani, priest, geologist, paleontologist, scholar, and author, was coming to Rome to see his niece and grand-niece, as well as to visit the Vatican and the Pope.

Maria and Renilde cooked and cleaned. They made the family specialties: brasato, a stew of beef marinated in wine; potato gnocchi; and the sweet corn tarts, cobeletti. They reread several of Stoppani's books and displayed them prominently on the mahogany table in the front hall.

Finally the day came. Alessandro, Renilde, and Maria made their way to the train station. The train arrived with a puff of steam, and Antonio Stoppani alighted. He stood out immediately in his brown wool cape. He embraced Renilde warmly. He knelt down to Maria and looked into her eyes. He smelled of lemon verbena.

Maria was enchanted. It was as though no one existed but the two of them.

"I have read every one of the letters you have sent me over the years, my dear," Stoppani said. "You have a keen mind. I cannot wait to talk with you about volcanic eruptions, the history of Rome, and the dawn of a new age. We are on the verge of a great leap for humanity. We will rely on brilliant young minds like yours. You are the hope of the future."

Maria's eyes shone. No one but her mother ever spoke to her like this, like an equal.

On the way to the apartment, Maria and Stoppani sat in the back of the carriage, deep in conversation. Alessandro and Renilde sat in front.

Alessandro whispered to his wife, "This can't continue. The child is already taking up too much of his time. It is unseemly."

Renilde smiled and said nothing. She knew Stoppani would do just as he pleased.

The week was jolly, full of animated discussions on many topics: nature, religion, philosophy. Maria participated in all the conversations. Because Stoppani treated her as an equal, it would have been rude for Alessandro to correct her. She spoke freely during their dinners, a behavior Alessandro would never allow under normal circumstances. Stoppani encouraged her with playful and sometimes pointed conjectures.

One evening, while they were discussing the Risorgimento, Stoppani voiced his opposition to some of its nationalistic aspects. "While I wholeheartedly support it, I feel we have much to learn from other countries. I fear becoming too myopic."

Maria said, "I have been thinking that too much national pride can mean we don't listen to other countries, from the lessons they have learned. Isn't it better to have a more worldly perspective?"

Alessandro, a dedicated civil servant and proud Italian who had fought for unity, had enough. It was to him unthinkable for anyone to call into question the notion of nationalism, whether it was an esteemed relative or his own daughter.

"I won't hear that in my house. Maria," he said sternly. "It is time for you to go to bed. I, too, am retiring. Goodnight, Father Antonio."

Perhaps it was a salve for the previous evening. Or perhaps he had planned it all along. But the next day, Stoppani took Maria to the Vatican.

She had seen it before, but always from the back of a large holiday crowd. This time, with her uncle, she passed along corridors that grew smaller and more intimate as they walked.

She held her breath as a phalanx of priests, all of whom seemed to know Stoppani, opened a small white door.

The red carpet glowed in the midday sun. Light poured through a stained-glass window and fell across the face of Pope Leo XIII. Maria kissed his hand and looked into his eyes.

“This young woman is going to do great things,” said her proud uncle.

“What is your name, my child?” the Pope asked.

“My name is Maria,” she answered.

“Ahhh. There is no name more sacred. Children are our hope, the future, and the greatest of God’s blessings. You must be protected until you can know God’s purpose for you. That is the greatest part of life: to know our purpose and to fulfill it. Let no one deter you. May God show you mercy all your days, and may His spirit of peace shine through you.”

He put his hand on Maria’s head, blessing her. Once more, she looked into his eyes. They were like two warm brown pools reflecting soft light.

Maria floated on air as they left the Vatican. She was, for once, speechless as they rode home. They passed elegant Romans making their way on the Via della Conciliazione. They passed through the San Lorenzo district, where Maria saw thin, dirty children begging on the streets. Several picked through the garbage outside a shop until the owner shooed them away.

Maria marveled that the same day could encompass a meeting with the Pope and the sight of the city’s most desperate and destitute. She saw there was immense suffering in the world. She turned to Stoppani and said, “I want to go to engineering school. I want to be an engineer. I want to help build a better world, houses for the poor. I want to physically make things that

can help people who need them. I want to continue my education in *liceo*. Not many women go. Papà won't like it."

"No, my child, he won't," Stoppani agreed. "But if you believe this is your purpose in life, you must find a way."

Stoppani left the next day. On the way out, he held Maria for a long time and said, "I have every faith in you, my child." Acknowledging the difficulties that lay ahead, he conveyed his belief in her ability to overcome them.

Alessandro returned to his old self. Once again, he was head of his household, after sharing that role with another male, and a religious one at that, for an entire week.

It was the end of May and the end of Maria's last year in elementary school. She knew that most young women her age went on to convent schools to study music, poetry, and perhaps a language, and to prepare to become good wives, solid citizens, and mothers to a new generation of proud Italians. Some young women studied to become teachers. Maria had no interest in this. She was determined to go to engineering school, and there was no better time to tell her father.

Her mother had made zuppa di porcini, Alessandro's favorite, and they were finishing a pleasant meal. Maria announced, "Papà, I would like to enter the Regia Scuola Tecnica Michelangelo Buonarroti in the fall. My plan is to study engineering."

Alessandro wiped his mouth carefully and folded his napkin. He stared calmly at his wife and daughter. They shared the same luminous skin, the same determined chins, the same intense dark eyes. He glanced around the dining room and took in the calm, agreeable atmosphere. He thought with appreciation of the fact that his wife and daughter kept the house themselves, refusing help they could have easily afforded. There was a precision and

equanimity to their lives that gave him, a military man, great comfort.

He cleared his throat and said, “During the Battle of the Volturmo, the great Garibaldi, speaking to us, the troops that would have walked through fire for him, said that the greatest warriors choose their battles. This is a battle I am not going to fight. But I want you to know the greatest victory, for me as a father, will be to see you married with a home and many children, raising them to love God and the greatest country of all, Italy.”

A darker tone came into his voice. “I know this idea comes from your Uncle Stoppani. I know that you have interpreted what the Pope said to mean that you can do whatever you like. I assure you, that is not what he meant.”

Both Renilde and Maria remained quiet. Maria, too, knew how to pick her battles. Her father had given her permission to attend high school and continue her education. She understood this was against his wishes. She also felt that her mission in life, the one Pope Leo XIII had spoken of, would be much different than the one her father had suggested. But for the moment, she simply said, “Thank you, Papà.”

On a sunny autumn day in October 1883, Maria Montessori began her education at the Regia Scuola Tecnica Michelangelo Buonarroti in Rome. Compared to her previous school, it was much larger, three four-story buildings flanking a courtyard with a fountain. It was also mostly male.

Her subjects of study for the next seven years would be Latin, Greek, mathematics, and science. This curriculum was

set in stone and monitored by a centralized minister of education. The methodologies for imparting knowledge were all too familiar. Teachers lectured students, believing they were filling empty minds. Students memorized and repeated formulas and passages.

The school day went from eight o'clock in the morning until noon, and again from two o'clock until five. There was no physical activity whatsoever.

Maria managed to survive and thrive. She worked hard to excel at school. She used her free time to explore in depth the subjects she enjoyed. Before long, her parents allowed her to walk to and from school by herself.

The teeming city filled her senses. The area surrounding her school was being built up. Laborers from Southern Italy laid stone foundations and raised huge blocks to rooftops with pulleys. Beggars and their children, gaunt and thin, wandered the streets. Wealthy Roman women stepped from carriages as servants carried their belongings. Nothing escaped Maria's notice. Every detail was seared into her mind. She wondered why the world was so full of inequity.

On most days, when she returned home from school, her mother greeted her with a fresh semolina cake and a pot of tea. They discussed what Maria had studied during the day. Renilde teased out the most compelling aspects of a subject and often produced books from her own library that enhanced and deepened her daughter's interest. She asked Maria endless questions. They learned and laughed together.

Maria wanted to know more about the human body and how physical surroundings affect its growth. Renilde responded with encouragement. Alessandro grew accustomed to arriving home and seeing his wife and daughter huddled over anatomy charts

spread across the table. Sometimes they became so absorbed that Renilde neglected to start dinner.

Maria did well in the first three years of technical school, earning 137 out of a possible 150 on the final exam, given in May 1886. She continued on to the Regio Istituto Tecnico Leonardo da Vinci, where she took Italian literature, history, geography, mathematics, and calligraphy.

Since girls were not allowed to mix with boys outside the classroom, Maria spent free periods alone in a separate room. She used this time to pursue her own interests. Increasingly, her focus turned to natural science and anatomy. By the time she graduated in May 1890, she had come to a firm decision. She would study medicine and become a doctor.

The fact that no woman in Italy had ever done such a thing did not deter her. Ever since she could remember, Maria had known she had a special mission. But it had never been clear to her until now. In her walks between school and home, she had observed tremendous need among the disenfranchised. She was consumed with questions about how society could help. She had an ability for math and science and empathy for the downtrodden. She wanted to make their lives better.

Maria was certain the only way to do this was to obtain a medical degree. She would have to inform her family, in particular her father, whose clear expectation was that she would become a wife and mother as soon as possible.

Final tests were over for all the students at the Regio Istituto Tecnico Leonardo da Vinci. It was early June 1890. The last evening rays of early summer sunshine spilled onto the dinner table of the Montessori family.

“I am proud of you, Maria,” said Alessandro. “We should begin planning a graduation celebration.”

“Papà, I am honored,” Maria began. “I know that with graduation come thoughts of the future—”

Her father interrupted. “You will take the summer off. Take some time to see other young people your age. Even I believe that one can’t work all the time, my dear.” He grasped his daughter’s hand and smiled at her across the table.

Renilde, who knew what was coming, crushed her linen napkin, kneading it in her lap. She and Maria had been practicing for weeks.

“Papà,” Maria began slowly, “I have decided to continue with school. Medical school. I know I have a mission in life to help those who haven’t had the advantages I have had. I’ve been blessed with a mind for science. I want to change the lives of the poor for the better. The way for me to do that is to become a doctor.”

The convivial atmosphere turned cold. Alessandro Montessori stared at his daughter, then at his wife. His face bore a look of hurt and betrayal that quickly changed to anger. There was a short silence. They could hear the happy sounds of neighborhood children playing outside. A ball smacked against the pavement in a rhythmic pattern. Laughter and cheers floated through the open window.

“What does a nineteen-year-old know about a mission in life?” Alessandro exploded, purple with rage. “I will tell you your mission in life! It is to be a good wife and a good mother to your children. To raise them to be good Catholics, and to conduct themselves for the glory of Italy. To teach them, as I thought I taught you, respect for the wishes and wisdom of their elders.”

His voice rose to a high pitch. "You have been spoiled and indulged by a mother who has failed to teach you proper respect!" Alessandro's open hand slapped the table. The china and silver jumped. "We are a military family. I am a civil servant. Do you know what this means? We are the example to others. What kind of example is this?"

The last sentence was spoken so loudly that the children outside the window were suddenly silent. The whole neighborhood had heard.

Renilde sat stone still. Her sweating palms had turned the napkin to a damp ball. Maria was now an adult, a graduate. Renilde knew that Maria would succeed with or without her father's approval. But it would not be easy. And once Maria left, Renilde would have to live with her husband. Renilde let her daughter speak for herself.

Maria remained calm, though shaken. "There is no one I respect more than you, Papà. And Mamma. I am who and what I am because of you. My strength comes from God. And from you. And I pray that it will see me through medical school."

They all sat in silence for a moment. Then Alessandro said bitterly, "I refuse to discuss this any further. I don't want to hear another word about it. You and your mother may do as you like. But don't ever speak to me about it again."

With that, Alessandro pushed back from the table. He gathered his coat and hat in the front hall and slammed out the door. His footsteps echoed on the stones below. The children resumed their game.

That night, Maria and her mother prayed for peace and understanding. The moon was full. Its light came through the lace curtains in Maria's bedroom. She sat upright in bed,

listening for her father's return. Finally his steps came slowly into the apartment. It was very late. Alessandro knocked over the umbrella stand and swore loudly.

Maria heard the rustle of papers. Was he unrolling the anatomy chart? She climbed out of bed and tiptoed down the marble stairs. Alessandro was tracing the outlines of the chart with his finger and repeating the names of body parts to himself. In his way, he was trying to fathom the mind of a daughter he could no longer control.