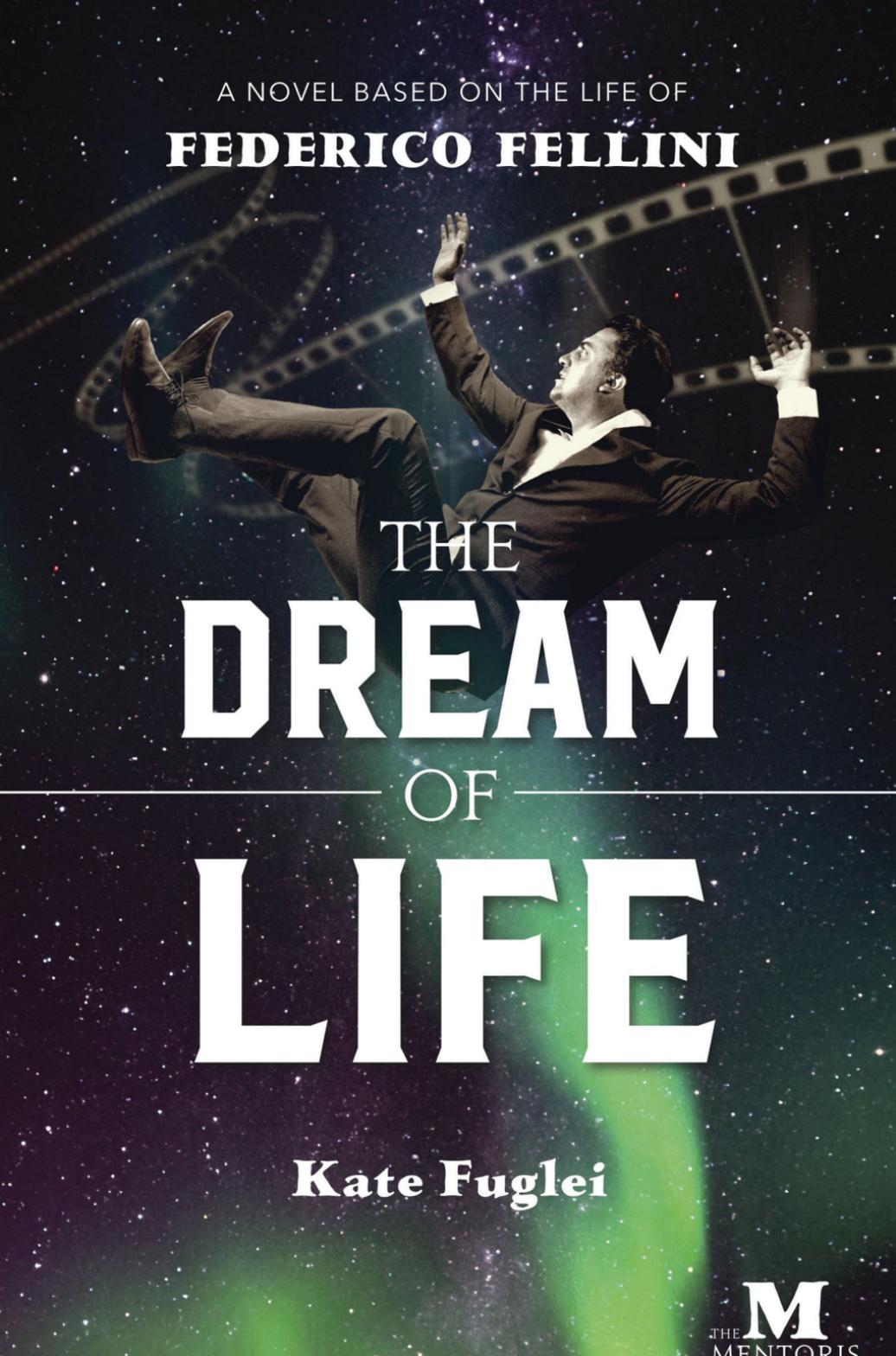


A NOVEL BASED ON THE LIFE OF
FEDERICO FELLINI



THE
DREAM
— OF —
LIFE

Kate Fuglei

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Chapter One

THE DREAM OF CHILDHOOD

Federico Fellini pulled away from his mother's grasp. He ran to touch the gigantic circus poster that hung on the side of the Arco d'Augusto in Rimini. He placed his tiny hands on the paper to see if the horse, the lady with the red feather who was winking at him, the leering clown, were real. It was his fourth birthday, January 20, 1924, and his father had promised him a trip to the circus. Circus and birthday aside, there was still marketing work to do.

Ida Fellini, Federico's mother, grabbed his hand and pulled him through the plaza at Mercato Atri and under the arch. They passed a Blackshirt parade. These parades now happened on all market days. The prime minister, Benito Mussolini—known as *Il Duce*—never let the citizens of Italy forget who controlled the government. The people of Rimini had now grown used to the parades. Federico ignored the drumbeats and the grim faces of the soldiers. Their monochrome movement faded into the background. He looked up at the colors of the posters. He was transfixed.

“Take my hand,” said his mother. “Don’t pull away again or you’ll be swept up with the Blackshirts.” Ida gripped Federico’s hand so tightly his bones hurt.

Hours before, when they had gone to the market, the plaza they entered had been empty. Now it was filled with a huge yellow and red striped tent. Men sauntered about in striped shirts. They had muscles like ropes. Their porkpie hats were shoved on the back of their heads. They whistled as they affixed green flags to the top of the tent. The flags snapped in the sharp breeze off the Adriatic sea. Wagons circled the tent. The sides of the wagons were painted with horses flying through the air, women with blond ponytails straddled on top. Tiny white poodles cavorted around the edges of the wagons. They ran in circles, skipping and yapping, in and out of the tent flap, which was held open with polka-dot fabric.

“Please, Mamma, can we go inside? Just for a moment?”

Federico looked up at his mother with large brown eyes. His shock of dark curly hair stood up no matter how much pomade she used. He needed a father’s touch. But his father was rarely home. Federico was always asking for something, always pushing the limits. Then he would crawl onto his mother’s lap and give her the sweetest hugs and endearments. He was just like his father.

“I’ve got all this food from the market . . . and your brother is in the carriage,” Ida said.

Indeed, Riccardo, who was two , looked up at Ida from his shaded carriage. The clock on the tower of the church indicated that the noon sun would be blazing soon.

“Riccardo is hungry and we need to get home before the heat of the day.”

Federico snatched a pignoli cookie out of her string bag and stuffed it into his brother’s mouth.

“He’ll be fine, Mamma.”

With that, Federico lifted the flap of the circus tent and rushed inside. Ida sighed. It was impossible to say no to Federico.

She stood, looking out at the gray waves of the Adriatic. They slapped against the pier that led out to the sea. She could see old men, stooped like question marks, casting their fishing lines. Their sons had gone out for the big catches before dawn.

She had a moment to herself for the first time that day. She wondered what in life had brought her to this provincial town. Rimini was not where she had dreamed of spending her life. She was lured there by Urbano Fellini. He was the handsome man who had swept her off her feet. She had been perfectly happy growing up in Rome, where she belonged. The Barbiani family was respected and sophisticated; they held Saturday soirées in their well-appointed apartment and strolled together on the via Veneto on Sundays, stopping to greet friends at the sidewalk caffès. Her parents were vehemently against her marriage to Urbano Fellini. They felt he was beneath her. She refused to listen.

Ida had a sense of dread the first night of her marriage to Urbano. He left the marriage bed to carouse with his pals. His sales job had brought them to Rimini, a town she hated. It was full of German and Swiss tourists in the summer. They descended like flies, taking over the tawdry caffès and shops. In the winter

Rimini was deserted. The women she met had nothing interesting to talk about; they were not educated, for the most part. Marketing, going to church, and raising their families took up their whole lives.

Urbano, who sold Parmesan cheese, olive oils, and other comestibles, was on the road most days of the week. He traveled around Emilia-Romagna, sometimes throughout Italy and a few times as far as France and Germany. Ida was left at home with a baby and a now-active toddler. Federico never stopped. He never napped, as other toddlers did, and even if Ida had been inclined to sit in courtyards gossiping with neighbor women, she was unable to as she was constantly watching Federico. When Urbano returned from his sales trips, there were frequent arguments that centered around his infidelity. When Ida found matchbook covers from nightclubs in distant towns and smelled perfume on her husband's shirts, there were loud confrontations.

Little Riccardo was an easy baby. Ida stared down at her younger son sleeping soundly in his carriage among the pounding and noise of a circus coming to town. The roustabouts, who seemed to be in no hurry, carried coils of rope and wiped their faces in the midday heat. Grease stained their handkerchiefs. They whistled at young girls walking by. Ida looked at her infant son and thought, *Are you going to be inscrutable like all men?* She stared idly at the flap of the tent and realized with a start that Federico had been gone for ten minutes. He was forever escaping her grasp.

Federico had indeed escaped his mother. The moment he entered the tent, he smelled sweat and hay. Someone was

cooking sausages. The combination was intoxicating. He saw a woman half-dressed in a tattered lace slip. He had never seen his mother in anything but a dress. The woman hummed a tune as she washed a red tunic in a wooden bucket. A rickety ironing board stood next to her. A little girl with curly red hair, not much older than Federico, was pressing a striped jacket. A man lay on the ground next to them, lifting a barbell. He wore no shirt. He stopped, got up and sat on a bale of hay, and lit a cigarette.

There were circus wagons lined up as far as Federico's eyes could see. The outsides were painted in a riot of colors with fantastic scenes depicted: women on horseback, acrobats flying through the air, and lions leaping through flaming hoops. Federico peered inside one of the wagons and saw a zebra. His heart pounded with excitement.

The little red-haired girl came out from behind her ironing board and took his hand. She led him into a smaller tent. There was a dressing table surrounded by lighted bulbs. On top of the table were all kinds of sticks in a profusion of colors: red, purple, blue, and green. There were powders and pots of creamy paints. A voice spoke up and Federico jumped in surprise.

"I didn't mean to scare you, little fellow. Who has my little Annamaria brought? You aren't in the circus, are you?"

The man had kind eyes. He sat on a brown chair. The stuffing was peeking out, but he didn't seem to notice. He was reading a newspaper that he flipped down in order to gaze at Federico. His hair was uncombed and he yawned while he talked. Everyone here seemed to go around half dressed.

Federico soaked in the atmosphere. It was as though they had all just awakened. Although it was after noon and Federico and his family had been up for hours, these circus people were just beginning their day.

“My papà, Luigi, is the star of the show. He is the best clown in all of Italy,” said the little girl, hopping onto her father’s lap.

He laughed, ruffling her curls. “I wish my pay reflected that. She’s the only one who seems to think so. But I’ll take it.”

Federico’s mouth hung open. He had never seen a real clown, let alone met one in person. He had seen posters featuring clowns all over Rimini and dreamed of going to the circus for his birthday. He had begged his parents relentlessly for weeks before they gave in.

“We . . . we are coming tonight,” said Federico.

“Well, now you are getting a preview of us in our underclothes, right?” he said, plucking the yellowed straps of his undershirt. He turned to Annamaria. “Darling, take him to see Sally. I need to speak to Giovanni. We weren’t paid yesterday and there is nothing to eat.”

Annamaria grabbed Federico’s hand and they ducked out of the makeshift tent. He had a million questions, but before he could ask, she had led him to the wagon with the zebra. There was just room for the two of them to slide inside. There were two wooden buckets near the zebra’s head. One seemed to be for food; the other was filled with water. The zebra stood very still.

“This is Sally. You can wash her if you like.”

She showed Federico how to take a sponge, soak it with

water, and slowly, gently wipe it over the flanks and legs of the wondrous animal. Federico felt the zebra skin. It was soft and leathery, like the pouch in which his father kept his sales receipts. It was moist like the semolina bread his mother made when the dough was ready to be put into the oven.

“Go ahead. Wash her. I think she likes you,” said Annamaria. She seemed to understand how magical the moment was for Federico.

Then they heard a scream. A piercing voice shredded the air. “What have you done with my son, you lousy fools?”

Federico recognized his mother’s voice. He dropped the sponge and ran toward the sound. He saw her standing next to Annamaria’s father. Her head was inclined toward him and she shook her fist in his face.

Federico ran to her as fast as his stubby legs could carry him. They were soon surrounded by circus people, many of whom were wearing threadbare bathrobes. They regarded Ida with a combination of curiosity and amusement. Ida stared back at them with unbridled contempt. Federico pushed through the crowd and hugged his mother’s waist. She clung to him as though he had been lost for weeks. Ida dragged him outside into the early afternoon sunshine of Rimini. Federico blinked his eyes as he was rushed down the street. Ida used one hand to pull her elder son toward home while the other pushed the baby carriage. A string bag full of that evening’s dinner hung from the handle. Federico turned his head backward, toward the circus.

“Dirty and disgusting. Do you still want to go tonight after seeing that?” asked Ida.

“Oh yes, Mamma,” said Federico, “yes. With all my heart.”

“We wouldn’t be going if your father hadn’t wasted money on the tickets. He goes away for weeks, then comes back and spoils you rotten. I, for one, have already seen more than enough of those circus tramps.”

Federico said nothing except a silent prayer that his father would come home in time, keep his word, and take him to the circus.

Six hours later Federico sat on his father’s lap in the second row of the circus. He was so close he could reach out and touch Sally the zebra, the lion, the horses, the gymnasts who did backflips around the ring, the six tiny white dogs who jumped through hoops and hopped up and down miniature staircases, the four white steeds that galloped around the ring with girls standing astride their glossy coats. The girls were so beautiful Federico could hardly breathe. His father pinched him when one of them winked and snapped her whip at them. Did it really happen or did he just imagine it? She had platinum blond hair in a high ponytail. The red velvet costume she wore was that of a female gladiator. Federico thought the trim on her skirt must have been made of pure gold. Her lips were the color of rubies and the muscles in her arms rippled as she gripped the reins of the fast-moving creature. Federico thought he could see breath coming out of its nostrils.

Following the crowd at the end of the circus parade was the performer who got the most applause: the clown. He juggled two milk bottles, lost them in the crowd, and then “found” them

as he walked around the ring. His face was painted white with a large red mouth outside his own; diamonds of purple were affixed to his forehead and above his eyebrows. He walked in a jiggly, unbalanced manner, tripping and doing somersaults to stand up again. A second clown walked after him, quiet and relatively dignified, almost an opposite. The first clown juggled a bottle to Federico and his father. As he leaned over to retrieve it, he said, directly into Federico's ear, "Welcome back home, little man. You belong with us."

The circus lasted for three hours. Federico sat on his father's lap the whole time. It was a rare evening for the Fellini family. They were all together. Ida and Urbano let themselves enjoy the evening despite Ida's earlier dismay. It was an uncharacteristically warm night for January, and they strolled back along the passage by the sea, which was crowded with tourists during the summer. Couples strolled hand in hand. Federico was happy. He saw that his parents were happy. The happiness didn't last.

Their home was near the train station. As they reached their front step, the sound of the train from Rome made its mournful whistle.

"If we lived in Rome instead of this backwater, we could take our children to see real art instead of this nonsense," said Ida. "The costumes were so tattered they could barely keep them on. Did you really enjoy that?"

"I certainly did," replied Urbano, "and so did your son. He knows a good thing when he sees it. I enjoyed it all immensely."

Ida sniffed. "Their costumes were all but falling off. And filthy."

"I thought they were beautiful," ventured Federico, "like princesses. Or queens."

"They were tramps this morning. And tramps tonight," concluded Ida. She turned to Urbano. "You should have been there hours ago." She sighed. "Now it's time for bed."

Federico thought of Luigi. He suddenly felt a deep sadness. He realized what he had seen in Luigi's eyes. He was alone. He was lonely, existing apart from the world of respectability. The world in which his parents moved and lived was a world apart from the circus. They had a family, a home, an existence surrounded by material things. Luigi had only his red-haired daughter Annamaria, a dressing table, his sticks of makeup, and whatever communion he had with his audience. Fleeting respectability—only the here and now. Whatever happened between Luigi and his audience. That was what he had. Feeling and reception, give and take.

Federico couldn't wait to go to bed. This was where he could close his eyes and dream. His dreams were where anything could happen, where there were no limits, no judgments, no parents interrupting. He closed his eyes. He saw girls leaping on horses, flying in the air. He saw zebras galloping. He saw clowns in pairs, as mirrors of one another. They all invited him to join them. He did flips and jumps, and instead of landing on earth, he flew high into the air over the coast of Rimini. He saw his town from the air: the four cathedrals; the

train station with tracks that led all the way to Rome; the school he would soon attend; the leather maker who offered him scraps for his puppets. They were all waving to him. They were full of joy and seemed to want to share it with Federico. They had none of the anger and sourness he experienced at home. But he couldn't find a way to get down to them. Just as he was about to call out, he heard a voice saying, "Federico, time to get up. We have to be at mass in an hour."

Ida Fellini made her way to church with her two sons. She had seen her husband off on a business trip to Milan early that morning. It was a competitive business, he said, and selling properly required beautiful clothing and frequent travel. There were arguments over whether the trips were escape or necessity.

Ida knew he was unfaithful. She didn't know what to do about it. She poured her anxiety and concern into her children. If their father had a lack of morals, she would make sure her children were raised with the strictest standards. They attended mass with rigor and regularity. Next year Federico would begin elementary school. Ida wanted to instill her rules in him before he was exposed to those of other families. She regularly asked her priest to pray for her family and to make her husband more faithful.

On this breezy Sunday in the spring of 1924, they walked toward their church. They passed a group of Blackshirts who were drilling a gaggle of adolescent boys. A banner with Mussolini's visage waved in the wind.

Federico stared at them with his round, intelligent eyes. He

did not respond to them. His expression remained passive—so much so that the leader of the group noticed and walked up to Federico. Assuming the boy would be excited by the attention, the young soldier showed Federico how to do the stiff-armed salute. Federico simply stared at him. He refused. He remained stock-still, staring at the soldier, who now grew confused. He looked at Ida. Was there something wrong with this boy?

Then he became angry. He knelt down, grabbed Federico's arm, and forced it up. As the soldier did this, Federico let out a loud raspberry. He made the sound by sticking out his tongue and blowing through his lips, as he had seen Luigi the clown do at the circus. Then he threw back his head and laughed. The Blackshirt was outraged and humiliated.

"He doesn't know what he's doing," said Ida. "He's just a little boy and he wants to get to church."

The soldier looked at them as though he didn't believe Ida. Ida pulled her son down the sidewalk toward their church. Federico turned his head and stuck out his tongue.

Urbano needs to talk to his son, thought Ida. This is what comes of having an absent father.

Federico began school that fall. It was like most provincial schools in small cities in Italy. As his elementary years progressed, Federico found the learning rote, the teaching uninspired. He had no interest in the droning speeches of the nuns who taught. He had even less interest in the sports games the other children played at recess. Kicking a ball was boring. He didn't care whether it went into a goal or not and he failed to understand why it

generated so much excitement. Physical activity, at least the sort usually attributed to young boys, was anathema to Federico. He especially hated swimming, which was something most boys his age in Rimini did frequently.

The nearness of the beach and the attraction of the tourist trade during the summer months drew Federico and his gang of friends toward the sea. The bright umbrellas, the caffès, and the gaggles of travelers brought Rimini to life. Anchoring it all was the Grand Hotel that stood like an elaborate pink and white wedding cake, beckoning the rich and privileged to step from their cars and up the grand marble staircase. The hotel was well guarded against any intrusions by ragamuffin locals. They could only stand across the street and admire the cream-colored coupes that pulled up the circular driveway and dispensed men in tuxedos who rushed to open the doors for women who wore white fur capes and satin gowns. Federico peered at the grandeur while his friends swam and played in the waves. He hated getting wet and was ashamed of his skinny body.

The greatest pleasure for Federico was to lose himself in comic books. His father brought them to Federico as gifts and his mother disapproved. She couldn't disapprove, however, of *Corriere dei Piccoli*, or *Corrierino* ("Little Courier"), for short. It was a weekly magazine specifically printed and distributed for Italian children. The brainchild of educator and journalist Paola Lombroso Carrara, it was created as a way to attract children to reading and educational pursuits. The pedagogical thrust was aimed at the thousands of Italian children who had little or no educational opportunities. It appealed to

children from all walks of life, especially ones like Federico who appreciated the beauty of the illustrations and the excitement of the stories.

It was the fourth time that hour that Federico had clomped down the stairs to the front door of their apartment.

“Stop the clattering. You’ll wake Maddalena,” said Ida, nodding toward Federico’s baby sister. Her eyes narrowed at him. “What are you up to?”

“I’m waiting for my *Corrierino* magazine. Today is the day it comes. I’m waiting for Little Nemo,” he said, twirling around in a circle.

“And who is Little Nemo?” asked Ida as she folded Maddalena’s diapers.

“Mamma, it’s my magazine. From America. Remember? I asked for the subscription for my birthday.”

“Oh yes, I remember. Don’t ever tell your Papà. He wouldn’t approve of a waste of money over colored pictures of silly things in a magazine.”

“Mamma, they are beautiful! They are drawn by Mr. Winsor McCay from America. Little Nemo lays in his brass bed, but he has fantastical dreams. He goes everywhere. He has magic adventures. He is a hero! Winsor McCay makes me dream.” Federico demonstrated by lying down on the carpet and closing his eyes. A beatific smile came over his face.

Ida gave his foot a little kick. “That may be what they do in America. But in Italy we tend to business. Get off the floor and behave yourself.”

“Yes, Mamma,” said Federico.

When he heard the postman's bell, he raced down the stairs and spent the rest of the afternoon poring over the magazine, dreaming of Little Nemo. Ida was too busy with Riccardo and Maddalena to notice.

Corrierino also reprinted the Katzenjammer Kids, a comic strip that detailed the adventures of two rambunctious brothers who loved to play tricks on their straight-laced mother; Felix the Cat, an enormous black feline with a perpetual grin; and Happy Hooligan, a hobo who encountered a good deal of misfortune but was never glum despite his low circumstance in life. Happy Hooligan significantly had two brothers, Gloomy Gus and snobby Montmorency, who were always unhappy despite their wealth. It was the founding notion of *Corrierino* to teach history, culture, and art through appealing, age-appropriate stories and beautiful illustrations. The magazines were printed with care to reproduce the vibrancy of the colors and details. None of it was lost on Federico.

He began to beg his mother for colored pencils, paper, and pens so that he could do his own drawings. Ida sighed and got them. It kept him out of her hair. She was happy to let Federico stay inside, reading comic books and drawing for hours at a time. When Urbano came home, he scolded his wife for making Federico into a "sissy." Urbano would then make noise about taking both boys to the park for some real exercise. They would sometimes go as far as digging out a deflated soccer ball. But usually by that time, Urbano had fallen asleep on the horsehair sofa in the living room. Federico would breathe a sigh of relief and pull out his drawings.

One warm Sunday afternoon in late May of 1926, Urbano insisted, “We have a back garden. We pay for it but we never use it!” he bellowed. “Get the ball! I’m going to teach you to kick a ball.”

They lumbered out to the back garden. It was still and hot. Urbano dropped the soccer ball and kicked it toward Federico.

“Now kick it back! No, don’t let it go through your skinny legs.”

The ball had rolled to the back of the garden, by their fence. A neighbor with blond hair appeared and smiled over the fence at Urbano. Urbano forgot soccer and went to talk to her.

“Go find the ball, Federico.”

As Federico reached the end of the garden and parted the ivy that clung thickly to the walls, he noticed a small door. He had never seen it before. He heard music. It sounded like an accordion. The same notes were being played over and over again. There was a rusted handle on the door and Federico turned it. It opened with a creak. A shower of crusted mud and dead ivy fell on his head. Federico wiped his eyes and stepped outside the door.

Across the stone-covered alleyway was an open archway. Inside the archway was a raised wooden platform. On it sat a man dressed in a red silk robe. There was a music stand in front of him and he held an accordion on his lap. His large, fleshy face glistened with sweat. He grinned at Federico and beckoned him inside.

“The back door to the theater isn’t usually open. But it’s so hot. We want to air it out before tonight’s show.”

Federico wandered into the dark theater. His eyes grew accustomed to the darkness as the musician gave him a hand. He stepped up onto the platform. He was in the middle of a small stage. There was one lightbulb on a stand in the middle of the platform.

“It’s the ghost light,” said the musician, referring to the single bulb. “It is to appease the ghosts of the theater, to give them a place to dance and sing and perform so that they will let us do so. You know what *appease* means, little man? It means to make happy. That’s what we artists do. We see the pain in life. We show it to people. Then we take it away. We make people happy. That’s our job. That’s what we get paid for.”

Federico heard his father’s voice calling him.

“I have to go,” said Federico.

“You’ll be back, though, right?” said the man. He played a short riff on his accordion.

Federico shook his head vigorously up and down. “Yes!” he said. “Oh yes!”

He ran out of the musky darkness and into the searing afternoon sun. A jolly tune rang out from the accordion and he skipped to the beat. He said nothing to his father, who had already forgotten about soccer. Federico instinctively knew his mother would not like theater people. So he kept it a secret. He vowed to visit again.

That night, he dreamed he was a puppet master. All the

people in his life—his mother, his father, his brother, his little sister, the boys who teased him about being skinny, the man with the accordion—they were all puppets on strings. And he, Federico, stood above them, controlling their every move.