



LIVES
OF THE
SAINTS

NINO RICCI

ALSO BY NINO RICCI:

Fiction

In a Glass House (1993)

Where She Has Gone (1997)

Testament (2002)

The Origin of Species (2008)

Non-fiction

Pierre Elliott Trudeau (2009)

Twentieth Anniversary Edition

LIVES OF THE SAINTS

BY NINO RICCI

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TONY URQUHART

INTRODUCTION BY STEVEN HAYWARD



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The places we have known belong now only to the little world of space on which we map them for our own convenience. None of them was ever more than a thin slice, held between the contiguous impressions that composed our life at that time; the memory of a particular image is but regret for a particular moment; and houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years.

Marcel Proust

Remembrance of Things Past

Valle Del Sole



I

IF THIS STORY HAS A BEGINNING, a moment at which a single gesture broke the surface of events like a stone thrown into the sea, the ripples cresting away endlessly, then that beginning occurred on a hot July day in the year 1960, in the village of Valle del Sole, when my mother was bitten by a snake.

Valle del Sole – which was not in a valley at all, but perched on the north face of Colle di Papa about three thousand feet above the valley floor – had no culinary specialties, no holy sites, no ancient ruins; forgotten and unsung, it was one of a hundred villages just like it flung across the Italian Apennines like scattered stones. Its main street, via San Giuseppe, came down a mile or so from the high road before carving a sharp S through the village centre and ending at a two hundred foot drop at the village's edge; and that July afternoon the street was deserted, the women and children walled up in their houses, the shutters closed against the flies and heat, the men out in the fields, which they had departed for before dawn and from which they would not return until after nightfall.

But in our house there were no men to go out and work the fields. My father – a native not of Valle del Sole but of nearby Castilucci, Valle del Sole's age-old rival – had emigrated to America almost four years before,

when I was barely three; and my grandfather, my mother's father, in whose house we lived, had been crippled during the first war, one leg, its bone crushed on the battlefield by a horse's hoof, left shorter than the other, and his calves scarred and pitted from the damage a grenade had done. He lived now on a government pension, and on the rent he collected from his few hectares of olives and vineyards; and in the village he was known simply as *lu podestà*, the mayor, because he had held that position unchallenged since the time of the Fascists.

Before lunch my mother had received a letter from the postman. Letters came to her every few months from my father; but the tight blue script I'd glimpsed on the envelope, before my mother had whisked it up to her bedroom, had been neat and legible – not at all my father's violent scribble, which did not resemble in the least the shapes *la maestra* had been teaching us at school, all the letters levelled out into a series of homogenized loops. After lunch, when my grandfather, as usual, had gone up to Di Lucci's *Bar e Alimentari* for a glass of watered-down wine and a game of *scopa* (Di Lucci, possessed of a deep entrepreneurial spirit, did not close up his shop during siesta), my mother slipped out of the house, making me promise to sit in the kitchen and study my school books.

'Where are you going?' I asked her.

'I have an appointment.'

'With who?'

'With the man who cuts the birdies off boys who ask too many questions.'

The books had been consigned to me because I had not done very well in my first year of school. The teacher, a big-boned woman from Rocca

Secca whose breasts jutted out like a mountain face and whose body gave off a strong odour of garlic and perfumed soap, had sent me home with a note:

Vittorio Innocente is intelligent but lazy. However if *la signora* doesn't interest herself in his education, there is nothing to be done.

My attendance at school had not been very regular – it had somehow fallen out that I'd spent much of class time wandering up to the top of Colle di Papa or down to the river with my friend Fabrizio, sharing with him the cigarettes he filched from his father. *La maestra* had paid a visit to my mother one afternoon, to advise her of my truancy and vices; but my mother had only laughed.

'He's just bored, that's all. Sitting in that classroom all day.'

But now, it seemed, I was to be reformed.

'We'll show *la maestra*, eh?' my mother said. 'When you grow up you're going to be a pope. This summer you'll catch up on all the lessons you missed while you were out chasing sheep with Fabrizio.'

And so I sat, now, on the stone bench in front of my grandfather's house, a book called *Principi Matematici* open on my lap to page 3. But I was not attending to it. I had slipped instead into a state of indolence which was very common at that time of year, especially when it was one o'clock and the sun was shining and the whole world seemed wrapped in a warm, yellow dream. Nearby, a swarm of flies hovered around a cluster of droppings on the cobblestones, the braver ones alighting and calling out to

their friends.

‘It’s goat, but it’s not bad!’ They rubbed their hands together the way my uncle Pasquale did when he sat down to a plate of *pasta all’uovo*.

A flock of sheep came around the corner from the direction of the square, followed by old Angelo Dagnello – the Red, we called him, because he was one of Valle del Sole’s few Communists; though years of faithful drinking had helped his appearance conform to his name, his nose and cheeks bright with shattered blood vessels. He moved with a measured nonchalance, his legs taking long slow strides which his upper body bobbed in tandem to; though his arms remained inert at his sides, only one hand moving, slapping a short sheep stick idly against a pant leg as he walked. The horde of flies above the goat droppings rose in unison as the sheep approached.

‘Ho, Vittò,’ Angelo called out. ‘What are you doing out here, frying yourself in the sun like that?’

‘I’m studying my mathematics,’ I said, opening my eyes wide and flipping a page. ‘I’m going to be a pope.’

‘A pope! Why settle for a pope? Why not Jesus Christ himself?’

My grandfather’s house sat at the very edge of town, set apart from the village’s last straggling houses by a patch of low bush; and not far beyond it the cobblestones ended and the road deteriorated into a mere dirt path, scarred by gullies and by the ruts of mule carts. A thin film of dust rose up from the ground as the sheep moved onto the dirt, hovering round their feet like a fog. At *la fonte di capre*, the village’s communal fountain, Angelo stopped a moment to cup his hands under the spout and bring a draught of water to his mouth.

I turned another page in my book, relieved for a moment by the taut crinkling of paper. The picture showed four shiny black apples, two spaced out widely and two huddled close together. Then, underneath, these markings: $1 + 1 = 2$. The book seemed to be arguing that I make some connection between the apples and the markings beneath; but the sun, reflecting off the page and filling my eyes with sleep, was arguing otherwise. Slowly my eyelids drooped and closed, while a happy host of apples and numbers, freed from the tyranny of the book, danced in my head in wild combinations.

I was awakened by a muffled shout.

The shout – it had sounded like a man’s – had come from the direction of our stable, which on the street side of the house was buried in the slope the house was cut into but on the valley side opened out at ground level. I set down my book and bounded down the crooked stone stairway at the side of the house that led down to it; but when I rounded the corner at the bottom of the steps I stopped short. The stable door was closed, but through a crack at the bottom of it a small, tapered head was flicking its tongue: a snake. I had seen it just in time; now I stood frozen as it slithered a long, slim green through the crack in the door and disappeared down a row of tomatoes in my mother’s garden, a gentle rustling of leaves leading finally to the ravine formed at the edge of my grandfather’s property by years of runoff from *la fonte di capre*.

Snakes, in Valle del Sole, had long been imbued with special meaning. Some of the villagers believed they were immortal, because they could shed their skin, and at planting time, to improve their harvest, they would buy a powder made of ground snake skins from *la strega di Belmonte* and

spread it over their fields. Others held that a snake crossing you from the right brought good fortune, from the left, bad, or that a brown snake was evil while a green one was good. But there was a saying in Valle del Sole, '*Do' l'orgoglio sta, la serpe se ne va*' – where pride is the snake goes – and there were few who doubted that snakes, whatever their other properties, were agents of the evil eye, which the villagers feared far more than any mere Christian deity or devil, and which they guarded themselves against scrupulously, by wearing amulets of garlic or wolves' teeth and by posting goat horns above their doorways.

But while I had been staring after the path of the snake, someone had cracked open the door of the stable. Two dark eyes were staring down at me now from the shadows, concentrating their energies on me as if to make me disappear by force of will. I was about to turn and run when the stable door opened a few inches further and the two eyes suddenly swooped out of the stable like swallows, turning magically a luminous blue as they caught the sunlight, bright flames that held me transfixed and seemed to burn away all other features of the figure swooping down on me. I stumbled backwards and fell, my arms coming up instinctively to shield me against a blow; but the blow did not come, and in a moment the sound of cracking twigs told me that something had followed the snake into the ravine.

I sat for a moment dazed where I had fallen, my head pounding and my palms scraped and bleeding from my fall. The thick growth of bushes and weeds and saplings that lined the ravine cut off my view of the pasture which opened out beyond it; but up on the high road I made out a glint of metal amidst a clump of trees that rose up from the bank of a curve. As I

watched, a small figure scrambled up the slope beneath the trees and a moment later an engine sputtered distantly to life and a small car pulled suddenly out of the trees' shadow, disappearing almost at once around a corner of the mountain in the direction of Castilucci.

Someone, though, was still in the stable. My mother: I came in to find her pouring water from a bucket into the pigs' trough as if nothing had happened, a lantern burning pale blue from a rafter above her.

'Ah, it's you,' she said, turning. She ran a hand through her hair to pull away a stick of straw dangling from it. 'I thought you were studying your mathematics.'

'I heard someone yelling,' I said.

'Oh, that was nothing. I saw a snake.'

'It wasn't you, it was a man.'

My mother pursed her lips and drew them to one side, the way she did when she was considering a problem. She crouched down in front of me.

'What did you see when you came down here?' she said finally. She stared at me hard a moment, her eyes narrowed; but when I did not answer she put her hands gently on my shoulders.

'Don't be afraid,' she said, more softly. 'Maybe other people will ask you too. What will you tell them?'

Question and answer: that was how *la maestra* taught us our lessons at school and how Father Nicola, the village priest, taught us our catechism. Every question had its right response; from everything you had heard and learned you had to pick out only what was necessary, only what was required.

'I didn't see anything,' I said finally.