

THE COLOR OF MORNING

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Fulfilling my grandfather's steps, in a rented boxy white 4-door compact Fiat Uno devoid of horsepower, passing through the small gray cobblestone-paved piazza, the center of a remote mountainside village made up of ancient architecture, a Duomo Maggiore Cathedral with a large Byzantine crucifix centered between two majestic spires, a clock tower at the west end, a single modern glass-front Trattoria on the opposite end, and white and pale pink and orange stucco villas, rooftops scalloped with burnt-orange Mediterranean clay mission tiles, windows dressed with green jalousie louvers and matching flower boxes filled with healthy red geraniums, landscapes of wildflowers, unruly red rose bushes leaning over white painted gates, gardens of green leafy vegetables and tall stalks of plump yellow and red tomatoes and crimson wine grapes held sturdy by wooden sticks and white string, and rows upon rows of golden sunflowers, having giant brown faces, that appear also along the edge of the narrow, winding, treacherous mountain roads leading to the unlikeness of rough familiar Castelluccio with its graffiti-painted walls, a local tradition - from marriage proposals to political criticisms - and drab, pronto piazza that points out of town, atop one of the Marche's several pine-covered bluish-black hillsides...one has a replica of the country, "the boot," including the island of Sicily at its toe, sketched in pine trees...and ridges that form the Monti Sibillini-range, part of the Appennine mountains that stretch 1000 kilometers from north to south along the country's east coast, forming its spine, that to the north, west and south overlook majestic snow-capped mountains...vertical jagged ledge peaks hidden by billowing white clouds moving slowly across the bright cobalt-blue sky...to the east the hillsides make up the horizon, in between is a flat vast valley, a hundred football stadiums wide, lush patch-quilt floor, blanketed with so much beauty and entertainment under the warm golden sun, tall rich fescue grass, red and violet field poppies, yellow buttercups and charlock mustard plants, men playing soccer with just a few onlookers, hundreds of campers resting in folding chairs, a group of 30 or so white, cocoa-brown, and black quarter horses grazing inside a large two-post wooden corral, and a flock of sheep branded grazing while small spotted sheepdogs and two herdsmen keep a watchful eye for strays that might cross the dirt and gravel road that carves the valley in two, running north and south, and turns windy as it cuts into the hillsides, forcing a steep spiral climb along the outer edges and disappears from view on the opposite side...the east and west facing roads paved branch off at four corners on the north end of the valley with the eastern road leading upward to Sibillini's highest peak, Monte Vettore, 8128 feet above sea level, a single, deeply rooted in the golden rocky hilltop, thick thorny branch with an oversized fully-blossomed pale-pink rose, firmly bowing its velvet pedals, stands friendly, in stark contrast to one of a few centuries-old, coarse charcoal-stained white and beige pebble-speckled stone walls, crumbled by bombs during the Italian Campaign of World War II in 1944...one supports a gray rectangular cement pillar, densely wrapped with skyward crawling thin and fat brown crooked vines, that acted as a corner stone of Mussolini's modestly-sized summer cottage, that overlooks the dense forests of towering turkey and sessile oaks and dwarf mountain and black pines, beyond the extraordinary woodlands and steep rolling green hills and pastures...alongside olive groves and orchards harvesting red and golden delicious apples and sweet cactus pears...where wild boar often threaten chickens and other required livestock, interrupted by the worn gray pavement that passes the white mausoleum, and home beneath Vettore's summit to the little village of Migliorelli, where the humbling roadside church faces a small patch of plush green grass and its centerpiece white stone water fountain, refreshing as the morning.

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