

*The Moresco, 3500 words*

The Moresco

*Sicily, c.1556*

In the shade outside the workshop door on the south side of a small square of ochre-coloured, flattened earth, Salvatore is ready to inspect pots removed from the kiln. Unable to stand for long, or to bend the necessary number of times to pick up the pots himself, he sits, waiting for the apprentice, Tommaso. Opposite is his bright white house, blinded by wooden, sun-silvered shutters. To his left is the way to the town through a grove of olive trees which provide oil for lamps, for cooking, to soften bread. To his right, a view to the sea is framed by orange trees.

Below one of these is a grave headed by a ceramic plaque which names his father in Arabic script within a calligraphic pattern of blue on white. A second grave is marked for his wife, its plaque in many colours to express her joy for the baby under her skin, a daughter, who is even now clasped in her arms. "Concetta and Azul", the names are written in Latin script surrounded by flowers. His sorrow and his love has been translated through his brush in the delicacy of the painting and the intricacy of the design. Salvatore, potter and painter, is a Master of his craft.

Grazia, his granddaughter, sits on the doorstep of the house. Her long black hair flows down from a triangle of bright blue fabric tied on the nape of her neck. She wears a white cotton blouse, its neckline pulled together with twisted cords, finishing in tassels between new breasts that she is not yet sure how to manage. Her brightly coloured skirt is pulled round her legs by arms encircling knees which support her chin as she looks, suspiciously, at Salvatore. She has been watching him closely for many days. He has not painted for several weeks, saying he cannot do this because of a cataract in his right eye. He says he cannot yet co-ordinate the left eye with the right hand, but, given time, he will. Grazia has seen him stumble, lean towards a doorway, she has seen that his eyes are uncoordinated. She waved when she sat down but he did not return it. He seems not to see her at all. Her mother, Giovanna, calls her; she obediently re-enters the house.

Tommaso passes pots to his master one at a time, starting with the storage jars. Salvatore rotates each jar, holding it against one hand as the other moves across and round, up and down, exploring every part of the jar. Although calloused from years of potting and painting, his fingers will discover tiny snags and pits which can be missed by the eye. The necks must be perfectly round and smooth, or the inserted corks will not fit exactly, and the jars will not be airtight. The fingers will also know whether the base is completely flat, the shoulders are balanced, the curves symmetric and true.

The first is one of the tall, slender jars with wide necks for dried and crushed medicinal herbs. His fingers dip into the concave sides that allow hands to take them from crowded shelves without fear of tipping the next pot onto the floor. A series of these is followed by bulbous jars, spheres with flat bases and narrow necks, for thick unguents and ointments. He leans each on his cupped left hand, exploring it with his right. His fingertips and palm linger over their curves in delight. He feels guilty about this, his preference for the spherical ones, for they are all his children. A lizard runs over his foot, which he feels but does not see. He hums as he works.

A low long note, this pot is flawed.

‘Left,’ he says. It is taken from him and placed carefully on the left side of the doorway, the side for imperfect pots. These will be painted with simple flower patterns or geometric shapes in cheap colours, brown, green, and blue, for everyday sales. When his fingers find nothing but a smooth, even, surface and correct proportions, his hums rise in pitch. He caresses this pot a second time, simply to enjoy its sensuality, and smiles with the wrinkles of his eyes. These perfect ones are stacked to the right of the door. They will be painted with intricate designs in a wide range of colours over a white surface created through a glaze made of a mixture of tin and lead. A glaze that was unknown in Sicily until he and his father brought it here from Spain.

‘Right.’

The work continues rhythmically, the humming and the one-word instructions like a chant, until all the pots are lined up, mostly to the right.

‘Tell Vincenzo to use those for the pharmacy order. There are more than enough, so he can paint the extras as specials.’ Neither as intricate as the pharmacy ones, nor as simple as those for everyday use, ‘specials’ will be displayed for sale in Palermo and Trapani town for urban households.

Tomasso calls a second apprentice to help carry the pots inside for Vincenzo, Salvatore’s son, to distribute to the painters. A large, mewling cat pushes at Salvatore’s hand and he tickles its ears.

‘So you’re hungry? Well, I expect you’ll have fish ends when we eat.’ The cat purrs and jumps onto his lap, weaving its tail round his fingers. It settles, and is stroked.

The sun has moved from behind the house. It flickers through the leaves of the olive tree above Salvatore, and sends sparkles onto the sea. It illuminates the plaques on the graves. This Salvatore cannot now see, for Grazia’s suspicions are correct. Seven - or was it more? - days past, he woke, and found his blindness was complete. He thinks no-one has noticed. After all, he could walk round his workshop, his home, and his land, with his eyes shut.

There are now no colours or patterns, no sea or people to fill his eyes. New designs are in his mind, but how is he to transfer these to paper? He can sit at a workbench, take charcoal into his hand, make marks, but how can he be sure when he raises the charcoal from the paper that it goes back to the right place? How can he know he is drawing exactly what is in his mind? How can he colour between outlines he cannot see? He breathes in sharply. He can't.

He exhales. His fingers run over his thumb-tip again and again. Who will design the commissions for dinner sets so that each one is different, each set unique - how can he copy a new coat of arms? Who will lead the workshop now? Who will stop it from falling into endless repetition of design? Vincenzo is a good manager, a good painter, but he is an imitator, not a creator, he has no vision. His hand judders up and down. Stop. This is pitiful. I must trust him, as my father trusted me. But, oh, not to be able to paint! This makes him aware of his moving hand; he stretches the fingers and twiddles the cat's ears. It pushes its nose against his hand. He likes the difference between the sleekness of the fur-free ears, the short hairs like velvet pile on the nose, and the silk of the long fur on its back. He likes the delicate touch of whiskers on his skin. He finds he is breathing in time to the rhythmic purr, and with each breath comes the scent of oranges.

'*Nonno!* Come with me to find eggs!'

The cat glares at Grazia and jumps down as she takes Salvatore's hand. He rises and allows himself to be lead to the hens' nests, just him and her, hand in hand, as normal. His head turns towards her, his lips smile, but his eyes are not quite on her. His steps are not as confident as they were. She seats him on the edge of a cart, gives him a basket.

'I'll find the eggs, you don't need to bend.' He protests

'If I don't bend sometimes, I won't exercise my back. I'll become stiff and not be able to walk.' But he is relieved, for he knows he will not see the eggs, and then she will know. He waits, hearing her dodge about, making the hens squawk and scatter. He can hear their wings fluttering and her laughter, so he knows where she is and he can make sure his head is towards her. Her footsteps tell him when she is returning with her hands full of eggs. She adds up the numbers as she puts each pile in the basket.

'Five!', 'Nine!', 'Fifteen!', 'Nineteen!' She claps her hands, looking into his face, then she waves a hen away making it leap and chatter. Covered by its noise, she steps to one side. Salvatore's eyes do not follow her, he speaks to where she was.

‘That’s a good number, five for us and fourteen for the men.’ He smiles, not in her direction. She turns, scolding hens who are not there.

‘You silly thing you’ve ruffled all your feathers, and you, stop pecking at her!’ He laughs. ‘They’re very lively aren’t they?’ Now she knows.

She speaks quickly, ‘I’ll make an omelette tonight, with courgettes, and tomatoes, and onions, with basil,’ She prattles to stop herself thinking of telling Vincenzo, of the sorrow that Salvatore will paint no more, will make no more brilliant, complicated designs. As she goes to shut up the hens, she is thinking.

Her thinking is this: she will not tell of this blindness, she will behave as if he is still one-eyed. She will ask him to teach her to paint, and in doing so, help him to paint again. She will ask Vincenzo to allow her to do this, and say that she wishes to help Salvatore back to the workbench. There are rules; women are not allowed to do the work of men. They can sing or play an instrument for their family to entertain their menfolk, but not outside the family home. They can clean and cook, and look after hens, and milk goats, but they cannot take animals to market. They can sell the everyday pots from the workshop, but they cannot paint. Grazia longs to paint.

They return to the house, the sun directs its rays to the sea, sending a golden path to the beach.

That night, Salvatore stirs in his bed, whimpers as he dreams in a turmoil of colour, both brighter and darker than his paints. He dreams of his past, which has seeped into his brain more frequently of late. He is in a rocking boat... no, he is looking down into a rocking boat from high above. It is full of tiny, rain-soaked people, crying and screaming as they lurch into each other. It is dark and he is unsure of why he can see so clearly, but he can. His father, Shamir, holds his mother Adina, and his baby brother Adman, to his chest. He is Saladin, ten years old, next to them; he is Salvatore the man, the watcher above. He sees the waves overturn the boat and tip the tiny people into the sea. Saladin plummets; Salvatore lashes his arms about as if swimming. He is on a beach, offering plate after plate to a King, who smashes each one. His sister Ghada is being taken away. He cannot follow her.

‘She is mine, Saladin,’ says the King. ‘You cannot stay. You cannot stay.’ The voice fades as flames destroy Shamir’s work, their home.

Water and fire, the ancient cleansing of the soul. He prays to Allah for the souls of his mother and brother, for their bodies under the sea. The prayer is in Latin, which he does not understand.

Mosque changes to church, Mohammed to Christ, Spain to Sicily. Shamir to Maurizio, Saladin to Salvatore.

He is stifled, gasping and damp from his sweat soaking the bedclothes. Silence and darkness. He cries for them, his family. He clutches the blanket over his mouth and, sobbing, asks for their comfort, but they are silent. His stomach fills with twisting, howling loneliness. He asks for death, for release. To Paradise or Heaven. Or Hell. He does not care. He lies limp through the sunrise.

He hears Grazia laughing.

She does not know her history, he will tell her; tell her why she has her name. He reaches for his tunic and trousers.

‘*Nonno*, breakfast is ready.’

‘I’m coming.’ He struggles, with his clothes and with his mind. He opens the door. ‘Good morning, pretty one.’ She kisses his cheek. Over breakfast, she asks him.

‘Please *Nonno*, teach me to paint. Papa says you may.’ For Vincenzo, urged by his wife, has agreed. He is pleased she wants to help her grandfather. Salvatore is aware that to deny her would mean he has to tell the truth. Instead, he lectures her.

‘You must watch the painters. I know you have seen them, but you must watch them carefully to gain understanding. Watch the mixing of the paints, watch how much paint they put on their brushes. Watch in detail how they work, and learn.’

They walk to the workshop and sit beside Vincenzo and his fellow painter, Calogero, who blushes. Salvatore would have seen this, and interpreted it correctly. Vincenzo, who has discerned nothing of the blush, instructs a surprised Tommaso to show Grazia how to make paint. The colours are mixed in little pots, each with its own brush lying across it.

‘The paint pots are placed in exactly the same order every day, so that the painter can take up the brush he needs without looking,’ Salvatore tells her. He hopes that Vincenzo, or even Calogero, might instruct her in the actual painting, but a desire to paint scratches at his mind, He tries to quash it, but it transfers itself to his fingers.

Vincenzo places two plates in front of them.

‘Why not copy this simple plate?’ Salvatore runs a finger over the painted one, feeling the pattern. A shield in the centre of a circle, surrounded by curled leaves, a pattern he had painted a thousand times before. He could do it blindfold.

The second plate is gleaming white, waiting.

‘I’ll give you a start Grazia,’ he says and paints a blue circle in the centre. He gives Grazia the blue brush then leaves them together. Grazia’s heart is in her ears.

‘*Nonno*, I’m scared, take my hand? Guide me through shape of the shield? Do we start at the top, from left to right?’ She touches her hand to his so he covers it, finger and thumb over hers on either side of the brush, which she leads to the plate. Once he feels the brush touch the surface, his hand knows exactly what to do. Together they make the shape, just a little off-centre, but still inside the circle. Together they make the crossed lines to quarter it. ‘You paint the triangles by yourself’ he says. Without hesitation, he picks up the yellow brush which she takes, and paints: four triangles, one in each quarter. Replaces the brush.

‘The scrolls round the circle are very fine; will you guide me, *Nonno*?’ He picks up the brush from the dark blue pot, and hesitates. He is afraid again. Grazia places her hand on top of his and guides the brush to the surface. Their two hands glide left, right; lift, touch down. She feels she is riding a strong wave, and, at one point, closes her eyes. The hands do not stop, the brush is taken to the pot several times, her fingers follow the lines of the scrolls without seeing them. He is drawing by instinct, she is learning by feeling. When they stop, she opens her eyes and sees the shield, the circle, the scrolls almost perfect. She gazes in astonishment, and pride, for her and for Salvatore. His fingers have remembered.

‘You must fill in the space between the shield and the circle, with the yellow paint.’ She picks up the brush and carefully fills in between the lines. The plate is finished

‘What do you think?’ says Salvatore. ‘Is it good?’

‘It is good.’ She smiles. He nods.

Calogero, who has watched them from time to time, comes across. He is surprised. Their plate is not like the other plate, the scrolls are more complicated.

‘Master’ he calls to Vincenzo ‘see what has been done!’ Vincenzo joins them.

‘The shield is a little to one side, but the scrolls – you have made your own scrolls, Papa,’ he both accuses and congratulates. ‘You see, you can still paint!’

‘Only with Grazia,’ says Salvatore, but his heart is light.

Every day they sit at their own bench making plates together. Giovanna complains that Grazia is doing little housework, but is pleased all the same. Grazia is Salvatore’s guide, and shield: it is not her right to tell the truth.

After two weeks, Salvatore insists Grazia must paint one on her own. ‘Make your own design, tomorrow. Without me. You are ready.’ As he was ready to tell her his story.

Grazia is excited, nervous. She clears her space on the bench, and chooses a plate which he agrees is without flaw. She puts powders into the little bowls ready for the next day.

After their meal, he takes Grazia, Vincenzo and Giovanna, to the graves. They sit and he tells that the design is not a pattern, but words, in Arabic letters: ‘this is the grave of Shamir, now Maurizio, the Moresco’. He told them how his son and his granddaughter would not have been born if a King had not changed his mind: if he had not reneged on his promise to the defeated Sultan of Granada that he would protect his Muslim people.

‘But he did not. When the Sultan left Spain, King Ferdinand demanded we Muslims become Christian. My father thought he could go to church and pray to Allah in his mind. But that was not enough.’ He tells them about the thugs who set fire to their house and workshop with the wood gathered for the firing of the kiln. ‘The kiln-watcher and his apprentice were burned alive. My father tried to save them: his arms and his face were scarred by burning.’ He did not tell them of the screams he heard, the smell of burning meat. He tells them about the kidnapping of children, of the sale of girls in the slave-market.

‘My older sister was one.’ ‘Her name was – Ghada – the graceful one. You are named for her, Grazia.’ He feels Grazia take his hand, feels her tears on it. He pulls her close, and tells them about the boat, the crowd, the storm, the beach. He tells them how the sea held his mother and brother, about their change of names in Sicily, that Maurizio, ‘the Moor’, was his father’s choice. How he, Saladin, became Salvatore. ‘I too am Moresco - a convert.’

As they absorb his story – their story – he tells them about his blindness. He feels Grazia nod against his chest. ‘And you, my dear one, can now describe things to me, as you have tried not to.’

‘You knew?’ says Vincenzo. ‘Why – ‘

‘Because she thought it was my place to tell, not hers. Isn’t that so?’ She smiled. ‘And she thought painting would help me admit my blindness, and she was right.’ Grazia blushed ‘and something more I think?’

‘Yes – I wanted – want- to paint.’

He nods. ‘Grazia has the skill, my skill. You have seen it, Vincenzo, you must let her paint. Now that the workshop is yours.’ He holds out his arms, and embraces his laughing family.

That evening, when the others have gone to bed, Salvatore goes to the workshop. He takes a spherical jar from the line waiting to be painted and goes to his seat. He places the jar at an angle balanced on his knee, lifts a brush, and begins to paint. He does not need light.

They find it in the morning. A perfect jar in orange, green, blue, yellow, and red. Coils of flowers and leaves, scrolls swirling and intertwining, leading the eye round the jar. An intricate geometric pattern unfolds round the top and the base. Inside the portrait circle is the head of a girl, hair in a blue scarf, wearing a white blouse and coloured jacket. Underneath is painted “Ghada/Grazia - Saladin”.

It is Grazia who places the jar on the credenza in the new extension built for her and her husband Calogero.

It is Grazia who finds Salvatore on the beach, the sea lapping his eyes, curling its arms round him as if taking him into itself.

It is Grazia who paints his grave-plaque in Islamic scrolls and Sicilian flowers, with his name: “Saladin/Salvatore - Grazia”.