

May 10, 2022

**EDGARDO
or WHITE FIRE**

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NOTE: *This play is my personal and completely subjective take on an actual historical event. In 1858 Bologna, Italy, a seven-year-old Jewish boy named Edgardo Mortara was abducted from his home because word had reached the Church that he had been secretly baptized as an infant. Church law forbid a “Christian child” from being raised in a Jewish household, so Edgardo was sent to Rome. There he grew up in the Catholic Church under the direct supervision of the Pope before becoming a highly beloved Priest, and spent his adult life in an Abbey in Brussels, dying two months before the Nazi invasion of Belgium in May 1940. My play imagines what would have happened had he lived until that moment.*

Edgardo Mortara’s kidnapping caused an international outcry which dovetailed with the effort towards unification in Italy; when Rome was “liberated” by Garibaldi, Edgardo could have been reunited with his family, but he fled, choosing to stay in the Church instead. Many years later, in 2000, Pope Pius IX (who sanctioned Edgardo’s abduction and raised him as a Catholic), was beatified by the Vatican. The descendants of the Mortara family are still fighting the Church over Edgardo’s fate (and the beatification of Pope Pius IX). The story raises profound questions about trauma, memory and identity, and about how one heals a broken self. What did it mean for Edgardo to be Jewish? What does it mean to be Jewish today? Is it a set of beliefs and values? A memory? Common rituals? A shared history? A permanent danger zone? Can you ever really leave it behind? Could Edgardo? Was his Catholicism in some surprising way a reflection of his childhood faith? Can one “remember” what has been erased?

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TIME: 1851- 1940

PLACE: An Abbey in Bouhay, Belgium, May 1940, just after the Nazi invasion. The cell of Friar Pio MORTARA, which devolves into a courtroom in Bologna and many other locations from MORTARA's past including: Edgardo's childhood home, the Vatican, a train station in Rome and so on. In my imagination, this play takes place on an almost bare stage, with a wooden bench, a window, and an upstage door. The more Brechtian the staging, the better.

CHARACTERS:

The play can be performed with five actors. The doubling indicated is intentional and part of the storytelling of the play.

- Edgardo **MORTARA** (Father Pio) as an old man, age 88, and throughout his life
- **VALENTINI** (the prosecutor, 40's), **MOMOLO** (Edgardo's father, 40's and up), **POPE PIUS IX** (50's and up), Count **FERRARI, GARIBALDINO**
- **YOUNG PRIEST** aka BROTHER NICOLAS (19); **YOUNG EDGARDO, LEPORI, GUARD, RICCARDO** (Edgardo's older brother, 20's), **JUDGE**
- **JUSSI** (the defense attorney, 50's), **LUCIDI** (the Papal Policeman), **FELETTI** (the Inquisitor), **RECTOR**
- **MARIANNA** (Edgardo's mother, 30's to 70's), **ELENA MORTARA, ANNA MORISI** (20's)

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Prologue

We hear the sound of children playing. Young Edgardo runs in, screaming with laughter, being chased by Momolo, his father—

MOMOLO

Run, Edgardo, run! The snow is coming! *(he tosses torn up fabric in the air like snow)*
Don't get wet! Run!

EDGARDO

Cover me, Papa! Cover me with snow! *(Momolo does so. Edgardo screams with pleasure)* No! It's so cold! I'm a snow man, Papa—you'll never catch me— *(he starts to run again—Marianna runs in, also tossing "snow")*

MARIANNA

Where's my Edgardo? A blizzard is coming over the mountains! Where is he?

EDGARDO

Here, mamma! I'm here!

MARIANNA

You're not Edgardo—you're a snowman!

EDGARDO

No, Mamma- it's me! Look! It's me.

MOMOLO

We can't see you in all the snow!

EDGARDO

Come find me! *(He runs off. Momolo calls after him)*

MOMOLO

Don't climb on that chair, snowman! It's not quite— *(there is a crash; sound of a chair breaking)*

EDGARDO

(from offstage) Sorry, Papa! It broke!

MOMOLO

Don't worry. Snow is hard on chairs-- I'll glue it again--

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EDGARDO

Find me now!

MARIANNA

(looking around) Where are you? I can't see you! Momolo, where has our boy disappeared to?

EDGARDO

(from offstage) Here—here—under the chair! Look for me, Mamma!

MARIANNA

Help! *(rising desperation)* Someone help me! I can't find Edgardo! Where have you taken him? Where have you taken my son?

MOMOLO

I'll go look for him! *(he runs off in the direction Edgardo has gone)*

MARIANNA

(she begins to wander the stage in a daze, in despair) Help! Someone help me! I've lost my son! *(crying out)* Edgardo! Don't leave us! Come back!

EDGARDO

(screaming, from off) Mamma!!!

Mortara wakes up with a jolt. Marianna disappears. He is in his cell. An Abbey in Bouhay, Belgium. May, 1940. Right before dawn. Sounds of Catholic vocal music in the distance. Mortara, disoriented, rises from the bench and tries to shake off the dream. A Young Priest, Brother Nicolas (the same actor who played Edgardo), emerges quickly from down a long hallway, carrying a piece of clothing in his arms. He seems distraught.

YOUNG PRIEST

Father Pio!

MORTARA

Brother Nicolas.

YOUNG PRIEST

What's the matter?

MORTARA

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Dreams. Always dreams... and you?

YOUNG PRIEST

(anxiously) The soldiers have come. Just as we feared.

MORTARA

Tell me. *(they sit together on the bench)*

YOUNG PRIEST

Neutrality is over. Antwerp is being bombed. They are hunting people down. *(beat)*
Even here. At the Abbey.

MORTARA

We have nothing to hide. The Holy Father will save us.

YOUNG PRIEST

You saved me. You've always saved me.

MORTARA

God saved you.

YOUNG PRIEST

And now? What will happen?

MORTARA

We will keep our heads down and go on with our lives.

YOUNG PRIEST

How? *(holding the bundle out)* Is this yours?

MORTARA

What is it?

YOUNG PRIEST

(revealing an old blue sweater) A sweater. I found it in the hay loft last night. Look. It has the letter "M" stitched into the collar. *(Mortara looks at the sweater, startled. Stares at the Young Priest)*

MORTARA

What were you doing in the hay loft?

YOUNG PRIEST

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(evasively) Nothing. *(holding out the sweater)* The wool is so old it's beginning to disintegrate.

MORTARA

(smiling) Like me.

YOUNG PRIEST

(urgently) Father Pio—

Suddenly, we hear the sound of knocking. It is loud and aggressive. For a moment, time stops. The lights change. Mortara turns, grabs the sweater, stares at the Young Priest.

MORTARA

Who is that? *(beat. Another sound of knocking. Mortara is startled. He cries out)*
Who's out there? *(shouts from outside)* Go away! This is a House of the Lord! *(we hear the sound of dogs barking outside)*

YOUNG PRIEST

(whispering) I told you. The Germans have surrounded the Abbey. They say we're hiding people.

MORTARA

Who?

YOUNG PRIEST

Roma... Freemasons... partisans... it hardly matters-- they hate everyone...

MORTARA

(beat. Thinking) We must trust the Holy Mother. We must rely on her goodness and she will protect us. *(quickly)* Don't be frightened. This too shall pass. Go tell the brothers to keep the doors locked. I will prepare the service. *(the Young Priest nods and exits. Mortara looks down at the old blue sweater. He raises it up and buries his face in it. Something shifts in the world. For a moment, we hear the sound of voices, of children playing, laughing, calling out. Young Edgardo runs in, trying to fly a little kite made of scraps of cloth)*

EDGARDO

I need some wind to fly my kite! Help me, Mamma! Find me some wind! *(tossing the kite up)* Wheeee! I'm at the seashore! Look! I can see the waves! *(Marianna runs in, pretending to be a bird)*

MARIANNA

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Watch out, you naughty boy! The seagulls are coming! They're flying over your head—

EDGARDO

(laughing, running from her) Go away, seagulls! Leave me alone! Don't you dare poop on my kite!

Suddenly we hear knocking again. Is it in the present or the past? Mortara looks up, frozen. Young Edgardo stops and listens.

EDGARDO

Listen! Someone's knocking downstairs.

MARIANNA

It's just a hungry bird, looking for worms! *(She comes and tickles him—he laughs)*

EDGARDO

Shall I look? *(he crosses to the window)* I see a policeman outside!

MARIANNA

A policeman?

EDGARDO

What does he want?

MARIANNA

I don't know-- he must have the wrong house. *(more knocking below)*

MORTARA

(getting nervous) Mamma! He's knocking on our door!

MARIANNA

(embracing her son) Don't worry, Edgardino—we seagulls will say our prayers and the nasty policeman will go away!

EDGARDO

Do seagulls speak Hebrew?

MARIANNA

These seagulls do. Come! *(she kneels. Mortara crosses to the candelabra, lights a candle. As he does so, his mother begins to sing. Young Edgardo joins her. Mortara looks up, arrested)*

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MARIANNA/YOUNG EDGARDO

“Sh’ma Yisroel, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad.

Baruch Shem Kavod Melchuto L’Olam –

The door opens and Lucidi, the Papal Policeman, enters.

LUCIDI

Excuse me— *(Marianna rises, terrified)*

MARIANNA

Who are you? What do you want?

MORTARA

(resisting the memory) Stop! Please. This is not the time--

PIETRO LUCIDI (Papal Police)

(to Marianna) I’m sorry to disturb you so late in the day, signora. I am Pietro Lucidi, Marshal in the Papal Police. I need some information.

MORTARA

(covering his ears) I won’t listen! We’ve been through all this before!

LUCIDI

(taking a piece of paper from his pocket) Could you list for me everyone currently residing in this household?

MARIANNA

Now? *(rattled)* There’s my husband Momolo, and me, and our servant Anna Morisi— but everyone calls her Nina. And then there are nine children—

LUCIDI

Nine! You’d think you were Catholic. *(Smiles. Beat)* Tell me their names. *(he looks down at a list he’s carrying)*

MARIANNA/MORTARA

(Edgardo recites alongside Marianna) Riccardo, Erminia, Ernesta, Augusto, Arnoldo, Aristide, Edgardo, Ercole and the baby, Imelda.

LUCIDI May

I see them, please?

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MARIANNA

(hiding Edgardo behind her) They're asleep! All except the eldest, Riccardo, who is out with his father. Please, signore, come back another time, when my husband is here.

LUCIDI

(firmly) I'm afraid that won't be possible. I need to see the children. Now. *(beat)* The truth is, Signora... you and your husband have been the victim of a betrayal.

MARIANNA

A betrayal?

LUCIDI

Your son Edgardo...

MARIANNA

What about him? *(grabbing him again in her arms)* He is the sweetest, kindest, most intelligent of them all! He is my blessing from God!

MORTARA

That's right! I was a blessing from God!

LUCIDI

According to Church law, it is no longer permitted for you to raise Edgardo in your home.

MARIANNA

What Church law? We're Jewish!

LUCIDI

Exactly so. *(beat)* We have it on good authority that your son Edgardo has been baptized. And therefore, he must be removed from this household immediately, and taken under the protection of the Church. *(Marianna starts to shake her head violently and holds Edgardo)*

MARIANNA

(to Mortara) No! It's impossible! He's never left my sight! In all his seven years, he's always been right by my side!

LUCIDI

At the age of seven, a child is considered by the Roman Catholic Church to have reached the age of reason and is entitled to receive communion.

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MARIANNA

Communion? It's a mistake! It has to be a mistake. Who told you this?

LUCIDI

The Inquisitor sent us. *(Marianna throws herself on her knees and wraps her arms around Lucidi's legs)*

MARIANNA

(screaming) Nooooo! Nooo! You can't take him, you can't! Edgardo is ours—he has never been baptized—never!!

EDGARDO

(in pain) Mamma! Don't. Don't cry, Mamma.

MORTARA

(kneeling, refusing to look at his mother) Hail, Holy Queen, Mother of mercy, our life, our sweetness and our hope! To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve!

MARIANNA

Take me to the Inquisitor! Let me talk to him.

LUCIDI

That won't be possible.

MARIANNA

Tell him! Tell Father Feletti it never happened! He'll understand! Edgardo is a good Jewish boy! *(to Edgardo)* Aren't you, my love? A leopard can't change its spots.

LUCIDI

He'll be perfectly safe, Signora. In fact, he'll be under the protection of Pope Pius IX himself!

MARIANNA

The Pope?

MORTARA

(praying) To thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears!

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LUCIDI

I'm truly sorry. Give me the boy.

MARIANNA

(dragging Edgardo to the corner of the room) No. Never. I will never give him up.

MORTARA

(praying) Turn then, most gracious advocate, thine eyes of mercy towards us, and after this our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb!

LUCIDI Please,

Signora. Don't make it worse.

MORTARA

(praying, arms raised) Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God, that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

MARIANNA

The Church shouldn't take children from their parents. It's not Christian!

MORTARA

(finishing his prayer) Forever and ever! Amen. *(Marianna begins singing a lullaby over Edgardo. Lucidi crosses to her)*

LUCIDI

(putting his arms out, gently) It must be done.

MARIANNA

I can't. I can't give him up. He's my angel. Look. He's sleeping. *(she closes Edgardo's eyes)*

LUCIDI

Perhaps that's for the best.

MARIANNA

(kneeling beside Edgardo, stroking his forehead) How can you take him? *(enfolding him in her arms)* He's part of my body. My blood runs through him. I won't survive.

LUCIDI

You will. We all survive.

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MORTARA

I told you to stop! What's the point --?

MARIANNA

(looking up at Mortara) It's your life! When they ask you, what will you say?

MORTARA

I will say that I have spent my years in devotion to the blessed Virgin Mother.

MARIANNA

You think they'll care? You think they'll believe you? *(to Lucidi)* Where are you taking him?

LUCIDI

If we put him in a monastery here in Bologna, do you promise to leave him alone?

MARIANNA

Never!

LUCIDI

Then he will be sent to the Catechumens in Rome.

MARIANNA

No! You will never make my son a Catholic! Please. *(clutching him close, whispering)* Edgardo, my precious! They're trying to take you away! They want to convert you! *(she kisses and kisses him)* Kiss your Star of David! Go on! Kiss it! Now—and always! *(as he does so, we hear the sounds of a violin playing the melody of a Jewish prayer. This runs under the next set of exchanges)*

LUCIDI

Don't be frightened, my boy. All will be well.

MARIANNA

(desperate) Well? First the Inquisition burns our precious books, every copy of the sacred Talmud, in the town square! Then you wall us up in this disgusting Ghetto where we can barely breathe. Then you give our only cemetery as a gift to the nuns of St. Peter's and we have to dig up the bones of our ancestors and carry them away on our backs. We pay a tax to finance the Catechumens, your disgusting conversion factory! And now you steal our children? No! It's enough! God will destroy you for this!

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LUCIDI

Please, Signora. Give us the boy.

EDGARDO

Don't, Mamma! Don't let him take me! *(Lucidi peels her arms apart and pulls Edgardo away. Edgardo screams. They cross away and exit. Silence)*

MARIANNA

(turning to face Mortara) And that was that. You were gone.

MORTARA

Mamma, please—this is ancient history--

MARIANNA

No, my love. It never changes.

MORTARA

How can you say that?

MARIANNA

They haven't forgotten you. They never forget. The world is watching you.

MORTARA

What happens in the outside world is of no concern to me.

MARIANNA

Don't be absurd. Even here, in this remote place, the world is part of you, whether you like it or not.

MORTARA

You're wrong. I have committed my soul to paradise! And you could have done the same.

MARIANNA

Never.

MORTARA

Why? Why wouldn't you convert? You could have been saved! I prayed with all my heart that you would join me. I've missed you so terribly—you cannot imagine!

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Every day of my life—I've longed for you to come be with me. It was the only possible solution, Mamma. I begged God to help you become one of us.

MARIANNA

One of who? *(beat)* Who could we have become, my son?

MORTARA

Beloved by Christ. Filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit.

MARIANNA

And then what?

MORTARA

Then you'd be in heaven, Mamma. Now! Instead of living on in anguish like this! It's what I've never understood about the Jewish people—why do you refuse Christ's love? Why do you choose to live in agony?

MARIANNA

You think that's the choice? Between Christ and agony? Open your eyes. There is an entire tapestry of life, Edgardo, to be experienced. Children to be raised, people to be loved, art to be created, prayers to be spoken, candles to be lit, songs to be sung, mitzvahs to be offered and received. You missed it all, my son, every single moment of life. All you have done is hide.

MORTARA

I had to hide! The Pope warned me—he warned me you would deride us and debunk my beliefs—that you would mock Christ and turn the world against me! I had to run away! To hold on to my soul!

MARIANNA

Don't be a fool!

MORTARA

Stop speaking to me! Stop appearing in my dreams! You will never persuade me. *(Marianna turns and leaves. He calls after her)* All those years of refusal—it was wrong, Mamma! And *useless*. Completely useless. What good did it ever do? *(Marianna returns as Elena Mortara, the great grand-niece of Mortara, a feisty contemporary woman)*

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ELENA

How can you ask such a thing? What good is justice? What good are the sacred ties of family? What good is the freedom to raise your children in safety?

MORTARA

Ernesta! My darling...

ELENA

You're close! Ernesta was my great grandmother's sister. *(smiling)* You recognize the cheeks?

MORTARA

(remembering with sudden affection) Absolutely! Ernesta was the sweetest and roundest of all my siblings!

ELENA

Good! *(nodding)* I'll call you Pio Edgardo...

MORTARA

(fascinated) "Pio Edgardo"?

ELENA

Edgardo Levi Mortara! My great great uncle.

MORTARA

(quickly) Here they call me Father Pio Maria. What are you doing here?

ELENA

Fighting to bring you justice!

MORTARA

I never asked for justice.

ELENA

You don't have to. A crime against a single child is a crime against humanity. Look what you had to do to save that Young Priest!

MORTARA

(startled that she knows about this) Who told you that?

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ELENA

He was left out in the street— with only his little satchel to his name— terrified and alone—and you took him in. A lost soul waiting to be rescued. That's why we love you so much. Your story is woven into our lives.

MORTARA

Whose lives? *(beat)* What's your name?

ELENA

Elena. *(smiling)* Elena Mortara. *(proudly)* I'm your future! I wish you could see us in action, Pio Edgardo. We are thorns in the Church's side! We drive them nuts! We expose their lies! As you should have done.

MORTARA

Why? The Church is my salvation! I was chosen for a new life when I was only seven years old.

ELENA

Chosen? You were abducted!

MORTARA

I was a boy—

ELENA

You were a rallying cry for the whole world! Slaves in America, oppressed people across Europe, peasants in remotest Russia-- everyone wanted to save the little Jewish boy.

MORTARA

They did?

ELENA

You were their heartbreak. And their hope. Your ghost will always haunt our family. We hear you screaming in the night!

MORTARA

Those are just dreams.

ELENA

They'll never stop.

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MORTARA

You don't know that--

ELENA

Of course I do. I see an empty seat at our table. I see you writhing in your bed.

MORTARA

I am struggling to be worthy of salvation.

ELENA

If children can be torn from their parents with no recourse, what's the good of salvation? Tell me that.

MORTARA

The Church is my home. My blessing. My sanctuary. It is not yours to judge.

ELENA

Perhaps. But there's no shame in remembering. *(turning to leave)*

MORTARA

I do remember. Of course I remember! You have no idea-- *(Elena disappears. Mortara looks around, anxiously)* Is this the end? *(beat)* Is today the day? *(beat)* Is this how I'm going to die? *(Marianna enters)*

MARIANNA

Better you should ask-- is this how you're going to *live*?

MORTARA

I have been dying since the day I was born.

MARIANNA

No my love—you were a happy, healthy boy! That story about your illness was a total invention.

MORTARA

I was saved! Nina saved me! Her action filled me with grace. Why could you never accept that?

MARIANNA

It was a desecration, right in broad daylight. That terrible trial—

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MORTARA

The trial was fair! The Vatican was not guilty. That was the verdict —you heard them say it—the Church was acting within the boundaries of the law. Papa told me so himself, right after it happened—I remember--

MARIANNA

Of course, the Church was guilty. The Church is always guilty. That trial was rigged. Don't you know that by now? They waited a whole year after you were gone to put that evil Inquisitor in the docket, and then we didn't stand a chance. We were sure once everyone heard the facts, we would get you back. But we were fools. Naïve fools. They destroyed your mind. Right from under our nose.

Sound of a gavel banging. Again, Mortara is startled. We find ourselves in a courtroom. Bologna. 1860. The trial of the Inquisitor Feletti. Valentini, the Prosecutor, stands across from Francesco Jussi, the Defense Attorney (played by the actor who played Lucidi)

VALENTINI

Right from under their nose! With absolutely no shame! Six months ago now-- the knock on the door, the terrified family upstairs, the insistence of the police, the violent abduction of the child, all in a single night. While the father was out and the mother was alone with her nine children.

JUSSI

I object! We have been through all of this already. The feelings of the parents, while regrettable, have no bearing on the justice of the case.

MARIANNA

A child belongs with his parents.

VALENTINI

A child belongs with his parents. That is sacred and irrefutable. Neither the state nor the Church has the right to remove a child against the will of the family. Your Honors, for what purpose did Father Feletti, the Inquisitor of the Holy See, have Edgardo Mortara abducted and sent to Rome?

MORTARA

To be with the Pope!

VALENTINI

I would posit that the Friar was and continues to be driven by an implacable hatred of Judaism.

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JUSSI

The child had been baptized. Baptism is a practice instituted by Jesus himself.

MORTARA

That's right! It cannot be reversed.

JUSSI

When a child has thus become Catholic, it is forbidden for Jews to have any hand in the raising of that child. That is and has always been Church law and will be forever after.

MORTARA

It was the law.

MARIANNA

It was a lie.

JUSSI

Call your witness.

(Marianna puts a shawl over her head and becomes a distraught woman of about 30 years old who is led to the witness box. This is ANNA MORISI aka NINA, a peasant woman who came to Bologna in her early twenties to make a living as a serving girl for Jewish households. It is she who supposedly baptized Edgardo as a baby)

VALENTINI

Tell us your name. *(she stares, terrified)* Loudly. So the court can hear you.

ANNA (MARIANNA)

My name is Anna Morisi. But everyone calls me Nina.

MORTARA

Nina! I knew it was you! How I loved your scent—I can still smell it when I close my eyes! *(he does so, breathing in the incense)*

VALENTINI

And were you, *Nina*, employed by the Mortara household from 1851 to 1857 as a servant and *shabbos goy* for the Mortara family?

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MORTARA

Yes! Yes!

JUSSI

Objection. The defense does not understand the term “shabbos goy”.

VALENTINI

(annoyed) Seriously? *(to the Court)* A “Shabbos goy” is a non-Jew who performs certain activities which Jewish law prohibits Jews from doing during the Sabbath.

JUSSI

Pont of clarification. The Church has expressly forbidden Jews from hiring Christian servants. We therefore disavow both the practice and the term.

VALENTINI

There isn't a Jewish family in Bologna who doesn't employ at least one Catholic girl to light the fire and look after things on the Sabbath. Even the *Rothschilds*--

JUSSI

(interrupting) Fine. We are here to try the Inquisitor, not the girl. Go on.

VALENTINI

(to Anna) How old were you when you began working for the Mortara family?

ANNA

I'm not exactly sure. Maybe... eighteen?

VALENTINI

Where did you grow up?

ANNA

San Giovanni in Persiceto.

VALENTINI

Can you read?

ANNA

Read? *(she is embarrassed)* No. I never learned to read.

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MORTARA

But you told us stories, such stories! Every night—all of us crowded onto one big bed, listening! You loved us—didn't you?

VALENTINI

Have you ever actually witnessed a baptism? In Church?

ANNA

(bursting out) How could I go to Church? I worked for Jews! They had nine children! I was needed!

MORTARA

She was needed!

VALENTINI

Understood. *(beat)* Is it true, Nina, that a few years after beginning work at the Mortara household, you became pregnant?

JUSSI

Objection! Anna Morisi's private life has no bearing on the matter at hand!

JUDGE

Overruled. Continue, Councilor.

ANNA

It wasn't my fault! There were so many soldiers staying in the area—

VALENTINI

(to the court) An Austrian brigade was stationed right near the Mortara home. In fact, a number of the soldiers rented rooms in the apartment upstairs. I have credible reports that Signorina Morisi had a disturbing familiarity with most of them. *(Anna starts to cry. Valentini addresses her)* Pull yourself together. Tell the court, when your pregnancy began to show, what did the Mortara family do in response?

Valentini takes off his robe and becomes Momolo Mortara. Momolo crosses to Nina, takes her shawl off, and she becomes Marianna again.

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MARIANNA

(laughing, to her husband) Did you hear what Rosina said? She told everyone in the building that one morning Nina came out of the Foschini's with her hands over her face exclaiming, "Oh what a night I had! Oh what a night, Signora Rosina."

MOMOLO

(laughing back at her) Maybe it was true! She's a lusty girl.

MORTARA

(shocked) Don't say that! She saved my soul.

MOMOLO

Let's send her to a midwife till she delivers. She'll give the child up to the Bastardini.

MARIANNA

Do you trust her?

MOMOLO

What choice do we have? They don't let decent girls work for Jews.

MARIANNA

(sighing) Why did we come to Bologna? It's an awful place. We don't even have a synagogue!

MOMOLO

Be patient. I make the best chairs in Bologna! Soon, everyone will be sitting on them.

MARIANNA

(smiling) On Jewish chairs? Glued together by furniture paste that falls apart when you look at it? *(Sound of the gavel. Crossfade back to the court. Shawl and robe on)*

ANNA

They paid for me to go to a midwife to deliver the baby. And no one knew.

VALENTINI

Why did you try to baptize their son Edgardo against their will?

ANNA

He was dying! I wanted to send the baby's soul to heaven!

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MORTARA

She wanted to send my soul to heaven!

VALENTINI

The Mortara family physician testified under oath that Edgardo only had a minor infection when Nina baptized him and was nowhere near death.

ANNA

(crying) They were reading Hebrew over the bed! My sister Monica – *(explaining)* she worked for the Mortaras before me-- she said that when Jews read like that over the bed, it means someone is about to go!

VALENTINI

And so you took it upon yourself to baptize him? You, who had no religious education? *(Anna begins to weep copiously)* You claimed in your sworn deposition that you only recited the prayer when the little boy woke up. And what woke him up? The water in his face! Isn't that right? *(Anna nods)* According to the Church, a baptism is only valid if the prayer is recited in conjunction with the immersion in water. *(to the Court)* Thus, what the Signorina did is null and void. Even if she did what she says she did.

ANNA

(bewildered) Null and void? You mean, I didn't do it?

VALENTINI

(to Anna) You yourself were sick in bed at the time of the supposed baptism, were you not, Signorina? When questioned at the time by the police, your grocer Lepori testified that you'd complained of fevers and headaches on the very day before it happened. And then you blamed *him*. You said it was his idea to baptize the boy, am I right? *(Anna nods, miserably. The door to the cell opens and Lepori the Grocer aka the Young Priest steps in)*

LEPORI

I never spoke to anyone about baptism! I never even knew that woman's name. *(to Nina)* Baptize him, Nina! It's easy!

MORTARA

(shocked) What on earth-- ?

ANNA

How do I do it?

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MORTARA

This can't be true!

LEPORI

You take some water from a well, and sprinkle a few drops on the baby's head while you say "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost". Basta!

ANNA

But what if they see me?

LEPORI

You'll be dumping a glass of water on the forehead of a sick child. So what? You can save a soul!

MORTARA

She saved my soul! She believed in me!

LEPORI

God will bless you for it!

ANNA

I'm scared. Why should I stick my neck out?

LEPORI

Don't you want to go to heaven, you slut?

MORTARA

She went to heaven for it, I'm sure she did!

ANNA

(handing the list) Here's the grocery list. Plus an extra dozen eggs and two pounds of cheese. There are so many visitors at the house.

LEPORI

Even though the baby's sick?

ANNA

(bursting out) It's me who's sick! My head has ached for days and I have a fever! But those Jews won't let me rest—they keep me on my feet from morning till night. So

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give me the extra groceries and I won't have to come back again tomorrow! I wish I never had to see them again!

LEPORI

You're lucky you have a job, the way you behave. Give me that. *(he takes the grocery list)* I'll go get the cheese. *(he steps away and exits out the door)*

MORTARA

Why are we watching this? What is happening?

JUSSI

Silence in the court! *(to Anna)* Tell us, Nina, why did it take you five years to confess to baptizing the child?

ANNA

I was scared! It was only when another of the Mortara babies was sick that I realized what I'd done!

VALENTINI

You mean, you did a *second* baptism, you vixen?

ANNA

No! I didn't want to make the same mistake twice! So I quit. If I'd told them about Edgardo when it happened, they would've fired me on the spot!

JUSSI

But God would have blessed you! Tell the court how you did it. We're all ears.

ANNA

I drew some water from the well. I stood over the sleeping baby, He was so sweet, with his little round fists. He deserved to live. When no one was looking, I sprinkled some drops on his forehead. I said the words the grocer had taught me. And I gave him a kiss! *(beat. Wailing)* How did I know he'd grow up to be such a good boy? I thought by the morning he'd be dead!

JUSSI

But instead, he survived! And five years later, when you finally told your Confessor the truth, and word of your brave deed reached all the way to the Holy Pontiff, the child was taken from his unbelieving parents and given a new life. *(raising his eyes to take in the whole court)* Edgardo Mortara left Bologna a Jew, but he arrived in Rome a Catholic. It was a miracle. One of two miracles the Virgin Mary gave to us in that

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remarkable year of 1858—her apparition at Lourdes, and the conversion of Edgardo Mortara.

MORTARA

You see! Did you hear, Mamma? I was a miracle. A miracle!

VALENTINI

Edgardo wept the entire trip to Rome. He was terrified. He refused to get out of the carriage.

MORTARA

I did?

VALENTINI

He longed for his mother and father. When he got to the Catechumens, he knew it was a place of horror. He begged to go home, but he was forbidden to leave. There were spies surrounding the Vatican!

MORTARA

What spies?

MARIANNA

That's right. Immediately, people started marching, and sang songs! There were protests! Even in America! The newspapers ran stories, demanding justice! But it didn't matter! Because we lost, Edgardo!. The machinery of the Church defeated us. Just as it always will. *(she rises and calls out)* All rise! Order in the court! The evidence has been heard, and the Judges have deliberated. Count Ferrari will now read the verdict. *(to Mortara)* And then the Count stepped forward and brazenly manipulated the truth.

Count Ferrari, played by the same actor as Momolo/Pope, steps forward.

FERRARI

"After considerable deliberation, this Court has determined that on the evening of 24 June 1858, the police took from the Jewish couple Salamone, alias Momolo, Mortara and Marianna Padovani, their son Edgardo, and furthermore, that this action was *authorized by the government* as it was constituted at the time.

Therefore, there were not, and are not, grounds for proceeding criminally against the executors of the above-mentioned action and thus against the defendant Pier Gaetano Feletti of the Order of Preachers, formerly Inquisitor of the Holy Office in

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Bologna. Consequently, Father Feletti is not guilty, and should be immediately released from jail. The boy Edgardo Mortara will not be returned to his family.”

There are sounds of an outcry from the crowd. Church bells begin to ring out. The Chief Judge bangs his gavel, which turns into knocking on the door. Sounds of a crowd outside. The Young Priest slips in, carrying a bunch of lilies. When the door closes, it goes quiet.

YOUNG PRIEST

Father Pio!

MORTARA

What is it? What’s happening out there?

YOUNG PRIEST

They refuse to leave. They want a list of names.

MARIANNA

They always want names.

MORTARA

Names? Of who?

YOUNG PRIEST

The names of all the brothers in the Abbey. And what each of us was called before we came here.

MORTARA

Why would they demand such a thing?

YOUNG PRIEST

They think we’re harboring enemies. Especially Jews. I told them we were all Catholics here! I even brought lilies from the altar—I asked them to pray with us--

MARIANNA

(referring to the Young Priest) What a wonderful face he has, this Young Priest.

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YOUNG PRIEST

They spat at me. So I told them our names-- (*reciting*) Father Pio Maria Mortara from Bologna, Brother Boniface, originally Benjamin, from Liege, Brother Michael from France, Brother Jerome, Brother Paul—

MORTARA

(*picking up the litany*) Brother Francis who was Francois Rochaix, Brother Giovanni, who was Jean-Michel Legros from Bruges, Brother Gabriel from right here in Bouhay—surely they know *him*—

YOUNG PRIEST

They said there are rats everywhere—priests in Belgian abbeys, tainted with Jewish blood...

MORTARA

I know every soul here. We are the most devout brotherhood in Belgium.

YOUNG PRIEST

What should we do? Their eyes are full of hate.

MORTARA

(*Grieving*) Don't they have parents? Or children? Don't they remember what it means to love someone?

YOUNG PRIEST

We're being punished. Have we forgotten our vows?

MARIANNA

Have you forgotten your parents?

MORTARA

(*in anguish*) Have we forgotten our parents? What about your mother? Do you never think of her?

YOUNG PRIEST

Of course I think of her. I pray for her every day.

MORTARA

How could you have left her behind when you came here? How can you bear to live without her?

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MORTARA
YOUNG PRIEST

I live here. At the Abbey. This is my life now.

MORTARA
But why did your parents abandon you? How could they have left such a small boy alone outside the gates?

YOUNG PRIEST
We had nothing—no food, barely a roof over our heads—it was better--

MORTARA
No! Children should be protected—they should be *loved*—

MARIANNA
You *were* loved! Beyond imagining!

YOUNG PRIEST
Father Pio-- in all your years here, have you ever feared for your life?

MORTARA
Here? No. *(beat)* But as a boy, I was frightened all the time.

MARIANNA
(shocked) What?!

YOUNG PRIEST
Me too.

MORTARA You?
Why?

YOUNG PRIEST
My father was so bitter—he came after me with a whip--

MORTARA
No! That's not what I meant! My papa never hurt anyone—never—he made snowflakes out of cloth—he threw them in the air and made us shout with laughter!

Momolo runs across the stage, chasing an unseen Edgardo. Marianna laughs.

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MORTARA
MOMOLO

Run, Edgardo, run! Quick, before I cover you with snow! *(he disappears)*
Papa! *(agitated, rising and scattering the petals of the lilies on the ground)* I scatter these petals like the tears of our Lord, who wept for our sins! His tears fell in the garden of Gethsemane... and everywhere a drop fell, a lily grew. The lilies of the field. So many flowers. So many tears. *(beat)* Weep for me.

MARIANNA

Tell him about your childhood, Edgardo. *(Mortara looks at her, then back to the Young Priest)*

MORTARA

What do they want from us?

YOUNG PRIEST

A victim. Someone to satisfy their rage.

MARIANNA

He loves you. I can tell.

YOUNG PRIEST/MARIANNA

They asked about you. *(beat)* Why did you leave your family?

MORTARA

I didn't leave them! They left me.

MARIANNA

(quietly) No, Edgardo. No.

YOUNG PRIEST

Could they not afford to keep you?

MORTARA

It wasn't about money! *(he stops)*

MARIANNA

Tell him.

YOUNG PRIEST

What was your name, when you got here?

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MORTARA
MORTARA

Why does it matter?

MARIANNA

Why won't you tell him?

MORTARA

(shaken, ignoring her) Sit down. It's so cold—I can't feel my fingers.

YOUNG PRIEST

There's frost all over the trees. The branches are white. In May!

MORTARA

How strange. The whole world, covered in snow...

YOUNG PRIEST

God is warning us, Father Pio. Something terrible is happening...

MORTARA

(regrouping) The Church is our parent now, Brother Nicolas. We must have faith.

YOUNG PRIEST

Why did you choose this Abbey?

MORTARA

There was a war on—

YOUNG PRIEST

There's a war on now. Belgium will be destroyed.

MORTARA

It never changes. When I was your age, violent fanatics were attacking the Pope. Even my brother Riccardo had joined the battle! Don't let those soldiers terrorize you. They will threaten us, but we will carry on as we always have--

YOUNG PRIEST

We can't! They're not going away, Father Pio. This is the moment God has been preparing us for. We have to fight back --it's our calling!

MORTARA

(beat. Angry) Stop staring at me with those eyes!

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MORTARA
YOUNG PRIEST

Whoever they're hunting down, we have to help them—we have to honor our vows!

MORTARA
(paranoid) I know that look! It was the wild expression my brother Riccardo had when he broke into my rooms at the monastery—

YOUNG PRIEST
What are you talking about?

MORTARA
It was late afternoon-- I was minding my business—learning my prayers—I was such a good boy—I knew all my Latin—I had harmed no one! *(backing away)* I see you! I recognize fanatics! know what you're trying to do!

YOUNG PRIEST
I'm trying to help. To protect the weak! Just as you taught me to do. The world is splitting apart right before our eyes.

MORTARA
That's what they said in Rome before they sacked the Vatican. Those men out there are *soldiers*, Brother Nicolas! They're evil. Never trust a soldier!

The Young Priest morphs into Mortara's favorite brother, Riccardo. He pulls a red sash out of his pocket and proudly drapes it across his chest.

RICCARDO
Don't you trust me, Edgardino?

MORTARA
I'm warning you!

RICCARDO
The world is cracking open! The tyranny of the Papal States is over! History is ours!

MORTARA
(wide-eyed) Riccardino...

RICCARDO
Garibaldi has won! We're all Italians now! It's a whole new world! You have nothing to fear.

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MORTARA

MORTARA

(trembling) Don't say that so loud—they'll kill you!

RICCARDO

I climbed the walls of the monastery—I looked in every room—I promised Mamma and Papa I would never give up till I found you—and here you are!

MORTARA

(beginning to get frightened) Papa was right! He warned me—

RICCARDO

He said you would be frightened—but I told him you'd know it was safe because it's *me!* Your favorite brother! *(reassuring)* Papa's right behind me—he's on his way from Bologna—he has waited so long for this day to come. No—no—he is weeping in the Vatican—

RICCARDO

In the Vatican? What are you talking about?

MORTARA

Don't you know my Papa—the Pope of all Christendom?

RICCARDO

(bewildered) The Pope is not your Papa!

MORTARA

You must not make me violate my vows! You will not turn me into an apostate!

RICCARDO An

apostate?

MORTARA

(crying out) Anathema! They will call me "anathema"! They will throw me into the mouth of the devil.

RICCARDO

They know who you are, Edgardo! Everyone knows.

MORTARA

No one knows anything. Where have you been? Where have all of you been? You're not my family—not anymore—

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MORTARA
RICCARDO

You can't really believe that. *(softly, urgently)* For twelve years, there has been an aching gash of sorrow in our house. *(he reaches out to touch Mortara, who longs to be held by his brother)* We have never stopped holding you in our hearts. We breathe the same breath. We're made of the same flesh. The same blood. The same spirit. Look. Look what I brought you. From Mamma. *(he hands Mortara a letter, from his mother. Marianna looks up, and smiles at Edgardo)*

MARIANNA

(quietly) "Carissimo! When you read this letter, you will know that the joyful day has finally arrived. I never thought it would come, did you? It's a miracle. Now we no longer have to choose between our faith and our love. You can come home!"

MORTARA

(in anguish) Mamma! Is it true? I can come home?

RICCARDO

Yes! *(laughing)* Dance with me, Edgardino! Like we used to do, at home! In the snow! *(he rises and starts dancing, clapping his hands and swirling around, laughing)* Come! You remember! *(he tries to get Mortara up. Mortara resists)* You see? You're free! It's time to celebrate! *(They start to dance. Riccardo is laughing, clapping and swirling. Mortara begins to enjoy himself)*

MARIANNA

My boys! My fabulous boys! Look at you!

RICCARDO

What a sight! Edgardo, dancing around in the robes of a Priest! *(Mortara stops, ashamed. Moves away from Riccardo. Beat)*

MARIANNA

Why did you stop?

MORTARA

(resisting) I'm a priest. Dancing is forbidden.

RICCARDO

It's still in your bones—in your soul-- I knew it would be. Nothing has changed. Mamma longs to see you again.

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MORTARA

She does?

RICCARDO

The whole world is trying to rescue you.

MORTARA

What's going to happen?

RICCARDO

You'll have your freedom back! You'll be Jewish again.

MORTARA

How? How will I be Jewish again?

RICCARDO

You'll have a family! A past!

MORTARA

What past?

RICCARDO

History! You'll belong to people you've never met, going back thousands of years!

MORTARA

I can't! I can't go back! *(he backs off, placing one hand over his eyes to shield him from the sacrilegious sight and extending the other hand in front of him to keep Riccardo from coming near him)* Get back, Satan! Get away from me. Take off that assassin's uniform! *(Mortara throws himself on the floor, prostrate)* You have to leave now, Riccardo. Before they catch you. Before they catch both of us. Or we'll be killed on the spot.

RICCARDO

By whom?

MORTARA

The Papal Police! *(Riccardo and the Young Priest are still merged in Mortara's confused mind)* You are my fiercest enemy! *(he tears the red sash off Riccardo and tosses it away)*

RICCARDO/THE YOUNG PRIEST

I'm your greatest love.

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MORTARA

The Virgin will never let me go!

THE YOUNG PRIEST

You're right. *(back in the present, quietly)* The Holy Mother is waiting for you in heaven, Father Pio. She will never abandon you.

MORTARA

Is that true? Please God let it be true. On the Day of Judgment, she will take us in her arms and hold us close. I believe that with all my heart.

YOUNG PRIEST

Amen. *(beat. He eyes Mortara quietly)* And now? What now, Father Pio?

MORTARA

We mustn't get distracted. Brother Boniface was screaming in the night again... he's in pain — we must fetch the doctor--

YOUNG PRIEST

We will tend to him ourselves. We've hidden his wheelchair in the barn. Otherwise they'll come after him and take him away.

MORTARA

(shocked) Take him away? Why? What has he done?

YOUNG PRIEST

He can't walk. *(Mortara takes that in)* That's how they think. *(beat)* When Brother Boniface gets terrified, he forgets all his French words—he keeps calling out in Basque, but no one understands that language—except you!

MORTARA

Can you move him into a different cell, so they won't know where he is? A cell nearer to mine, where I can look after him?

YOUNG PRIEST

I can try. *(beat)* Will you come out and address the soldiers?

MORTARA

What good would that do?

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YOUNG PRIEST

You're our father. You could explain to them that they're wrong—that we're not hiding anything—

MORTARA

And if they don't believe me?

YOUNG PRIEST

If we don't produce a suspect, they'll round us all up and deport us. Just as they did at that convent in Liege.

MORTARA

(horrified) They rounded up the nuns?

YOUNG PRIEST

They're giving us twenty-four hours.

MORTARA

(shocked) Is the Day of Judgment upon us, then?

YOUNG PRIEST

It feels that way.

MORTARA

(urgently) Tell me! When the Rapture comes—when I am standing at the Gates of Heaven-- *(panicking)* Will the angels let me through? Will I be welcomed into the land of the saved? Will I see Paradise? Will I finally rest in the arms of the Lord? Or has it all been for nothing? Will they slam the gates in my face? Will I be damned? *(pacing around)* Tell me, Brother Nicolas. When the God of Judgment peers into my soul-- what will He see? Who will He find?

YOUNG PRIEST

(bursting out) Stop asking me that! This is not your tragedy!

MORTARA

(outraged) How dare you speak to me like that?

YOUNG PRIEST

(cowed) Forgive me. I didn't mean--

MORTARA

(agitated) I know what you're thinking! *Anathema!* You think I'm anathema, don't you?

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YOUNG PRIEST

No!

MORTARA

I am not one of those filthy scum. I will not be attacked by their dogs! Tell them! Tell them if we see Jews here, we will shoot them on sight!

YOUNG PRIEST (*shocked*)

Father Pio! You don't mean that.

MORTARA

Can't you smell them? They're everywhere! They pollute the world! They smell of money!

YOUNG PRIEST

You sound like my father.

MORTARA

I learned it as soon as I got to Rome! The Pope told me everything. It's a conspiracy.

YOUNG PRIEST

What is?

MORTARA

The so-called "opinion" of the world! All those Jewish newspapers! All those sanctimonious Americans and violent Frenchmen! Backed by money and press barons and politicians—*lies!* False news to destroy the Church! To attack our beliefs. Tell them! Tell them I am pure!

YOUNG PRIEST

No one is pure! They're taking everyone. We must hide who we can—we must not cast stones—

MORTARA

(interrupting ferociously) We must! We must cast stones or they will be cast at us!

YOUNG PRIEST

(trying to stay calm) Surely you don't believe that innocent people should get hurt...

MORTARA

Innocent! Who is innocent? You were innocent and your parents left you to die on the streets.

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YOUNG PRIEST

All the more reason I should save someone else.

MARIANNA

He learned that from *you*, my love! Listen to what he's saying.

MORTARA

We must be vigilant, Brother Nicolas. There are enemies everywhere. Have you forgotten what Jesus said? "For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and a man's foes will be those of his own household." That's what he said.

MARIANNA

He was wrong.

YOUNG PRIEST

That's right! We must take the cross and follow Him! We must lift up the vulnerable and protect the weak.

MORTARA

No one protects the weak.

MARIANNA

You did!

YOUNG PRIEST

You are my Father, my spiritual father... I revere you, and love you—

MORTARA

I never asked you to love me.

YOUNG PRIEST

You didn't have to ask.

MORTARA

I'm not worth revering, Brother Nicholas. I wish I'd died years ago.

MARIANNA/YOUNG PRIEST

But you didn't.

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YOUNG PRIEST

So many times, even when the waves of despair crashed over you, you never gave up—

MORTARA

What waves of despair? Don't say such blasphemous things!

YOUNG PRIEST

You think we don't notice when you stop eating? When you stop drinking, and speaking? When you confine yourself to your bed with your face turned towards the wall for days on end-- until you finally reemerge at Mass, looking like death-- ?

MORTARA

What I look like is unimportant. When it gets dark, go search the barns. The grain bins. The closets. Make sure there are no strangers hiding in there. If you won't do it, I'll enlist Brother William—he's not afraid to sniff out Jews ...

YOUNG PRIEST

You're wrestling with the angels, Father Pio.

MORTARA

We must all wrestle! Why do you long to help Christ-killers and atheists? You are blind to the ways of the world.

YOUNG PRIEST

Then let me be blind. *(he turns and makes his way out)*

MARIANNA

(outraged) Edgardo!

MORTARA

(fighting back) Leave me alone! *(beat. From the other side of the cell, Momolo Mortara enters)*

MOMOLO

Edgardo! My own child. We knew they'd try to poison your mind. What we never understand is why you *listened*, you of all people, who were so filled with love.

MORTARA

(with longing) Papa! You don't understand...

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MARIANNA

No. We don't. *(crossing to her husband)* You think your father was a dog? You think he polluted the world? I wish you could have watched him fight to bring you home.

MOMOLO

We went before the Inquisitor. We begged him to give you back to us. Did you know that? Did I never tell you about that night?

MORTARA

No. *(beat)* Or maybe yes. *(beat)* Please, Papa, please—this is not the time--

Momolo turns to greet Friar Feletti, the actor who played Lucidi and Jussi, who steps in from the other side, a Rosary in his hands.

MOMOLO

Please, Father, please— My name is Momolo Mortara. I am the father of the little boy Edgardo, and this is his mother—

FELETTI

I know who you are.

MOMOLO

What makes you think my son has been baptized? We have lived with him every day since then and I can assure you it is not so.

FELETTI

The rules of the Holy Tribunal have been scrupulously followed.

MARIANNA

Surely the Church recognizes the sacred bond between parent and child. You can't think it's right to remove him from us this way.

MOMOLO

This shouldn't be happening -- it's all a mistake!

FELETTI

Are you saying God makes mistakes?

MOMOLO

It wasn't God—it was a *Policeman*—your Policeman! He claimed Edgardo had been baptized—but it's not true!

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MARIANNA

We're a nice quiet family, Father. Well, not exactly *quiet*, we have nine children you see, so there's always a bit of commotion, but--

FELETTI

(interrupting) Nine children? And you can't spare one to honor the Blessed Virgin?

MARIANNA

(bursting out) He's my son!

FELETTI

We have it on credible evidence that five years ago, when Edgardo was lying sick in bed, indeed, while he was near death, a kind Christian believer baptized him, so that his soul would not be lost to God.

MOMOLO

His soul was never lost to God!

MARIANNA

Edgardo knew his Torah portion before he was four—

MOMOLO

He was a devoted member of our little congregation—

FELETTI

There's no congregation in Bologna. You're lucky we even allow you to live here.

MOMOLO

Jews have always lived in Bologna!

FELETTI

More's the pity. *(to Marianna)* You should rejoice in his new life. Prepare to say farewell to him tomorrow.

MARIANNA

Tomorrow?

FELETTI

Creating a nasty scene will benefit no one, least of all you.

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MOMOLO

This is against the law.

FELETTI

Not in the Papal States.

MARIANNA

(getting hysterical) We're asking—*begging*—for another chance!

MOMOLO

(trying to calm her) Where is the harm of returning Edgardo to us? What use is he to the Church?

FELETTI

What *use*? He is a Catholic! All Catholics are held in the loving bosom of the Church. I am under no obligation to respond to your questions. The Holy See has acted.

MARIANNA

Are we nothing to you? Are we rats? Are we invisible? You would not take a kitten from the cat as cruelly as you steal my son! *(turning to Mortara)* Do you see? Do you see what your Holy Catholic Church has wrought?

FELETTI

Pope Pius is the best friend the Jews will ever have.

MARIANNA

He has harmed the lives of thousands of our people.

FELETTI

(rising) Get out! You know nothing! The Pope has opened the ghetto gates in Rome, he has eliminated the weekly conversion ceremony, he has supported your ungrateful tribe as generously as he could.

MOMOLO

Have you ever been in the Roman ghetto, Father? Have you ever tried to tread on the filth and bile that covers its streets? A place where children are supposed to study, to thrive, to grow up to be God-fearing and just-- it's a sewer! A mountain of garbage and excrement.

FELETTI

That's just propaganda! Besides, if conditions for the Jews in Rome are as bad as you describe, all the more reason you should celebrate the conversion of your son. He

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will enjoy the divine protection of the baptized. And he will sleep in a clean bed. You should do the same.

MARIANNA
Sleep in a clean bed?

FELLETTI
Yes. And renounce your faith!

MARIANNA
(shocked) What?

MORTARA
What?

FELETTI
Get baptized. Accept Our Lord Jesus Christ into your heart. Your son will bless you for it.

MORTARA
He's right! I would have blessed you a thousand times--

MARIANNA
How can you demand such a thing?

FELETTI
Many Jews have done it. To save their souls.

MARIANNA
My soul is safe! *(Time stops for a moment. Marianna calls out to her son)* Edgardo, my love, come! It's sundown! Mamma's waiting! Time for prayers! *(Young Edgardo rushes in, kneels beside her happily)*

EDGARDO
Here I am, Mamma.

MARIANNA
You lead, my angel! You know it all so well. I'll follow. *(they sing their Sh'ma together. It is calm and beautiful. Mortara watches, transfixed. As they conclude, Momolo turns to Feletti)*

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MOMOLO

(quietly) You see, Your Eminence? This is who we are. Being Jewish is not a coat that you can shed. It's not an error to be corrected. It's our body and soul. It's what we eat and drink. It's our connection to the world.

MORTARA

No! Being Jewish was the source of all your fear! You could have saved yourselves!

MARIANNA

(to Mortara) What you ask is like demanding we change the color of our eyes, the rhythm of our heartbeat. There is a path that we follow-- the tracks of a thousand footsteps across time, the imprint of so many ancestors -- these are the things we must hold on to, Edgardo. If we abandon them, we are nothing.

FELETTI

If you won't give up your faith, then perhaps you should give up your son.

MARIANNA

What?!

MOMOLO

No! *(enraged)* You will regret this. Victor Emmanuel is waiting in Sardinia—he's ready to bring all of Italy together—he won't look kindly on what you're doing! Even the American President--

FELETTI

(sharply) Him? Heroic President Buchanan? Who leads a country where slave children are routinely taken from their parents and *sold*? You think he'll help an angry Jew?

MOMOLO

I know he will! I'll make sure he does. *(Momolo disappears)*

MARIANNA

(to Mortara) He never stopped trying, your Papa. Never. Until it killed him. You understand? So now you must make your peace with God, Edgardo. Whatever God you believe in. It's a terrible thing you have done.

MORTARA

It's a terrible thing *you* have done! You refused to let me grow up—you held me tethered to my childhood like some kind of stray dog!

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MARIANNA

You can't walk away and leave behind your history just because something easier comes along—

MORTARA

Easier? Do you think it is *easy* to become a Catholic? To follow the teachings of the Holy Trinity? To become a priest? Are you mad? *(beat)* It has been the fight of my life. I have moved forward—always forward—towards the light—

FELETTI

(to Marianna) I'm sorry you have failed to see the light. I hope you can find your way out. The corridor is very dark at this time of night. *(Marianna moves away)* Idiots. *(Feletti exits)*

MARIANNA

The darkness is of your own making, Edgardo. You act as if you have no past. But a man without history is a hollow shell. That cannot be what you long for—

MORTARA

My spirit will live on eternally—

MARIANNA

Where? There is only one life! One chance! One moment to love someone, to extend a hand, to carry the world forward. That's what our faith gives us, Edgardo—a chance to be part of *life!* A chance to love! *(she gestures towards the sweater on the bench)* You see that sweater? It was the last thing he ever gave you. *(Mortara looks at the old blue sweater on the bench. Marianna crosses away, rejoining Momolo, who enters carrying a bundle of Edgardo's things. They move across the stage to the Convent of San Domenico, where Edgardo is being held after his capture)*

MOMOLO

Wait, dearest! He's too small to carry all of that.

MARIANNA

Is it cold in Rome? Colder than here? Shall we give him your winter coat?

MOMOLO

He's too tiny. It would drag behind him like a train. I'll give him my sweater. It smells a bit of furniture paste... it will make him remember... *(Mortara buries his face in the sweater)*

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MORTARA

I have it, Papa! Brother Nicholas found it—today— *(he holds it out to his father)*

MARIANNA

He must be so frightened, the little mite. He has never spent a night apart from us! He didn't even have his blanket! *(looking in the windows)* Do you think he's had his breakfast? *(calling)* Edgardo! It's Mamma! We're here, my love—are you hungry? I have a panino for you! Papa and I are right outside!

A Guard enters from the Convent. Momolo rushes to him.

MOMOLO

Excuse me, Sir—we are here for our son—for the child, Edgardo Mortara, who was taken into custody last night—

GUARD

Yes?

MOMOLO

We're here to say goodbye. Father Feletti promised—Edgardo hasn't said goodbye to his mother—

GUARD

That little Jewish boy? He's gone.

What? No! That's impossible! Where is he? Where have you taken him??

GUARD

(shrugging) As far as I know, they went to Rome.

MARIANNA

They can't just *take* him! We have his clothes! His food! His breakfast!

GUARD

The carriage left an hour ago.

MARIANNA

Edgardo!!

MOMOLO

But how can that be? We never said goodbye!! *(Mortara watches in horror)*

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MARIANNA
MARIANNA

He won't be able to sleep! He needs his blanket. His little books! How could they take him without telling us?

GUARD

It looked like rain this morning. They figured they'd get out before they got wet.

MARIANNA

(stunned at the news) Wet? They were worried about getting wet?

GUARD

Be quiet! This is a Convent!

MARIANNA

We're not animals. Edgardo's our son. He's our *son!* *(she approaches the Guard)* We'll give you everything we've got. What is it you want? Money? Furniture?

MOMOLO

Marianna—no!

MARIANNA

(seductively) How about a woman's touch? Are you looking for love? Shall I give you a kiss? *(She puts her arms around him)* Take me to your rooms. Tell me what to do.

MOMOLO

Stop! Don't do this-

MARIANNA

(fanatically) We need to find him. *(to Guard)* I need to find my son. I'll do whatever you ask. I'll wear a cross if I have to. Tell me what you want.

GUARD

Nothing. He's gone. That's it. *(he moves away. Marianna and Momolo are devastated. They turn to Mortara)*

MOMOLO

We prayed to God a thousand times a day to show us what to do.

MORTARA

I know, Papa. *(Momolo begins to leave)*

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MARIANNA
MARIANNA

Your Papa never gave up! Every morning he woke up with a new plan, a new way to save you.

MORTARA

(calling after him) Forgive me, Papa! They told me you'd forgotten me. They said my papa had been lost to me forever—but that I would be given a new Papa! A papa in heaven who loved me, as much and more as my own father. *(to Marianna)* You mustn't worry—I've been given another father to devote my life to! The Father whose son died for our sins.

MARIANNA

When will you finally realize? No one dies for other people's sins.

MORTARA

He promised eternal life!

MARIANNA

This is the life we are given, Edgardo. Right here. Right now.

MORTARA

How can I bear to think of you suffering in hell while Jesus is waiting for me in the Kingdom of Heaven?

MARIANNA

For eighty years, your family has been waiting for you right here on earth. Isn't that more important?

MORTARA

Nothing is more important than salvation. I wish you could imagine it, Mamma! When I heard the music that day in the cathedral, I knew it was playing for *me*. It was calling to me. Out of love. I knew I would be born again! You should have been with me that day—you'd have seen how kind that policeman was, how he taught me to understand—

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MARIANNA

What policeman? *(Lucidi enters with Young Edgardo)* That awful man? That's who taught you?

MORTARA

He's the one who showed me the way forward.

MARIANNA

He's the one who stole you from our house!

LUCIDI

Come sit with me, Edgardo. *(he smiles)* I've been sent by the Pope to bring you to Rome. *(Edgardo sits beside Lucidi on the bench. Lucidi pulls out Edgardo's battered little suitcase. The sound of horses, of a carriage moving)* Are you hungry? *(Edgardo shakes his head)* Thirsty? *(beat)* Have some water—it's so hot today. *(Mortara takes a sip of water from his glass)* Better? *(Edgardo nods. Mortara puts down his glass)* Don't be scared. We will look after you. *(Edgardo looks down and begins fingering something gripped in his hand)* May I see? May I see what you're holding? *(beat)* I'll give it back, I promise. *(Edgardo holds out his Star of David. Sounds of a violin. Lucidi looks at it carefully)* Is that your Star of David? *(Edgardo nods)* Do you pray with it? *(Mortara nods)* I see. Say your prayer for me.

EDGARDO

Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonaie Echad..." Hear Oh Israel, The Lord our God..."

LUCIDI

Can I give you something? Something just as valuable to me? *(Lucidi reaches around Mortara's neck for his Medallion of the Virgin. He takes it off and holds it in his open palm. The sound of the violin fades)* Isn't she beautiful? *(beat)* Do you know who that woman is, engraved on the medallion? *(Edgardo shakes his head)* She's the Virgin Mary, Mother of Our Lord Jesus Christ. We sometimes call her...

MORTARA/LUCIDI

Our Lady of Sorrows.

LUCIDI

Do you know why she's crying?

EDGARDO

For all us sinners!

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LUCIDI

And for the Jews, who refuse to become Christians.

EDGARDO

(looking up) Me?

LUCIDI

No, my boy. You're a Christian now, remember? *(a moment of silence. Mortara contemplates the medallion)* She's crying for your mother and father. And for all your brothers and sisters too.

MARIANNA

We were all crying, Edgardo. Your whole family. We were crying for years and years.

LUCIDI

(still holding the Medallion of Mary) She loves you, Edgardo. She will take care of you.

MORTARA

(turning to her) Like you did, Mamma!

LUCIDI

(to Edgardo) Would you like to keep it? *(Mortara stares at the medallion)* Shall I put it around your neck? *(Edgardo puts his medallion back around his neck)* I'll put your Star of David in your suitcase, shall I? *(he does so)* Look out the window, my boy! You see? There's the Cathedral in Fossombrone. Do you want to take a look? It has a giant rose window full of angels and prophets. I could give you a candle to light. Would you like that? Would you like to present a candle to this Lady, who loves you with all her heart? She will rejoice to see you.

EDGARDO

She's never met me.

LUCIDI

She's the Mother of us all. All of us love the Madonna, just like you love your Mamma. And she loves us. Do you understand? She will never let you down.

EDGARDO

I want my real mother.

LUCIDI

You have a new Mamma now! Shall we go into the Church and visit her? I will teach you a little prayer to say with the candle, to let her know how much you love her. It

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goes like this: *(Lucidi lights a candle in the cell)* "Hail, Mary, full of Grace, the Lord is with Thee; blessed art thou amongst women." *(Edgardo joins in. They say the prayer together)* "And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus Christ. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen." *(Lucidi stares at him)* Very good. Have you heard that one before? *(Edgardo shakes his head. Suddenly we hear the sound of bells. It is time for prayers. Edgardo stands up immediately and makes as if to remove his hat)*

MORTARA

Listen!

LUCIDI

The Campanile! You hear the bells welcoming you? As you enter the church, you must tip your hat, to show your respect. Can you do that? Like this. *(Lucidi demonstrates tipping his hat)*

MARIANNA

I can't watch--

LUCIDI

Watch, Edgardo! When you step inside, you must make the sign of the cross. You dip your finger in holy water as soon as you enter the church. And then you make this sign. *(Lucidi makes the sign of the cross)* Our Lady will see you and bless you.

EDGARDO How

do you know?

LUCIDI

I'll show you! She's waiting for you. Listen. *(Lucidi urges Edgardo forward and the two of them exit down the hallway as if into the Cathedral. A choir sings. Mortara listens with incredible pleasure)*

CATHEDRAL CHOIR

(singing)

Sancta Maria, Mater Dei,
Ora pro nobis peccatoribus,
Ora, ora pro nobis;
Ora, ora pro nobis peccatoribus,
Nunc et in hora mortis, In
hora mortis nostrae. In hora,
hora mortis nostrae, Ave
Maria!

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MORTARA

Can you hear the music, Mamma? It was the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard. It came from somewhere high up in the cathedral vault, like a choir of angels singing from paradise!

MARIANNA

Why do you think Catholics build their churches with high ceilings, my love? To make their worshippers feel small and pathetic -- so that their only hope is to escape their earthly existence and ascend to heaven. Such a desecration of the human spirit! In our little shul we feel embraced—we are not dwarfed by God--

MORTARA

I *wanted* to be dwarfed by God. Life is a transitory station! I lit my candle and stared up at the rose window, glowing with hundreds of colors—the colors of precious jewels. There were angels with wings sculpted along the walls— and wise men in long robes—kind women with outstretched arms—all looking down at me and smiling. They were calling to me! “Edgardo!” “Edgardo Mortara!” *(as he says his name, Edgardo stands looking up at the cross)*

MARIANNA

(heartbroken, calling out towards Lucidi) How could you have done that to him? Children are so fragile—their brains—their hearts—their little bodies--

MORTARA

He was the fragile one. Look! *(looking up at a cross)* Above the altar there was a man, weeping. I could hardly look at him, his face was so sad. On his head was a crown of thorns. His hands were bleeding. There was a gash in the side of his body. And lilies scattered on the ground. I wondered who he was. Why he'd been hurt. I thought someone should take care of him, before he bled to death.

MARIANNA

He was a Jew, that man. Didn't they tell you? A Jew who unfortunately became a fanatic.

EDGARDO

(Edgardo steps back into the space and looks up at the cross) I have to help him.

MARIANNA

You can't help everyone.

MORTARA

I can try.

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MARIANNA

Then help the people you *know!* The people you love.

MORTARA

(insistently) It started to get dark. And then, right before I left--

MARIANNA

(quickly) Don't say it.

EDGARDO

(crossing himself) In the name of the father...

MARIANNA

Gone.

EDGARDO

And the son...

MARIANNA

Taken away.

EDGARDO

And the Holy Ghost. Amen. *(He bows to the cross. Kneels and begins to pray)*

MARIANNA

(unleashing) Coward! Where is your mind? Your heart? Where is the child I raised and adored? Think, Edgardo! The Church wants you to believe there is only one answer to every question. But out of the same roots grow so many branches— so many kinds of blossoms. You forget, my son-- we know who you are. Such a beautiful spirit! You come from a line of wanderers, as far back as history can remember. But you have wandered away from yourself. From your very *being!*

MORTARA

When I took Christ into my heart, all the broken pieces of my life came back together. I had a future. I realized that the sorrows and hardships of this life are not in vain but are steppingstones on the path to Paradise.

MARIANNA

The Paradise you are conjuring may be full of hope—but it's not a place people can *live*. You are needed by the world, Edgardo!

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MORTARA

That's not my calling—

MARIANNA

It must be. *(beat)* Otherwise, what are you? A book that has been erased and written over so many times the meaning is gone.

MORTARA

The meaning has *changed*...

MARIANNA

How could we not have protected you from that insane Pope? That's what I keep asking myself. What had we done to deserve that?

Organ music begins to play. Young Edgardo leaps up, excited. The music climaxes as Pope Pius IX steps forward in his splendid red robes and mitre. He is played by the same actor as Momolo. He opens his arms wide, gesturing to Edgardo.

POPE

Vieni! Vieni, carino! Come my child! I've been waiting for you for such a long time! A child! My own child. *(The Pope embraces and holds him tight)* Let me look at you! *(he does)* My Edgardo! They tell me you are a prodigy! A brilliant boy! They say you learned your catechism as soon as you got into the carriage to come here! Is that true? *(Mortara nods)* And your "Ave Maria" too? *(Edgardo nods)* It's a miracle! Can you read?

MORTARA/MARIANNA

Of course!

POPE

Of course! You Jews are nothing if not studious. Do you know how many years I have been longing for you? You will be my special charge! Like my own son! You will give me hope, won't you? You understand why I had to bring you here? You will help me through this terrible time, my sweet Edgardo. I will look after you and teach you and we will read Latin and sing psalms and you will never be sad again.

MARIANNA

He was crazy!

MORTARA

He was ill.

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POPE

Oh my son, what a heavy price I have paid for you! Heavier every day! The world hates me, do you know that? They write terrible things about me in the papers. Yes! And today, that evil Napoleon demanded I send you back to your parents. He says the French won't stand for it—but who cares about the French! Napoleon is conspiring with Cavour to drive the Austrians out of Italy and annex the Papal States. Over my dead body! *(The Pope's lips start to tremble and soon his whole body is shaking. Mortara is terrified. The Pope becomes quiet again)* Forgive me, Edgardo. I am not well.

MORTARA

And then he was shouting and falling and I had to help him. I always had to help him.

MARIANNA

How could he ask that of you? A seven-year-old child.

POPE

If you find me having a seizure on the ground, my son, you must hold me still until it passes, do you understand? *(He embraces Edgardo)* And you? What are you thinking, Edgardo? *(Edgardo stares at him silently)* Do you want to stay here, in the Vatican? With me?

MORTARA

(to Marianna) Did I want to stay?

MARIANNA

Of course not. You longed to come home. To us.

POPE

You are my prize.

MARIANNA

You were our whole world.

POPE

But they will try to take you away from me. *(He holds Edgardo tight)*

EDGARDO

(Edgardo looks at the Pope. But sees Momolo. He is confused) Papa? Papa! Mamma! I want my mother and father! *(Edgardo covers his face with his hands)*

POPE

Does it pain you to think of them? Would you like your Papa to come visit?

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EDGARDO

(anxious) I thought *you* were my Papa now!

POPE

Il Papa Pius IX.

EDGARDO

Where is my real father? The one with the chairs and the snow, in Bologna? *(beat. He takes the mitre of the {Pope's head, revealing Momolo. Pleased}* There you are! Salamone Davide Momolo Mortara. My Papa. And I'm your Edgardo! *(they embrace)*

MORTARA

Edgardo! People said it was a strange name for a Jewish boy. Not even Biblical. What kind of Jews name their children Riccardo, Erminia, Ernesta, Augusto, Arnoldo, Aristide, Edgardo, Ercole and Imelda?

MOMOLO

(laughing) It was for the future! For Italy! We were all going to be Italians and we would all have names that everyone could pronounce! Edgardo Mortara!

EDGARDO

Edgardo Mortara! And Riccardo! And Ernesta, of the beautiful cheeks...

MOMOLO

You and Riccardo marched around the house like tiny soldiers and sang patriotic songs, remember? *(he tickles Edgardo)* And then I'd come up the stairs at the end of the day with bits of cloth from the shop -- and we'd cut them up in tiny pieces and make it snow. Remember? I chased you around the house! *(he begins to chase Edgardo who laughs and runs away)* Run! Run, Edgardo, before you get covered in snow!

EDGARDO

I'm hiding! You'll never find me! Come and find me! *(He runs away; Marianna runs after him)*

MARIANNA

Don't leave us! Where have you gone, Edgardino? *(She runs off. The sound of knocking at the door. Mortara jumps up, panicked)*

MORTARA

Stop knocking! Leave us alone!

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POPE

(retrieving his mitre and calling out) Where are you, Edgardo? Are you hiding from me? Be a good boy or the soldiers will take you away and lock you up!

MORTARA

(crying out) No! We sent them away!

EDGARDO

(crawling out, terrified) Don't let them in! Don't let them take me!

POPE

(stroking his hair) You poor boy. You have been scared out of your wits. If you listen to me, I will keep the bad people from hurting you. *(calling out)* Go away! I have him now! There's nothing to worry about! *(The Pope screams)* I am infallible. Do you know what that means? I can never be wrong. But your family—your family is covered in shame! They killed our Lord. They are out to destroy me, they are going to tear apart the fabric of the Holy Catholic-- *(he starts to shake. An epileptic fit is coming on)* Leave! I can't—I have to go to my rooms—I'm— *(he collapses to the ground, having a seizure. Edgardo rushes to him, alarmed)*

EDGARDO

Papa! Papa! Papa! I'm here! *(he leans over the Pope and holds him. The Pope is heaving and twitching)* It's okay—it's me, Papa, Edgardo. *(he kneels down and comforts the Pope)*

POPE

Edgardo? *(he looks up at him)* You made me fall!

EDGARDO

I tried to help you! You were yelling—

POPE

About you! You and your evil family! Kneel down at once! *(EDGARDO does so)* Kiss my feet! *(Edgardo does so)* Now make a cross on the floor with your tongue. *(Edgardo hesitates, looks up at the Pope)* Do as I tell you! With your tongue, do you hear? *(Edgardo does so. Mortara watches in horror)* And now, stand up. *(Edgardo rises shakily and faces the Pope, who makes the sign of the cross over him)* In the name of the father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

EDGARDO

Amen.

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POPE

(backing away) Promise me you will stay with me, Edgardo, no matter what! Swear! Swear that you will always love me.

EDGARDO

I will always love you.

POPE

You have only to trust me. And all will be well.

MARIANNA

You have only to *think!* To remember! To stay true to yourself. Look. *(she hands him a packet of letters from the suitcase)* I wrote to you every single day!

EDGARDO

(caught up short) You did?

POPE

(urgently) Your parents will forget you, Edgardo.

EDGARDO

They will?

POPE

No one will care. Their letters will be burned. Your only hope lies with the Church. *(He lifts the incense burner from its stand and lights it. Liturgical music plays. He burns the letters. Mortara is horrified)*

EDGARDO

(to the Pope) What are you doing?

POPE

I'm making incense, my miracle child. Breathe it in! Listen to the music! Every day, you will become closer and closer to God.

MORTARA

Mamma! What's he saying?

MARIANNA

You'll see. *(to Mortara)* Some day, I promise you, the secrets in the white space will reveal their mysteries... and then you'll understand... *(she exits)*

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POPE

(to Edgardo) Every day, you will forget a little more about your past. Until finally one day, you will be entirely ours. *(Elena Mortara enters)*

ELENA

You are ours, Pio Edgardo. The connection never ends. That's what it means to be a family.

MORTARA

Elena! Elena of the beautiful cheeks!

ELENA

You're part of our history. No matter what he says.

POPE

(screaming, slightly fanatic) The Pope is infallible! *Infallible!* There will be no more dissent!

ELENA

(to Mortara) We will never stop dissenting.

POPE

In virtue of the promise of Jesus to Peter, the Pope when appealing to his highest authority is preserved from the possibility of error on doctrine and matters of faith. Do you not understand?!

ELENA

(to the Pope) You are preserved from nothing! Your days are numbered.

POPE

No more questioning!

ELENA

No more permission to kidnap children.

POPE PIUS IX

No more attacks on Papal authority.

ELENA

No more attacks on Jewish families.

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POPE

I am the Pastor Aeternus! My name will live forever! *(screaming)* I am infallible! Infallible! I am warning you! Should anyone, which God forbid, have the temerity to reject this definition of ours, let him be... *(screaming)* ANATHEMA!

MORTARA

(terrified) Anathema! Is that what I am? Is that what people think?

ELENA

No!

POPE

(smiling, reaching out to Edgardo, who crosses to him) No one will care, Edgardo. In a hundred years, your name will be forgotten. But not mine. By the Millennium I will be beatified!

EDGARDO

What is beatified?

POPE

I will be blessed among men!

ELENA

You will not!

POPE

And eventually, I will be sanctified!

ELENA

You'll be cursed! Run, Edgardo! While you still can! Save yourself! *(Young Edgardo runs away. (to Mortara)* You must understand. The people who come knocking on our doors are full of hate. They will always try to silence us. Don't give in! Resist their demands.

MORTARA

How? *(she opens the door and the Young Priest is standing there. Elena exits)* Brother Nicolas! I'm sorry. How could I have spoken to you that way? Forgive me.

YOUNG PRIEST

(emotionally) Of course, Father Pio. I know you don't believe those things.

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MORTARA

I am full of sin. Help me. What should we do?

YOUNG PRIEST

I've settled Brother Boniface in the infirmary behind some screens...

MORTARA

The infirmary...?

YOUNG PRIEST

(carefully) Along with a few small boys...

MORTARA

(Beat. Staring) What boys?

YOUNG PRIEST

The village has been ransacked-- their parents are terrified for their lives...

MORTARA

(gently, not with anger) What are you doing, Nicolas...?

YOUNG PRIEST

Jesus said, suffer the children to come unto me.

MORTARA

(carefully) Which children?

YOUNG PRIEST

All children are equal in the eyes of God. That's what you showed me, the day you brought me into the Abbey. *(Mortara nods. Beat)* If we don't hide them before the soldiers return, they'll be killed. Let us keep them here. I beg you.

MORTARA

How can I?

YOUNG PRIEST

You did the same for me, you know you did.

MORTARA

You had been called by Jesus.

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YOUNG PRIEST

And you answered the call!

MORTARA

We'll be putting the Abbey at risk—all of us--

YOUNG PRIEST

Everything is at risk! Think about those children. Someone must have blessed you when you were a small boy--

MORTARA

It was my Mamma and Papa. I wish you'd known them, Brother Nicolas! How we laughed! Our house was covered in snow!

YOUNG PRIEST

Snow? *(Momolo runs across the stage, laughing)*

MOMOLO

Where's my little snowman? Where is he hiding? Does he want a chocolate, to warm up his insides? Edgardino! *(he runs off. Sound of a crash offstage Mortara smiles)*

MORTARA

Where did it go? All that love? All those games and seagulls and broken chairs?

YOUNG PRIEST

I must go. There's so much to be done... I'll be back.

MORTARA

How could it all just disappear? *(Marianna appears, the Young Priest slips out)*

MARIANNA

Nothing disappears! Not completely.

MORTARA

Where is it?

MARIANNA

Waiting. Hidden in the white fire.

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MORTARA
MORTARA

What does that mean?

MARIANNA

Words—commandments—language—those are part of the black fire—that’s how the Torah guides our lives. But between those words—in and around the black fire—are the empty spaces—the margins—the silence. Inside that silence are teachings so deep they defy language. *(beat)* That’s where we love you, Edgardo. In the mysteries of the white fire. Where there are no more words.

MORTARA

(full of grief) Ti amo, Mamma. I see your face, every night, in my dreams—your sweet sad face...

MARIANNA

My face has changed, Edgardo. I withered up, like a plant that someone forgot to water. But your father, your sweet indefatigable father—he followed you everywhere! He kept hoping and praying that something would change—*(Momolo rushes in)*

MOMOLO

We’re full of hope, Edgardino! The world is changing! We’re waiting for you! By the clocktower at the train station at midnight. You can escape from the monastery before they see you and make your way to the station. Riccardo and I will be there. We’ll bring you home!

MORTARA

I can’t. The Pope won’t let me go, Papa! He wants me to flee across the border! *(A train station in Rome. Sounds of crowds and chaos.)* “All the bayonets of the world will not force me to hand this child over to the clutches of the Revolution and the devil”. That’s what the Pope told them! He sent the Rector to spirit me out of Rome!

The Rector appears and pulls Mortara towards him.

RECTOR

(whispering) No one will recognize you in civilian clothes. They’re looking for a young priest.

MORTARA

What should I do? What happens when my brother turns up at the station? Where do I go? What do I do?

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RECTOR

(pulling dark glasses and a cigar out of his pocket) Wear these black glasses and take this cigar. Even if you don't light it, keep it in your mouth. *(Mortara does so)* Now remember, they're no longer your family! They're nothing to you. Let them go! You will escape across the border and head for Austria where they still love Christ. The Pope has arranged a monastery to take you in. No one will know who you are. Here is your ticket. Don't move till the train has pulled up at the platform. Then you'll walk as quickly as possible behind me, and board the last carriage.

MORTARA

Give me my cross! *(in the distance hear, "Momolo! Momolo Mortara! Viva l'Italia!")* Listen! Did you hear that? They're shouting my father's name.

RECTOR

(stepping in front of Mortara) Stop it. He's no longer your father!

RICCARDO

(from across the stage) Edgardo! We're here! Beneath the clock tower! We're waiting for you!

MORTARA

(to the Rector) He came with my brother—they love me so much --

RECTOR

No one loves you but the Church. The day of your baptism, you ceased to belong to them ever again. *(more shouts offstage, cheers, music)*

MARIANNA

What kind of religion would believe such a thing?

RECTOR

You think you can go home to some pathetic ghetto in Bologna and pretend to be a Jew again? They will destroy you. You will be damned for all eternity! Do you want to be forgotten in the eyes of God?

MORTARA

Mamma!

Sudden light shift. Marianna is kneeling, holding her arms out to her son.

MARIANNA

Have courage, my son!

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MORTARA
MORTARA

I'm afraid!

MARIANNA

Kneel down! Say your prayers! (*Mortara kneels*) Go on! Sing them out, Edgardino, for all to hear! They're yours. They will keep you safe! The God of your ancestors will not abandon you!

MORTARA

(*terrified*) He *did* abandon me! He *has* abandoned me! I am nothing! I'm not your son anymore—you wouldn't love me if you knew me-- I'm not the boy you remember!

Lights shift. The train station. A soldier of Garibaldi appears with a scarlet sash and a rifle.

GARIBALDINO

(*seeing the Rector*) Excuse me.

RECTOR

Are you speaking to me?

MORTARA

Hide me!

GARIBALDINO

When's the next train to the border?

RECTOR

I wouldn't know, my friend—I'm only going as far as Bologna.

GARIBALDINO

You haven't seen a group of priests hiding out here, have you? Or one priest? A young one? A piece of scum trying to escape Rome?

RECTOR

No! Certainly not!

GARIBALDINO

One particular rat has slipped through the cracks. (*seeing MORTARA*) Is that guy with you? Why does he look so scared? (*he pulls Mortara from around the back of the Rector*)

RECTOR

(*stepping between them*) Crowds frighten him. He's deaf.

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GARIBALDINO

He would be just his age. The false priest who escaped. *(to Mortara)* How old are you?

MORTARA

(whispering) I am an old man. My time is nearly up. Leave me in peace.

RECTOR

(the sound of a train approaching) Ah! Excuse me, my friends. That must be our train! *(to Mortara)* It's time. Run! *(Mortara takes a step or two and then freezes when he hears Momolo and Riccardo calling out from across the stage)*

RICCARDO

We're waiting! Over here! Can you see us? Papa is with me! We're waving to you! Look!

MORTARA

(suddenly captivated) Papa! My papa! You came!

RECTOR

Shut up and run, you fool! God will protect you!

RICCARDO

Edgardino! My brother!

MORTARA

Riccardo! Papa! Stay with me!

RICCARDO

(from off) Come find us! Quickly. We're bringing you to Mamma!

MORTARA

I can't! I want you to bring Mamma to me! Please! I'll lead you all into Kingdom of Heaven!

RICCARDO

(from off) Let's go home.

RECTOR

I'm going.

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MORTARA
MORTARA

Let me save you!

RICCARDO

Come home!

MORTARA

They'll kill me!

RICCARDO

You are ours!

RECTOR

You are the Church's shining light.

(crying out) I am no one! No one! It's all a lie! *(to Marianna)* Why did you want me, Mamma? I lost the thread—I forgot who I was! I was a rat in a cage. Nothing but a filthy rat they wanted to kill. I could never come home. I could never get out. I'll never be saved. I'll never see the gates of Paradise. Stop watching me! Don't love me. Don't listen to me. Don't try to understand. I have sinned. There is nothing—nothing you can do to save me. *(he starts to scream. The sound of the train builds and then begins to disappear. He buries his face in his hands. The stage grows quiet. Riccardo puts Momolo's coat back on the Rector. Then Riccardo turns and exits, slowly. Mortara looks up. Momolo walks slowly across the stage, towards Marianna. Mortara's heart aches with sympathy for his father)*

MARIANNA

My dearest. You're back. *(beat. She looks at her husband with dread)* Where is Edgardo? Have you brought him home?

MOMOLO

I couldn't. *(beat)* They wouldn't let him go.

MARIANNA

(shocked) They have to! Riccardo promised. *(Momolo strokes her cheek)*

MOMOLO

Edgardo loves you so much. All he wants is to be in your arms again.

MARIANNA

(in despair) No.

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MOMOLO

He is well and healthy. He spoke only of home.

MARIANNA

(rocking herself) Stop talking. I can't bear it.

MORTARA

I can't bear it.

MARIANNA

(in a dull voice) It doesn't matter. *(to Mortara)* Nothing mattered anymore. I wanted to burn it all down. I didn't care.

MORTARA

You have to care.

MARIANNA

We no longer noticed what was happening. The fight was over.

MOMOLO

We let you go.

MORTARA

(horrified) Don't let me go!

MOMOLO

(holding Marianna) For twelve years, we have wandered the world, begging for mercy. We've taken the Inquisitor to Court and Petitioned the Pope. We've sent letters to Rothschild, to Buchanan, to Napoleon III. Our son Riccardo joined the militia and defeated the French. The Garibaldini took over Rome. And still we have lost our son.

MORTARA

No. Don't say that.

MOMOLO

I have failed. I failed my wife and children. I have failed every Jew in Italy and across the world. May God forgive me... *(he exits slowly)*

MORTARA

(full of grief) Papa!

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MORTARA
MARIANNA

And that was the end, Edgardo. *(she sinks to the ground)*

MORTARA

No! It was the beginning. I promise. There is always a new beginning.

MARIANNA

(quietly) Stop talking, my son. We've said enough.

MORTARA

Please, Mamma. Don't give up.

MARIANNA

What is there left to say?

MORTARA

One more thing.

MARIANNA

I'm so tired, Edgardo. I have tried and tried... *(there is a long silence. Mortara views his mother, crumpled on the ground. He kneels to her. Speaks to her gently)*
Listen, Mamma. The first time I ever preached, I spoke only of you.

MARIANNA

Of me? What is there to say about me?

MORTARA

It was the day of my ordination.

MARIANNA

Don't.

MORTARA

You would have been proud, Mamma. I know you would. *(he starts to take off his robes, stripping down to his long underwear)* It was in Poitiers. In France. In spring. I was so young—only 21— not even the minimum age to become a priest—but I was special—that's what they told me--so special—

MARIANNA

(sadly) Yes, love. You have always been special.

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MORTARA

I longed for you to be there. I kept hoping I would open my eyes and see you, you and Papa and Riccardo and Ernesta, all of you, watching me make my vows to God. I wanted you to understand that all your suffering was not in vain —

MARIANNA

But it *was*, Edgardo. It was all in vain. You never even renounced that terrible man.

The Pope appears. Marianna covers her ears.

POPE

My most beloved Edgardo,

Today marks the day of your ordination to the Priesthood, and I am too ill to be with you. Nothing in the world has filled me with as much joy as this event, which I have longed for since the day you arrived in my care twelve years ago, a little Jewish boy whom we set on the path of righteousness. You are a comet in a dark sky, my hope in a bleak and broken world. Your tale is miraculous. God chose an illiterate serving girl to invest you with the divine grace of God through the sprinkling of holy water over your tiny head. You were a lost soul, saved from the God-forsaken path of the infidel and brought into the care of the Pope himself. Your life is a tale of redemption and glory, in which you, Edgardo Mortara, now named Father Pio Maria, braved the threats of an ungodly world and chose to devote your life to spreading the word of the Holy Gospel. In honor of this glorious day, I have established a lifetime trust fund of seven thousand lire to ensure your support and well-being for the rest of your life. May you follow the ways of the Lord. My God bless you and keep you always, as I keep you in the innermost sanctuary of my heart.

With my eternal love, Your Papa.

MARIANNA

It's despicable.

MORTARA

But when the moment came for me to be ordained, I stood before the altar and lifted my eyes to heaven. *(lifting the glass of water and pouring the remains onto his head. He stands shivering in his long johns)* I was baptized anew. I was transformed by holy water. I became part of the Holy Orders. I could help the suffering and the poor. No matter what anyone said! Father Pio Maria Mortara was given the grace to minister to the world.

The sounds of organ music. Mortara begins to sing, with the Chorus. Marianna watches.

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MORTARA
ALLELUIA CHORUS

(singing) Jesus Christ is risen today Alleluia!
Our triumphant holy day!
Alleluia!
He who died upon the cross,
Alleluia
Suffered to redeem our loss Alleluia!

MARIANNA

Why are you telling me this?

MORTARA

Because then, as part of the ceremony, I told them a story, Mamma. A parable. I told it for you, and for Papa, and for all of us.

MARIANNA

(resisting) It's too painful. I can't...

MORTARA

How do you know? You haven't heard it yet! *(Mortara steps forward, as if addressing a crowd)* Beloved friends. My sermon to you this morning is about the ravages of doubt.

MARIANNA

(surprised) The ravages of doubt?

MORTARA

Why is it so hard to believe? Why is our faith so endlessly challenged? Why do we fall away from God, and have to keep renewing our vows? *(beat)* Here is a story. When I was a very small child, my Papa made furniture.

MARIANNA

(full of love) Momolo!

MORTARA

We had no money. No help. Papa never had the right equipment, he lacked a proper workshop, nothing was easy. Each time a chair was completed, one of his nine children would leap upon it during a snowstorm, and snap! Its back would break.

MARIANNA

(laughing, in spite of herself) That's true!

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MORTARA

Or it would get knocked off a cart on the way to delivery and boom—an arm would fall off. He was forever re-gluing his chairs, forever struggling to make a simple seat on which a weary person could rest his bones. I couldn't understand why he didn't give up, why he never got angry when something broke, when the same chair had to be repaired so many times, with furniture paste that never seemed to hold. Every day, the goal was just ahead of him. Every day, there were setbacks and mistakes. How could it have been so difficult? It was only a *chair!* Why didn't he give up and find an easier life?

MARIANNA

Because he loved his children so much! He believed in your future!

MORTARA

Yes. *(beat)* I have come to understand, over the course of my life, that faith is never easy and the glue rarely holds. God is mysterious and difficult to know. So many days, we feel lost in the snow, abandoned, without a place to rest our bones. But we continue to practice our belief, to repair our hearts, just as my Papa kept making his chairs. And bit by bit, we find a path towards God. The road is dark and strewn with broken pieces. But the Holy Virgin is lighting the way. All the saints whom we hold in our hearts are opening their arms and calling to us, just like our mothers did when we were small. They accept our doubts and our fears. They are patient with us, and kind. Some day they will shower us with their love. And then, my friends... then we will finally be released from doubt. We will find peace. And at long last, we will be able to rest. *(Mortara turns to his mother)* Rest, Mamma. *(There is a moment of silence between them. Then Marianna crosses to him and opens her arms)*

MARIANNA

My bambino. My love. My soul. My cherished child. Chosen by God. *(she strokes his face, and smiles)* You sounded just like a Rabbi!

MORTARA

What do you mean?

MARIANNA

Furniture and faith. Such a good analogy. Your Papa would have been so proud. *(calling out to Momolo)* Imagine, Momolo! A sermon on the ravages of doubt! On the necessity of making a good chair! I see it now. In spite of it all, in the end, Edgardo has remained one of us!

MORTARA

Do you think so?

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MORTARA
MARIANNA

(tenderly, to Mortara) A tortured Jew, full of chaos and contradictions, fearing the knock on the door. *(Mortara takes that in. Moves towards the door. Stops)*

MORTARA

It will come any moment. *(beat)* What should I do?

MARIANNA

(she reaches under the bench and pulls out his battered suitcase) Why do you think people like us leave a suitcase packed and ready in the hallway? You think this is new? It is the nature of the world. We have been on the run since the time of Moses, without a home, and without safety. It's what being Jewish means, my love. To wander. To escape. To be spat upon. To take care of each other. To start over in a new place, with new hopes. Over and over again, carrying our history with us, our endless longing to learn, to grow, to argue, to protest, to write, to love. Do you see? *(he takes her in. She crosses to him and looks him in the eyes)* I am your origin story. I am the repository of your childhood self.

MORTARA

I know that, Mamma.

MARIANNA

But now there is another love in your heart. I can feel it. I pray she holds you close. That she loves you as much as I do and helps you to survive. Because those who are knocking — they will know who you are. You will know too. And then you must choose.

MORTARA

Will we find each other in Heaven?

MARIANNA

(sadly) No. That can never happen.

MORTARA

I've smashed everything I loved.

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MORTARA
MARIANNA

That's what children do. *(beat)* But the Talmud tells us, in the fragments of broken vessels, there are a million shards of light.

MORTARA

I am a Priest. A Catholic priest. A Jewish Catholic Priest at the end of his life. *(beat)* Where do I find the light?

MARIANNA

Listen to your heart. Listen to the Virgin Mary, for all I care! We'll help you.

MORTARA

If I don't tell those soldiers who I am, Brother Nicolas and the whole Abbey will be destroyed. If I do... *(he stops. The Young Priest slips in. Mortara jumps up)*

YOUNG PRIEST

Father Pio! What's happened? Why are you undressed? *(Beat. He takes in Mortara's grief)* What's the matter?

MORTARA

You tell me. *(beat)* Tell me what to do.

YOUNG PRIEST

We're saving who we can. One life at a time.

MARIANNA

For a Priest, he sounds strangely Jewish... don't you think?

YOUNG PRIEST

May we hide some of them in the chapel? *(Mortara thinks. Beat)*

MORTARA

I'm thinking about Abraham, Brother Nicolas. One day, three strangers turn up at his tent unannounced. Do you remember? They're hungry and tired and filthy. But Abraham brings them inside. He feeds them, and soothes them, and washes their feet --

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MORTARA
YOUNG PRIEST

(picking up the story) And only after the strangers have eaten and drunk and rested does God finally reveal that they are not men at all...

MORTARA
But angels! Angels, Brother Nicolas.

MARIANNA
He was entertaining angels, unawares!

YOUNG PRIEST
(eyeing him carefully) Does that mean...?

MORTARA
I'm not Abraham. But I will try...

YOUNG PRIEST
(moved, overjoyed) Thank you.

MORTARA
You mustn't thank me. This is what I taught you. We're an Abbey. We have barns and a crypt and a hospital. We have dormitories and food and warmth. And a chapel full of pews where people can sleep. *(The Young Priest nods)* Hurry! Slip out the back and help who you can. I'll wait here.

YOUNG PRIEST
God bless you, Father Pio. *(The Young Priest slips out the side door. Beat. Mortara crosses to the suitcase. Sudden knocking on the door. Mortara freezes. He and the Marianna stare at the door. Beat. Knocking)*

MORTARA
They're nothing if not punctual. *(beat)* And now?

MARIANNA
(She pulls out his Star of David. We hear the violin tune mournfully playing. Mortara listens.) Choose life, that thou mayest live, thou and thy seed.

MORTARA
I have no seed.

MARIANNA
(tenderly) Whatever you do, I will always love you.

May 10, 2022

MORTARA

Is that true?

MARIANNA

Of course it's true. I'm a Jewish mother. *(she brushes her hand across his cheeks)* The traces of my hands across your cheeks can never be erased. *(Marianna disappears. Mortara begins singing softly)*

MORTARA

"Sh'ma Yisroel, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad. *(the Chorus of Descendants joins him in singing)*

CHORUS

Baruch Shem Kavod Melchuto L'Olam Va'ed. *(there is a long moment of Jewish prayer. Perhaps Elena Mortara is part of it. Just as it's ending, the knocking resumes. Shouts)*

MORTARA

I'm almost ready! Give me a moment.

(Mortara prays. Elena and the Descendants disappear. Beat. The Young Priest enters, ashen. He stops and stares at Mortara, as if he's seeing a ghost)

YOUNG PRIEST

Father Pio! The soldiers have ransacked the hayloft – where I found that sweater--

MORTARA

Papa's sweater! Yes. *(he looks around)* It's so cold. Where are my robes?

YOUNG PRIEST

You took them off.

MORTARA

Why? *(feeling his wet hair)* Why is my hair wet? *(he puts on his old sweater, shivering)* I have to go out. It's snowing. I'll put on the sweater. You see? It still smells of furniture paste—my Papa made chairs, Brother Nicolas, beautiful chairs – but they sometimes fell apart—

YOUNG PRIEST

(picking up the battered suitcase) Is this yours?

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MORTARA

MORTARA

Of course! My mother gave it to me. If you open it, you'll hear music. *(beat. He opens it)* Tell me. Why is this day different from every other day?

YOUNG PRIEST

The soldiers found it upstairs.

MORTARA

Why is this day different from every other day? Because on this day, we eat tears. Tears! Do you hear? We dip our herbs into tears – and we weep for the lives we have lost – *(looking around)* – so many ghosts—so many tears--

YOUNG PRIEST

They uncovered things from when you first came here.

MORTARA

But some day there will be sweetness! Apples—apple blossom—honey—dates—sweetness for the future.

YOUNG PRIEST

Italian books. Some civilian clothes. A blanket. A boy's jacket. And this. *(he holds out the Star of David)*

MORTARA

(clutching it tightly) My Star of David. *(beat)* So now they know.

YOUNG PRIEST

(steadily) Who are you?

MORTARA

I am Father Pio Maria Mortara.

YOUNG PRIEST

It's *you* they're looking for! *(beat)* Why could you not tell us the truth?

MORTARA

Forgive me, Brother Nicolas. The truth has so many coats...

YOUNG PRIEST

(anguished) I would have been so proud! You could have trusted me. I would have hidden you under my own bed for as long as it took. *(the knocking begins again. The*

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Young Priest goes to the door and yells out) Wait! Give us some time! (The knocking stops. The Young Priest turns to Mortara in despair) What will we do?

MORTARA

Such silence. *(beat)* The birds are all gone. *(beat)* Everyone is gone. Now we are nothing. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. We walk in the desert. We weep the tears of our ancestors. Two thousand years of tears.

YOUNG PRIEST

They're waiting for you, Father Pio.

MORTARA

(crossing to the window) It's snowing. (beat) Mamma calls it the White Fire.

YOUNG PRIEST

I don't understand.

MORTARA

My suitcase is packed. Is everything ready?

YOUNG PRIEST

How can you go out there? They'll kill you. *(beat)* Shall I go with you?

MORTARA

No. Leave me at the crossroads. Make a different journey. And don't look back.

YOUNG PRIEST

You have lived a life of secrets.

MORTARA

I have lived the life I could. *(after a beat, taking the Young Priest's hand)* Pray for your parents, Brother Nicolas. Even for your father, who beat you.

YOUNG PRIEST

You are my father.

MORTARA

Imagine I was never here.

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MORTARA
YOUNG PRIEST

It's impossible to imagine that. *(beat)* Are you Edgardo Mortara?

MORTARA

I am what's between the lines. *(beat)* Soon I will be covered with snow.

BLACKOUT.

END OF PLAY.

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