

April 25, 2024

EDGARDO or WHITE FIRE

By Carey Perloff

Careyperloff@gmail.com

415 265-7293

careyperloff.com

Representation:

Leah Hamos

The Gersh Agency

lhamos@gershny.com

212 634-8153

April 25, 2024

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, an upstage door, and some snow. 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, from age 7 to the present
- **VALENTINI** (the prosecutor, 40's), **MOMOLO** (Edgardo's father, 40's and up), **POPE PIUS IX** (50's and up), **GARIBALDINO, BROTHER BONIFACE**
- **YOUNG PRIEST** aka BROTHER NICOLAS (19); **LEPORI, GUARD, RICCARDO** (Edgardo's older brother, 20's)
- **JUSSI** (the defense attorney, 50's), **LUCIDI** (the Papal Policeman), **RECTOR**
- **MARIANNA** (Edgardo's mother, 30's to 70's), **ANNA MORISI** (20's)

ACTS and SCENES: The play is performed in one act and moves fluidly across time and place without literal changes in scenery or costume.

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; he 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 instead he fled, choosing to stay in the Church. 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 (led by Elena Mortara) are still fighting the Church over Edgardo's fate (and the proposed sanctification 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?

April 25, 2024

Prologue

Mortara is dozing on his bench in his cell just before dawn Everything is still. We begin to hear the fragments of a violin tune in the distance. Mortara stirs. Suddenly Momolo, Edgardo's father, runs across the stage as if chasing his son. Sounds of a storm. Snow.

MOMOLO

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

Marianna runs in, also tossing "snow".

MARIANNA

Where's my Edgardo? A blizzard is coming over the mountains! Where is he? *(spying him across the room)* Don't be frightened, little one—it's just cloth from papa's workshop!

MOMOLO

(tossing fabric pieces in the air) Wheeee! A storm of fabric! Down it comes!

MARIANNA

Is that you I spy in the corner? No, you're not Edgardo—you're a snowman!

MOMOLO

Look, snowman! See how beautiful the world is, all covered in white!

MARIANNA

(the violin plays. Marianna opens her arms to the sky) White snow! White fire! White sweetness! Taste it. God is sending us manna from heaven! So what if it looks like furniture paste! Eat up, little snowman! Climb up on that chair and open your mouth wide!

MOMOLO

(urgently) Wait! Not that chair, Edgardino! It's not quite— *(there is a loud crash; sound of a chair breaking. Mortara wakes up with a jolt and screams)*

Mortara's parents disappear. He is in his cell. An Abbey in Bouhay, Belgium. May, 1940. Right before dawn. Mortara looks around, disoriented from his dream, when a Young Priest, Brother Nicolas, emerges quickly from down a long hallway, carrying a bundle of clothing in his arms and a cup of something warm.

YOUNG PRIEST

Father Pio?

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

Brother Nicolas! *(he looks around, disoriented)* Is it time for Matins?

YOUNG PRIEST

Not yet. I brought you something warm... *(he hands Mortara a cup of something warm and drops the clothes on the bench. Mortara holds the cup, still half in his dream)*

MORTARA

Bless you. I must have overslept. *(beat. Confused)* Did you hear something breaking just now?

YOUNG PRIEST

(anxiously) Antwerp is being bombed. We got the news this morning.

MORTARA

Antwerp? *(disoriented)* I thought it was a chair...

YOUNG PRIEST

(sitting beside Mortara) It's happening, Father Pio. *(beat)* The war has come to Belgium.

MORTARA

(full of grief) Alas. Why does everything break, Brother Nicolas? Just like my poor Papa's chairs! *(sipping the drink, then looking up at the Young Priest)*

YOUNG PRIEST

(mystified) Chairs?

MORTARA

Every time we climbed on them, they'd shatter... and we'd come crashing to the ground!

YOUNG PRIEST

There are people fleeing the city and heading our way—that's what they say—

MORTARA

What people?

YOUNG PRIEST

Anyone in the line of fire, I guess. All the Jews of Antwerp are trying to escape—

MORTARA

And come *here*? We're an Abbey—a Christian brotherhood—

April 25, 2024

YOUNG PRIEST

Even so. The brothers are so afraid--

MORTARA

I must go speak to them--

YOUNG PRIEST

Write us one of your sermons! Please. Tell us what to do.

MORTARA

(searching) First.... light a candle, Brother Nicolas. The Virgin Mother will give us guidance.

(The Young Priest lights a candle and sings the beginning of a psalm: "May the Virgin of Virgins intercede for us, now and forever". Mortara joins him. They sing together. Then the Young Priest turns to Mortara)

YOUNG PRIEST

And now? Soon it will be morning! What shall we tell the Abbey, Father Pio?

MORTARA

What can one say... ? *(he begins to think... to improvise a sermon, pacing around)* "My brothers, today we are faced with an impossible quandary... We are an Abbey, a brotherhood of priests devoted to the worship of Jesus Christ... evil is spreading across Europe—and now it appears to be arriving at our own doorstep. Why does God allow such things to happen? What is the right way to respond? *(pause. Pacing)* It's true that we are not a part of this war... its demands do not concern us here in Bouhay... and yet...and yet... if we do nothing... if we say nothing... *"(pause. He searches for the right words)*

YOUNG PRIEST

Go on. *(Mortara stops in his tracks)*

MORTARA

When I was a boy, Brother Nicolas – when I was only seven years old—*(he stops)*

YOUNG PRIEST

What? *(beat. Mortara is silent)* When happened?

MORTARA

(shaking it off) It doesn't matter. What matters is what's happening now... *(pacing, thinking)* "How do we know what's right? What does God ask of us in times of crisis? The role of the Church is not to intervene in the affairs of the world or to threaten the safety of our own clergy on behalf of—" *(suddenly, we hear the sound of knocking. It is loud and aggressive. Mortara looks up)* Who is that? *(beat. Silence)* Where was I? *(Mortara picks up where he left*

April 25, 2024

off) "Must we threaten the safety of our own clergy on behalf of those who—on behalf of apostates and non-believers and—" *(another sound of knocking. Mortara calls out)* Go away! This is a House of the Lord! *(we hear the sound of dogs barking outside. Mortara is frightened)* Dogs! I hear *dogs*...

YOUNG PRIEST

(terrified) Is it the Germans? Already?

MORTARA

It's not even dawn!

YOUNG PRIEST

Shall we go hide? I found a place in the hay loft...

MORTARA

(rousing himself) Why should we hide? We have done no wrong, committed no crimes! Tell the brothers to bolt the gates to the dormitory and keep the doors locked. I will prepare the service and join you in a moment. We will carry out our tasks, like every other morning. *(beat. Looking gently at the Young Priest)* Fetch some lilies from the altar. Bring them outside and give them to whoever is knocking. *(beat)* Go on. Don't be afraid.

The Young Priest nods and exits. Mortara huddles on the bench.

MORTARA

(looking up) Holy Mother of God! Help me! What shall we do? Tell me what to do, what to say! *(shivering)* It cold! I'm so cold...

Violin music. Marianna appears and crosses to him. She picks up the sweater.

MARIANNA

Then put on your sweater, Edgardo.

MORTARA

My sweater? *(looking at her, astonished)* Mamma? *(long beat. He stares at her)*

MARIANNA

It's me, my love. I'm here. Pay attention.

MORTARA

To what?

MARIANNA

To me.

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

What is happening? Am I dreaming?

MARIANNA

Alas, no. You're awake, Edgardino...

Knocking on the door. Mortara jumps up.

MORTARA

Who is that? *(more knocking. Lights shift. We go back in time, to February 1858, Bologna. Mortara speaks energetically, like a child expecting something exciting)* Mamma! Listen! Someone's knocking!

MARIANNA

I heard, my angel! Climb up and look out the window! See who it is.

MORTARA

You look, Mamma!

MARIANNA

(peering out the window) There's a policeman down there—

MORTARA

(as a child) Which policeman?

MARIANNA

Not one we know...

MORTARA

Go away, Policeman! Leave us alone-- *(Loud knocking)*

MARIANNA

What if he means trouble? Go hide in your room.

MORTARA

Why?

MARIANNA

(staring out the window) He has a big blue coat! He's walking through the door downstairs. *(More knocking, right outside)* We should pray, Edgardino!

MORTARA

April 25, 2024

(bravado) No! I'm a seagull! I'll fly away so they can't find me!

MARIANNA

It's too late. He's here. *(kneeling)* We seagulls better say our prayers.

MORTARA

Do seagulls speak Hebrew?

MARIANNA

Special seagulls do! Come! Quickly! *(she begins to pray. Mortara joins her)*

MARIANNA

"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)*

MARIANNA

(trying to stay calm) Good evening, officer--

MORTARA

Go away! You can't be here! Leave us alone!

PIETRO LUCIDI (Papal Police)

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

MORTARA

What does he want, Mamma?

LUCIDI

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

MARIANNA

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

LUDICI

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

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

(eagerly) Tell him, Mamma! Let's tell him our names!

MARIANNA/MORTARA

(like a mantra) Riccardo, Erminia, Ernesta, Augusto, Arnolfo, Aristide, Edgardo, Ercole and the baby, Imelda.

LUCIDI

May I see them, please?

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... you and your husband have been the victim of a betrayal.

MARIANNA

A betrayal?

LUCIDI

Your son Edgardo...

MORTARA

That's me, Mamma!

MARIANNA

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

MORTARA

(with pride) I am her blessing from God!

LUCIDI

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

MARIANNA

Who cares about Church law? We're Jewish.

April 25, 2024

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

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.

MORTARA

What's "communion", Mamma?

MARIANNA

It's a mistake! Who told you this?

LUCIDI

The Inquisitor sent us. Father Feletti. *(Marianna blanches—this is the worst)*

MARIANNA

Father Felletti? *(beat)* The Inquisitor? *(she holds on to Edgardo)* Then take me to him! Let me talk to him.

LUCIDI

That won't be possible.

MARIANNA

Edgardo is a good Jewish boy! Tell Father Feletti! A leopard can't change its spots. *(to Mortara)* You have a Jewish *neshama*—no one can take that away from you! *(to Lucidi)* I'm talking about his *soul*, Signore—

LUCIDI

His soul will be under the protection of Pope Pius IX himself.

MARIANNA

The Pope?

LUCIDI

Give me the boy.

April 25, 2024

MARIANNA

No. Never. I will never give him up.

LUCIDI

Don't make it worse.

MARIANNA

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

LUCIDI

(putting his arms out) It is the will of God. It must be done.

MARIANNA

I won't give him up. Look. He's sleeping. *(she closes Mortara's eyes)*

LUCIDI

Perhaps that's for the best.

MARIANNA

(kneeling beside Mortara, stroking his forehead, enfolding him in her arms) He's part of my body. My blood runs through him. I won't survive.

LUCIDI

Yes, you will. We all survive.

MARIANNA

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! *(clutching Mortara, whispering)* Edgardo, my precious! They're trying to take you away! They want to convert you!

MORTARA

Why, Mamma?

MARIANNA

(kissing and kissing him) Kiss your Star of David! Go on! Kiss it! Now—and always! *(as he does so, we hear a few notes of a violin—the melody does not necessarily cohere yet-- but runs under the next set of exchanges)*

April 25, 2024

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! And now you steal our children? It's enough! God will destroy you for this!

LUCIDI

Please, Signora. Give us the boy. *(Lucidi peels her arms apart and pulls Mortara away. Mortara screams: Mamma! Lucidi disappears. Lights restore to the cell. Marianna turns to face Mortara)*

MARIANNA

No wonder you scream in your sleep.

MORTARA

I don't scream in my sleep.

MARIANNA

I hear you. *(beat)* I have always heard you.

MORTARA

How?

MARIANNA

When I close my eyes, your cries echo in my ears. I will never stop hearing them—*never!* I wanted to save you—

MORTARA

I saved myself!

MARIANNA

I wish that were true.

MORTARA

(looking at her in confusion) What happened to you, Mamma? Are you burning in hell?

MARIANNA

Hell is right here, Edgardo. The chickens are coming home to roost.

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

Chickens? What chickens?

MARIANNA

(smiling in spite of herself) You were never good at metaphor...

MORTARA

You should be in *heaven*, Mamma—instead of haunting me like some deranged ghost--

MARIANNA

That's a simile! Are you calling your mother a deranged ghost?

MORTARA

Why are you here? Am I dying?

MARIANNA

Death is the least of it. Consider what you've done with your life.

MORTARA

I have dedicated myself to Jesus.

MARIANNA

You have lived a lie!

MORTARA

I have lived a life of service.

MARIANNA

You need to face the truth, before it's too late.

MORTARA

You were the only one who wouldn't accept the truth.

MARIANNA

No one accepted it – except those lunatics at the Vatican. You think that was *justice*? To abduct a child right from under his mother's nose? It was a crime! A crime against humanity!

Sound of a gavel banging. 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)

April 25, 2024

VALENTINI

It was a crime! A crime against humanity!

MARIANNA

Listen to him, Edgardo. (*pointing to Valentini*) He was the only one who got it right!

MORTARA

Why? Why revisit things that could never be changed?

VALENTINI

An act of shame! Right from under her nose! 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

His first mistake! 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 Feletti was and continues to be driven by an implacable hatred of Judaism.

JUSSI

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

MORTARA

That's right! It's a gift! It cannot be reversed.

April 25, 2024

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 always has been Church law and will be forever after.

MORTARA

It was the law.

MARIANNA

Whose law?

JUDGE
(MORTARA)

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! You smelled so beautiful—I could always tell when you passed through the room –

VALENTINI

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

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.

April 25, 2024

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) That's enough! Your point is irrelevant. We are here to try the Inquisitor, not the girl.

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.

MORTARA

(urgently coaching the witness) But you told us stories, wonderful stories! Tell them! All of us crowded onto one big bed! Remember?

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!

April 25, 2024

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!

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. Nina becomes Marianna again.

MOMOLO

(laughing) 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 fuck I had! Oh what a fuck, Signora Rosina."

MARIANNA

(laughing back at him) I'll bet it's 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? Decent girls won't work for Jewish families.

April 25, 2024

MARIANNA

Why did we ever come to Bologna? It's awful. We don't even have a synagogue!

MOMOLO

(urgently) We will! Soon we'll have everything. I make the best chairs in town!

MARIANNA

They disintegrate when you sneeze!

MORTARA

That's a terrible thing to say!

(Sound of the gavel. Crossfade back to the court. Shawl and robe on)

VALENTINI

After you gave up your own baby to the Church and returned to work at the Mortara household, 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!

MORTARA

She wanted to send my soul to heaven!

VALENTINI

But 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

April 25, 2024

(bewildered) 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.

ANNA

(nodding vigorously) That's right!

VALENTINI

And then you blamed *him*. You said it was his idea to baptize the boy! *(The door to the cell opens and Lepori the Grocer aka the Young Priest steps in)*

LEPORI

(to the court) 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) Lepori? What on earth-- ?

ANNA

How do I do it?

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 a sick child's head. So what? You can save a soul!

MORTARA

She saved my soul! She believed in me!

LEPORI

God will bless you for it! Dirty Jews.

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

He's lying. It was a miracle! Everyone said so. A simple illiterate servant girl invested a small child with the miraculous powers of divine grace—

ANNA

(to Lepori) I'm nervous. Why should I stick my neck out?

LEPORI

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

MORTARA

She went to heaven, you fool, I'm sure she did! She rescued me from the God-forsaken path I had been born into!

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. I wish I never had to see any of 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)*

JUDGE (MORTARA)

(to Jussi) You may cross-examine the witness.

JUSSI

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 heretic?

MORTARA

Don't torment her—she's so confused!

ANNA

No! I wasn't going 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 exactly how you did it.

April 25, 2024

ANNA

I drew some water from the well. I stood over the sleeping baby, He was so sweet, with his little round fists. 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 remarkable year of 1858—her apparition at Lourdes, and the conversion of Edgardo Mortara.

MARIANNA

A miracle? Only in a rigged court is the abduction of a child a “miracle”!

MORTARA as the JUDGE

(overriding her) All rise! Order in the court! The evidence has been heard, and the court has deliberated.

MARIANNA

(to Mortara) They always say the evidence has been heard! And then they commit whatever horror they want and call it justice.

MORTARA as the JUDGE

“After considerable deliberation, this Court has determined that on the evening of 24 June 1858, the police took from the Jewish couple Momolo and Marianna Mortara 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, formerly Inquisitor of the Holy Office in 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 Young Priest opens the cell door. He is carrying a bunch of lilies and looks upset.

MARIANNA

It was a sham! A horror!

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

They were trying to do the right thing, Mamma! They were following the laws of the Church. Why can't you understand--?

YOUNG PRIEST

(bewildered) Father Pio?

MARIANNA

The whole world knew the truth! You could have rallied them all to the cause of freedom! They were shouting your name, across the world!

MORTARA

What difference does it make? What's past is past! I wanted to have a *future!* A life!

YOUNG PRIEST

Who are you talking to?

MORTARA

Brother Nicolas! *(recovering)* I'm talking to... the holy Mother.

MARIANNA

Tell him about your *real* mother! Make him understand!

MORTARA

I'm trying to understand what is happening.

YOUNG PRIEST

They wouldn't take the lilies.

MORTARA

Were they policemen?

YOUNG PRIEST

Soldiers.

MORTARA

What did they want?

YOUNG PRIEST

A list of names. Everyone living at the Abbey.

MORTARA

(a traumatic memory) Names?

March 16 2024

MARIANNA

They brought dogs! They'll get what they want.

MORTARA

What use are names to them?

YOUNG PRIEST

They threw me against the wall. They wanted to know what each of us was called before we came here.

MORTARA

Why would they care?

MARIANNA

Think, Edgardo!

MORTARA

Did they come to take someone away?

YOUNG PRIEST

They claim there are rats throughout the country—communists, subversives, priests in abbeys, tainted with Jewish blood...

MORTARA

What does that have to do with us? We are men of God, Brother Nicholas! They are *thugs*! Thugs with dogs.

YOUNG PRIEST

I pretended that I didn't understand what they were asking.

MORTARA

Good for you. We have nothing to hide. We are a brotherhood.

YOUNG PRIEST

They'll give us till tomorrow! That's what they said.

MORTARA

Tomorrow?

YOUNG PRIEST

What are we going to do?

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

We will proudly tell them who we are. *(reciting)* Brother Boniface, originally Benjamin, from Liege, Brother Michael from France, Brother Jerome, Brother Paul, Brother Giovanni who was Jean-Michel Legros from Bruges, and Father Pio Maria Mortara from Bologna--

MARIANNA

(reciting at the same time) Riccardo, Erminia, Ernesta, Augusto, Arnoldo, Aristide, Edgardo, Ercole and the baby, Imelda!

YOUNG PRIEST

(distraught) I always thought the Abbey would be safe, no matter what!

MORTARA

Nothing is safe.

MARIANNA

Oh, my son—if you only knew...

YOUNG PRIEST

Are they going to close this place down? Will they take us away?

MORTARA

The evil of the world is in constant supply...

YOUNG PRIEST

We have to hide! They saw Brother Boniface in his wheelchair and demanded that he stand up— they said there was no need to keep defective people alive.

MORTARA

Defective? (pacing around) How I wish I were more like my Papa, Brother Nicolas. He was so relentless-- he never gave up! Every time he got knocked down, he'd rise again, with a huge smile on his face—and throw fabric in the air—and make us all laugh!

YOUNG PRIEST

My father was the opposite. Don't send me back home. I'll do anything. I'll hide in the hay loft and eat straw!

MORTARA

No one is sending you away--

April 25, 2024

YOUNG PRIEST

Then who are they looking for?

MORTARA

Whoever it is, it's not us. We are priests. Catholic priests. We are blameless.

MARIANNA

Oh Edgardino wake up! You were blameless when you were seven, and still they took you away!

MORTARA

That was different!

MARIANNA

It's true! You know it's true.

MORTARA

They took me away because I'd been baptized!

YOUNG PRIEST

Who took you away?

MORTARA

I was... rescued as a child—

YOUNG PRIEST

From what?

MORTARA

From a life of sin.

MARIANNA

From a life of *joy*, with your family! Tell him the truth!

YOUNG PRIEST

We all live in sin, until we are saved.

MARIANNA

What an awful thing to believe. Your past is always with you, Edgardo. Tell him who you are!

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

Who am I?

YOUNG PRIEST

Why do you ask?

MARIANNA

You are the one at risk—tell him!

YOUNG PRIEST

Tell me. I want to know! *(beat. Curiously)* When did you first come to the Abbey?

MORTARA

A thousand years ago...

YOUNG PRIEST

Why did you leave your family?

MORTARA

(deflecting) I don't remember! Why did you leave yours?

YOUNG PRIEST

Could they not afford to feed you?

MORTARA

(agitated) I didn't leave them. They left me!

MARIANNA

That's not true!

YOUNG PRIEST

What was your name, before you got here?

MORTARA

Why do you want to know?

YOUNG PRIEST

(fervently) You're my *Father*. You've taken care of me since I was seven, but aside from that story about the chairs, you've never told me a thing about yourself. Not a single thing.

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

What is there to tell? I have always cared for you... and looked out for you... like my Papa looked out for me!

Momolo runs across the stage, chasing an unseen Edgardo. Sound of children laughing.

MOMOLO

Run, Edgardo, run! Quick, before I cover you with snow! *(he laughs)* Wait! Be careful! Don't climb on that chair! *(sound of a chair crashing. Mortara screams)* The glue hasn't set! My poor little one—don't cry-- let me pick you up-- *(Momolo runs off. Mortara shivers, heartsick at the memory)*

MORTARA

I will do whatever I can to protect you, Brother Nicolas. You have to trust me.

YOUNG PRIEST

I do. Of course I do.

MORTARA

(he shivers) I'm so cold—I can't feel my fingers.

YOUNG PRIEST

There's frost all over the trees. The branches are white. In *May!* Maybe it's a sign!

MORTARA

Of what?

YOUNG PRIEST

The end of the world. *(his eye is caught by the sweater)* Is this yours? I meant to ask you. *(The Young Priest picks up the sweater. Mortara stares at him)*

MARIANNA

Yes! Tell him about Papa's sweater, Edgardo--

YOUNG PRIEST

I found a pile of clothes in back of the barn. Look. *(holding out the sweater)* The wool is so old it's beginning to disintegrate.

MORTARA

What were you doing in the back of the barn?

April 25, 2024

YOUNG PRIEST

I told you-- looking for a place to hide. In case they come back. (*staying focused on the sweater*) Is it yours, Father Pio?

MARIANNA

Look at his face! His eyes. The mystery is in the white space. Read between the lines...

MORTARA

(*to Young Priest*) At your age, when I was in Rome, violent fanatics were attacking the Pope. Even my brother Riccardo had joined the battle, but I resisted! Those soldiers will try to terrorize you. They might even try to take you away. But this time, they won't win! Not again! Never again! Taking a child is a crime—it's a *crime*!

YOUNG PRIEST

Why are they even concerned with us? There are thousands of people out there, fleeing the bombing and looking for shelter—

MARIANNA

I warned you! This is only the beginning.

MORTARA

God will take care of those poor people...

YOUNG PRIEST

And if they come here--?

MORTARA

Why do you ask?

YOUNG PRIEST

The moment we shelter any of them, the soldiers will bomb the Abbey. That's what they told me!

MORTARA

They can't do that—

YOUNG PRIEST

They will! Cook came in just as they were leaving—he said people are crawling through the mud at night so they don't get hit-- no one knows how long the resistance can hold out... the foreign Jews who'd fled to Antwerp are being hounded

April 25, 2024

out of their homes... the diamond merchants are gone—Cook says in a few days, they'll all end up hiding in our fields—

MORTARA

Are they that near?

YOUNG PRIEST

If the Germans find out—

MORTARA

I will plead with them myself for mercy! I am Father Pio Maria Mortara—they know who I am!

MARIANNA

They don't! But they will find out soon enough, Edgardo! And when they do—

MORTARA

(terrified, looking at his mother) What? What will happen when they do?

YOUNG PRIEST

(sensing Mortara's terror) What is it? *(beat)* Father Pio?

MARIANNA

That will be the end.

MORTARA

Of me?

MARIANNA

(beat) They never forget.

Mortara is frozen for a moment. Then he takes the sweater from the Young Priest and throws it to the ground.

MORTARA

This is not my sweater, Brother Nicolas. And it is not our war!

MARIANNA

If not ours, then whose?

YOUNG PRIEST

What should we do? Tell us! We trust you--

April 25, 2024

MARIANNA

They trust you!

MORTARA

Why?

YOUNG PRIEST

We *revere* you—

MARIANNA

They're counting on you!

MORTARA

Don't revere me! Don't count on me! (*anxious, confused*) What if I'm not worthy? When I am judged—when I am standing at the Gates of Heaven-- 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 naught? 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

How can I answer that?

MORTARA

(*agitated*) I know what you're thinking! *Anathema!* You're going to say I'm anathema, aren't you?

YOUNG PRIEST

Why would you think that?

MORTARA

I am not one of those filthy scum. I will not be attacked by their dogs!

MARIANNA

You will, Edgardo! That's what it means to be a Jew!

MORTARA

This war has nothing to do with me—with my life—with my task in the world—

MARIANNA

History has a long arm, my love.

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

I am a priest! I have a brotherhood to save!

YOUNG PRIEST

You will! We know you will. We should appeal to the Pope—

MORTARA

The Pope?

MARIANNA

Good luck with that! He's worse than all the Nazis combined.

MORTARA

Tell them! Tell them I am pure!

MARIANNA

No one is pure!

YOUNG PRIEST

Of course you're pure—you're our spiritual father—you have guided us through every crisis in our lives--

MARIANNA

(staring at the Young Priest) What a wonderful face he has! Such kind eyes!

YOUNG PRIEST

We would follow you anywhere!

MORTARA

Go find Brother Boniface—tell him that when it gets dark, we'll move him into a different cell, where he won't be found. Or maybe we'll all sleep in the chapel, where we can protect each other from harm. I will come up with a plan... some way to keep us safe... tell them-- *(the Young Priest nods and goes)*

MARIANNA

How can you hide from him?

MORTARA

My past has been erased—it's gone! There is only the present—

April 25, 2024

MARIANNA

Coward! The past is never erased—

MORTARA

I have been baptized in the image of Jesus Christ! I have been born again! I believe in the salvation of the Holy Spirit--

MARIANNA

It doesn't matter what you believe, it's what *they* believe that counts. Have you learned nothing in your eighty-eight years? The world is about to crack open, whether you like it or not. Terrible destruction and unspeakable acts. Children being taken from their parents— just like the Church took you!

MORTARA

The Church *saved* me. I am loved! I am held in the arms of God!

MARIANNA

Once upon a time, you were a rallying cry! Slaves in America, workers across Europe, peasants in remotest Russia-- everyone wanted to save the little Jewish boy. We were so proud! You were a symbol of everything they hoped for. And everything they feared. You can't have forgotten so much! I hear you screaming in the night--

MORTARA

Those are just dreams. Dreams! I am struggling to be worthy of salvation.

MARIANNA

You'll never find salvation if you leave those people to die in the streets.

MORTARA

All I have ever wanted, Mamma, is to end my days in paradise.

MARIANNA

What matters is not where you go *after* but what you do *now*!

MORTARA

You want me to risk my brotherhood to save those refugees?

MARIANNA

Jews. They're Jews. Jews and anarchists and Roma and subversives of all kinds. Yes. They are yours to save.

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

And if it damns me in the process and destroys my home?

MARIANNA

A crime against a single child is a crime against humanity. Don't you remember how your papa fought for you? As his papa had fought for him. And all the way back throughout history. That's how it goes.

MORTARA

Then why didn't you save me when you *could*?

MARIANNA

We *tried*! We did everything possible to save you! But it failed. We never even got to say goodbye! We waited and waited outside San Domenico – it was so cold— we brought everything you loved—

She rises, and we hear the sound of bells. Momolo enters carrying a bundle of Edgardo's things.

MOMOLO

Marianna! I've brought his warm clothes! And his favorite blanket.

MORTARA

(crying out when he sees his father) Papa!

Momolo and Marianna move across the stage to the Convent of San Domenico, where Edgardo is being held after his capture.

MARIANNA

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

MOMOLO

He's so tiny. It would drag behind him like a train. I'll give him my sweater. It smells of furniture paste... it will make him remember...

MORTARA

I remember, Papa!

(Momolo picks up the discarded sweater and places it gently around Mortara's shoulders)

April 25, 2024

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.

MARIANNA

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? *(to Mortara)* We never got to say goodbye!!

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

(full of grief) Papa!

MARIANNA

He won't be able to sleep! He needs his blanket. His little books! He can't sleep without his 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? We've got chairs!

MOMOLO

(humiliated) Marianna—please!

MARIANNA

Must we renounce our faith, as the Inquisitor demanded? *(seductively)* How about a woman's touch? Are you looking for love? Shall I give you a kiss? *(She puts her arms around him)*

THE GUARD

Stop it!

MARIANNA

Take me to your rooms. Tell me what to do.

MOMOLO

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.

April 25, 2024

GUARD

Nothing. He's gone. That's it. *(he moves away)*

MOMOLO

They will not get away with this. We'll show them who we are. *(he exits)*

MORTARA

(turning on his mother) How could you demean yourself that way? Either of you! You should have been grateful—

MARIANNA

Grateful?

MORTARA

I had been *chosen*! I was headed for a new life. A holy life!

MARIANNA

(appalled) Being Jewish is not a coat that you can shed. It's not an error to be corrected. We can no more stop being Jewish than change the color of our eyes.

MORTARA

(passionately) But we can *evolve*, can't we? We can choose a new path!

MARIANNA

Your *neshama* will be Jewish forever...

MORTARA

The Church gave me another soul, another father! The Father whose son died for our sins.

MARIANNA

No one dies for other people's sins. That's one of the stupidest things the church ever invented.

MORTARA

The Son of God grants us eternal life!

MARIANNA

This is the life we are given, Edgardo. Right here. Right now. How have you forgotten what I taught you?

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

It was another lifetime, Mamma. I was different person.

MARIANNA

I don't believe that. Listen. *(Marianna takes his hand. Slowly, she begins to sing a lullaby. Something begins to shift in Mortara. He remembers the music from his childhood. She looks at him, and stops singing for a moment)* Do you remember this song? *(Mortara nods)*

MORTARA

Yes! Of course I do.

MARIANNA

You would lie on your little cot with your eyes wide open until I sang a lullaby to put you to sleep. The other children let go of that early on... but not you...

MORTARA

Keep singing, Mamma—please --

(Marianna finishes singing the lullaby. She strokes his cheek)

MORTARA

(his eyes shining) Bless you.

MARIANNA

You always loved music.

MORTARA

Music is what changed my life, Mamma. That day, in the Cathedral of Fossombrone. I heard music as if for the first time. The most beautiful music in the world. When the organ began, I knew it was playing for *me*. *Calling* to me. I breathed it in and suddenly a whole world opened up before me! A world full of comfort and happiness! You should have come with me—you would have felt the same thing.

MARIANNA

You think so?

MORTARA

I'm sure of it. I felt safe for the first time since— *(he stops himself)* I felt full of joy! I wish you had seen how *kind* that policeman was, how he taught me to love —

April 25, 2024

MARIANNA

(shocked) To love?

MORTARA

To be protected once and for all from all the dangers in the world!

Lucidi enters and crosses to the bench beside Mortara.

LUCIDI

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

MORTARA

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? *(Mortara 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?

MORTARA

For all us sinners!

LUCIDI

And for the Jews, who refuse to become Christians.

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

(looking up) Me?

LUCIDI

No, my boy. You're a Christian now, remember?

MARIANNA

I hate that man!

LUCIDI

(while Mortara contemplates the medallion) She's crying for your mother and father. And for all your brothers and sisters too.

MARIANNA

We're all crying, Edgardo! We've been crying for so many years.

LUCIDI

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

MORTARA

(turning to her) She *has* taken care of me! She has, Mamma!

LUCIDI

(to Edgardo) Would you like to keep it? *(Mortara stares at the medallion)* Shall I put it around your neck? *(Mortara 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.

MORTARA

Me? 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.

MORTARA

I want my real Mamma.

April 25, 2024

LUCIDI

You have a new Mamma now! Shall we go into the Church and visit her?

MARIANNA

Oh my God.

LUCIDI

I will teach you a little prayer to say with the candle, to let her know how much you love her. It 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." *(Mortara 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? *(Mortara shakes his head. Suddenly we hear the sound of bells. It is time for prayers. Mortara stands up immediately and makes as if to remove his hat)*

MORTARA

Listen!

LUCIDI

The Campanile! You hear the bells welcoming you? When you step inside, you must make the sign of the cross. *(Lucidi makes the sign of the cross)* Our Lady will see you and bless you.

MORTARA

How do you know?

LUCIDI

I'll show you! Come. *(Lucidi urges Mortara 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,
Nunc et in hora mortis, In
hora mortis nostrae. In
hora, hora mortis nostrae,
Ave Maria!

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

It was the most remarkable sound I'd ever heard. It came from somewhere high up in the cathedral vault, like angels singing from paradise!

MARIANNA

The Paradise you are conjuring may be full of hope—but it's not a place people can *live*.

MORTARA

I will live there some day.

MARIANNA

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

MORTARA

I *want* to be dwarfed by God.

MARIANNA

(bursting out) You're an embarrassment to your upbringing! Don't you remember what the Torah says? Every beggar could be the Messiah.

MORTARA

That's not true. There is only one Messiah, and he was calling out to me! They were *all* calling, all the angels and the prophets! They were shouting my name. "Edgardo!" "Edgardo Mortara!"

MARIANNA

(heartbroken, calling out towards Lucidi) How could you have let him believe that? He was just a little boy.

LUCIDI

Look up, Edgardo!

MORTARA

I looked up! *(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. I wondered who he was. Why he'd been hurt. I thought someone should take care of him, before he bled to death.

April 25, 2024

MARIANNA

He was a Jew, that man. Did they forget to tell you that? A Jew who became a fanatic.

MORTARA

(Mortara looks up at the cross) I have to help him.

MARIANNA

You can't help everyone.

MORTARA

I can try.

MARIANNA

You should've helped the people who *loved you!*

MORTARA

(Beat. He feels her grief. Then, insistently) It started to get dark. And then, right before I left--

MARIANNA

(quickly) Don't say it.

MORTARA

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

MARIANNA

Gone.

MORTARA

And the son...

MARIANNA

Taken away.

MORTARA

And the Holy Ghost. Amen. *(He bows to the cross)*

MARIANNA

(unleashing) Coward! Where is your mind? Your heart? How can you have been raised Jewish and believe there's only one answer to every question? What do you think Jews do all day? We wander and we argue, we argue and we wander, forever

April 25, 2024

and ever. But you-- you have wandered right away from yourself. From who you *are*!
No wonder you can't sleep at night!

MORTARA

Who says I can't sleep? (*insistently*) Christ took the broken pieces of my life and made them whole again.

MARIANNA

You don't look whole. You look like a book that has been erased and written over so many times the meaning is gone.

MORTARA

The meaning has *changed*... You should be proud! The Pope taught me a new language—a new vision, a new way of seeing the world! He welcomed me with open arms! He opened my eyes to the Majesty of God! Do you know how it feels to be *chosen*? And not just by anyone, but by the most powerful man in the world!

Organ music begins to play. The music climaxes as Pope Pius IX steps forward in his splendid red robes and mitre. He opens his arms wide, gesturing to Mortara.

POPE

Vieni! Vieni, carino! Come my child! I've been waiting for you for such a long time!

MARIANNA

Don't make me watch this!

MORTARA

If you'd been there, you would have understood. Look at his robes, Mamma! His ermine collar! His magnificent cape! He was incredible!

POPE

A child! My own child. (*The Pope embraces him 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? (*Mortara nods*) It's a miracle! Can you read?

MORTARA/MARIANNA

Of course!

April 25, 2024

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 a madman!

MORTARA

He was a visionary! And he wanted me by his side!

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. They want to hand the whole country over to evil non-believers! 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. If you find me having a seizure on the ground, my son, you must hold me still until it passes, do you understand?

MARIANNA

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

MORTARA

He loved me! He trusted me with his life!

POPE

(embracing Mortara) And you? Are you happy, Edgardo? *(Mortara stares at him silently)* Do you want to stay here, in the Vatican? With me?

MORTARA

(with shining eyes) Yes, Papa!

MARIANNA

No! You longed to come home!

April 25, 2024

POPE

Your parents will appear in the night... they will burn your cross... they will try to steal you away from me!

MORTARA

Don't let them! *(terrified)* I'll hide. I know how to hide. I'll sleep in my clothes, every night! This time, I'll be ready, no matter what! Don't let me be stolen again!

POPE

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. 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)*

MORTARA

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!

MORTARA

I tried to help you! You were yelling—

POPE

About *you!* You and your evil family! Kneel down at once! *(Mortara does so)* Kiss my feet! *(Mortara does so)* Now make a cross on the floor with your tongue. *(Mortara hesitates, looks up at the Pope)* Do as I tell you! With your tongue, do you hear? *(Mortara does it)*

MARIANNA

No! *(in horror)* Oh my son!

POPE

And now, stand up and look at me.

MARIANNA

Don't!

April 25, 2024

Mortara rises shakily and faces the Pope, who makes the sign of the cross over him.

POPE

Swear that you will always love me.

MARIANNA

(full of grief) My beloved child.

MORTARA

I will always love you.

MARIANNA

I had no idea, Edgardino.

POPE

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

MARIANNA

(holding up a packet of letters) We tried so hard. I wrote to you every single day!

MORTARA

(caught up short) You did?

POPE

(urgently) Your parents will forget you, Edgardo.

MORTARA

They will?

POPE

No one will care. Their letters will be burned. Your only hope lies with the Church.

The Pope lifts the incense burner, lights it. Liturgical music plays. He burns the letters. Mortara is shocked.

MORTARA

Wait! What are you doing?

MARIANNA

What was he doing?

April 25, 2024

POPE

I'm making incense, my miracle child. Breathe it in! Listen to the music! Every day, you will forget a little more about your past. Until finally... one day... you will be entirely ours.

MARIANNA

You will never be theirs!

MORTARA

You weren't there, Mama! No one was there—I was all alone, in that huge palace--

POPE

All the bayonets in the world will not force me to hand this child over to the clutches of the Revolution and the Devil.

MORTARA

(terrified) The Devil?

POPE

Who are the Jews? Tell me, Edgardo! Tell me about the Jews!

MORTARA

The Jews?

POPE

What evils did they commit?

MORTARA

(reciting what he's been told) They killed our Lord!

POPE

What else?

MORTARA

They drink the blood of Catholic babies!

POPE

What else?

MORTARA

(panicking) I don't know!

April 25, 2024

MARIANNA

That's enough! *He* was the Devil, Edgardo—can't you see?

MORTARA

He promised me he could never be wrong!

POPE

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

MARIANNA

(yelling at the Pope) Our family 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.

MARIANNA

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

POPE

No more questioning!

MARIANNA

No more permission to kidnap children.

POPE

No more attacks on Papal authority.

MARIANNA

No more attacks on Jewish families. No more walling us up in your disgusting Ghettos!

MORTARA

(shocked at her audacity) Mamma!

MARIANNA

(continuing to attack the Pope) You gave our only cemetery as a gift to the nuns of St. Peter's and we had to dig up the bones of our ancestors and carry them away on our backs! *(to Mortara)* Did you know that, Edgardo? Don't you know how the Vatican

April 25, 2024

hates Jews? *(back to the Pope)* We pay a tax to finance the Catechumens, that evil conversion factory where you're trapping my son! It's enough!

MORTARA

Mamma, he's the Pastor Aeternus!

POPE

I am the Pastor Aeternus! My name will live forever! *(screaming)* 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?

POPE

It's what your family is!

MORTARA

(staring at his mother) My family? You mean... my Mamma and Papa?

POPE

Conniving murderers! Dishonest, disloyal, duplicitous and filthy!

MORTARA

Filthy? My family?

POPE

(with a cruel smile) Your family no longer exists. In a hundred years, your names will be entirely forgotten! Along with all traces of Jewish scum!

MORTARA

Our names will be forgotten?

POPE

But not mine. Never! By the Millennium I will be beatified! *(shouting)* I will be blessed among men!

MORTARA

(angrily) I won't let you erase us!

April 25, 2024

POPE

It's too late!

MORTARA

We'll fight back!

POPE

The Church always wins, my son. Long after you're gone, I will be canonized AS A SAINT! *(he disappears in a cloud of incense. Mortara cries out)*

MORTARA

Papa! Don't leave me! You promised to save me!

MARIANNA

(full of sorrow) Oh my son. My Edgardino. *(she touches his cheek)* I didn't understand. I should have come— I should have forced my way into the room like your brother! I should have followed you to Belgium—anything—anything but abandon you to the power of that man...

MORTARA

Nothing would have stopped him.

MARIANNA

(with grief) No wonder you had to flee.

MORTARA

He had guards watching me day and night. He warned me what could happen—he told me that Jews were sucking the blood of the world and that he was the only one who could protect me from you-- *all* of you—from my own family!

MARIANNA

And you believed him.

MORTARA

He promised me salvation. He taught me everything I know!

MARIANNA

He taught you to hate your own people.

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

I hid in my room. I said my prayers. I begged the blessed Virgin Mother for guidance--
- *(the Young Priest enters quickly)*

YOUNG PRIEST

(bewildered) Father Pio! We need to you come, right away--

MORTARA

What? *(frightened)* Don't stare at me that way!

YOUNG PRIEST

What way?

MORTARA

I'm warning you! *(backing away, paranoid)* I recognize that look--

YOUNG PRIEST

Father Pio! Hurry--

MORTARA

(backing away) I see you! I know who you are! I know what you're trying to do! But you won't succeed—I tell you—you'll never succeed in luring me out of here!

YOUNG PRIEST

What are you talking about?

MORTARA

Get out, Riccardo! *(shocked)* My own older brother, with a knife in his hand! God will punish you!

RICCARDO

No, Edgardino! I've come to rescue you! *(the Young Priest morphs into Mortara's favorite brother, Riccardo. He pulls a red sash out of his pocket and proudly drapes it over his chest)* Look! I've joined the army! I'm fighting for Italy—like we always dreamed when we were little boys in Bologna!

MORTARA

You're a soldier now, Riccardo? A real soldier?

RICCARDO

(joyfully) The tyranny of the Papal States is over! Unification has finally come -- history is ours! Papa was right!

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

How?

RICCARDO

Do you know why he named you Edgardo? For the future! We were all named for the future! Remember?

RICCARDO/MORTARA

(reciting together) "Riccardo, Erminia, Ernesta, Augusto, Arnolfo, Aristide, Edgardo, Ercole and the baby Imelda!"

RICCARDO

The world is changing, Edgardo! We won't be left out forever. No more Biblical names! Every time we marched around the house like soldiers, we got closer and closer to our dreams. Someday, we'll be like every other Italian!

MORTARA

(frightened) What about the Pope?

RICCARDO

His power over us is gone! I climbed the walls of the monastery—I looked in every room—and here you are!

MORTARA

(backing away) Papa was right! He warned me—

RICCARDO

He said you would be scared—but I told him you'd know it was safe because it's *me!* Your favorite family member! *(reassuring)* Papa's right behind me—he's on his way from Bologna—he has waited so long for this day to come.

MORTARA

No—no—he's so angry—he's in the Vatican planning his revenge—

RICCARDO

In the Vatican? What are you talking about?

MORTARA

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

April 25, 2024

RICCARDO

(bewildered) The Pope is not your Papa!

MORTARA

You must not make me violate my vows! Unification is evil—it will destroy the Holy Catholic Church!

RICCARDO

So much the better! The Jews will be the same as everyone else in Italy—we'll have the same rights! The same lives!

MORTARA

How can that be? Jews will never have the same lives as true believers—never! The newspapers are lying to you, Riccardo.

RICCARDO

The newspapers are recording history! It's happening all across Europe – freedom! Freedom for people like us!

MORTARA

(crying out) Anathema! They will call me “anathema”! They will throw me into the mouth of the devil like all the other Jews!

RICCARDO

That's a lie. They will love you. And cheer for you! They know who you are, Edgardo! Everyone knows. Come-- sit with me. *(reaching out to touch Mortara)* The family has never stopped thinking about you. We breathe the same breath. We're made of the same flesh. The same blood.

MORTARA

(full of longing) It's been so many years... I thought you had forgotten me!

RICCARDO

No one has forgotten you! The whole world has been trying to rescue you. People are marching in the streets, shouting your name!

MORTARA

My name? *(with sudden pride)* They know my name?

RICCARDO

They're marching for your freedom.

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

Where?

RICCARDO

Everywhere! You're the symbol of the new Italy, my brother! You're famous!

MORTARA

Me?

RICCARDO

(laughing) We had to overthrow an entire government just to rescue you! We had to fight the Austrians and storm the Vatican walls—you can't imagine how hard we fought!

MORTARA

(horrificed) You stormed the Vatican?

RICCARDO

With guns and knives! How do you think I got here?

MORTARA

No, Riccardo, no—

RICCARDO

Europe is exploding, Edgardino! It's a new beginning! Look. I brought you a letter. 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

(tempted) Home?

RICCARDO

Yes! *(laughing)* Dance with me, Edgardino! Like we always did 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)* Don't be scared. You're

April 25, 2024

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 beautiful boys! Look at you!

MORTARA

Look at me, Mamma! I'm dancing!

RICCARDO

Edgardo Mortara, dancing the hora in the robes of a Priest!

MARIANNA

I'm waiting for you, my darling! In the same little room where they took you away! *(she waves and disappears)*

MORTARA

(suddenly paralyzed with fear) No! I won't go back there! I can't. *This* is my home! I live here in peace and quiet—such quiet—such peace—no one knows—no one will ever know-- don't make me go out there, Riccardo! *(he tears off the sash and Riccardo becomes Brother Nicholas again)* Don't let them take me away!

YOUNG PRIEST

(shocked) Father Pio! What are you saying?

MORTARA

(struggling to return to himself) Forgive me, Brother Nicolas. My mind is not my own
...

YOUNG PRIEST

(beat. Concerned) What are you frightened of? I've never seen you scared... not once in my whole life...

MORTARA

I've always been scared, Brother Nicolas. Since I was a child.

YOUNG PRIEST

Scared of what?

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

(beat) Can you imagine what it's like to sleep with your clothes on, every single night for years and years, terrified that someone would sneak in during the night and try to steal you?

YOUNG PRIEST

Why would they steal you?

MORTARA

I never understood—

MARIANNA

It was a plot of the Inquisition – of course you understood.

YOUNG PRIEST

In the village, they're closing their shops. There are German spies everywhere. The nuns of St. Bernard's have fled their convent--

MORTARA

(shocked) Where did they go?

YOUNG PRIEST

No one knows. But their dormitories were empty this morning... the Nazis are moving in and commandeering the whole place.

MORTARA

They're moving into a *convent*?

YOUNG PRIEST

What have we done wrong? Are we being punished?

MORTARA

We can't escape punishment! *(beat. Trembling at the memory)* I was punished with my *tongue* when I was a boy! The pope made me lick a cross on the floor with my tongue.

YOUNG PRIEST

The Pope?

MORTARA

I sometimes wonder... where was God when that was happening?

April 25, 2024

YOUNG PRIEST

(in despair) Where is He now?

MORTARA

We must look for Him inside us, Brother Nicolas. We must pray that He is hiding there, quietly... some place where there are no words...

MARIANNA

The white fire, Edgardo! Tell him about the white fire.

MORTARA

(to the Young Priest) You must call upon every ounce of strength you have! You must imagine things you have never imagined...

YOUNG PRIEST

(anguished) I don't know how. I'm scared I'm losing my faith.

MORTARA

You will find it again! I promise!

YOUNG PRIEST

What if I don't? What if they succeed in destroying us?

MORTARA

Faith is a mystery... you know that... sometimes it works—and other times it shatters apart... like a broken chair... and then we have to start all over again...

YOUNG PRIEST

Why? I thought we would be sustained by our prayers -- by our holy life, every single day, inside this Abbey. I thought God would protect us!

MARIANNA

But sometimes life intervenes—tell him! Tell him you can't ignore the world forever—even if you're a Catholic priest!

MORTARA

We can't ignore the world forever, Brother Nicolas. Even if we're Catholic priests. There are times when the universe screams so loud we have to listen.

YOUNG PRIEST

(making a decision to tell) I heard someone screaming this morning.

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

(instantly concerned) Brother Boniface?

YOUNG PRIEST

No. *(beat)* It was a little boy. Standing outside our gates.

MORTARA

A boy?

YOUNG PRIEST

I didn't even notice him till I got close to fetch the milk.

MORTARA

This *morning*?

YOUNG PRIEST

He looked so scared... his eyes were huge...

MORTARA

And?

YOUNG PRIEST

When he saw me, he started to bawl.

MORTARA

And what did you do?

YOUNG PRIEST

I grabbed the milk and ran back inside.

MORTARA

You left him there?

YOUNG PRIEST

What could I do? He had a Star of David around his neck! His parents must have gone underground...

MARIANNA

Those parents... think of the parents...

MORTARA

How could you leave him in danger?

April 25, 2024

YOUNG PRIEST

I knew if I brought him inside, we'd all be in danger! The Germans would find him—they'd know what we've done!

MORTARA

Jesus said, suffer the children to come unto me.

YOUNG PRIEST

The nuns have fled their convent! Is that what you want to have happen here? To the brothers? Where will we go if the Abbey is raided? What will we do?

MORTARA

I don't know, Brother Nicolas. I can't imagine.

MARIANNA

You can't leave that child to die. Show him some charity! Isn't that what it means to be a Christian?

YOUNG PRIEST

We'll be killed!

MORTARA

But remember... every beggar might be the Messiah.

MARIANNA

I taught you that.

YOUNG PRIEST

So we should risk our lives for a child we don't even know? What happens if the Abbey is torched? No! It's not right! Why should we let them destroy us? You've lost your way—you're not thinking clearly! We believe in you—you must save the Abbey from destruction!

MORTARA

I don't know how.

MARIANNA

You do, my love! You know what to do! Save that boy. Don't be afraid.

MORTARA

And then?

April 25, 2024

MARIANNA

And then – whatever happens—you will have repaired a tiny tear in the world.

MORTARA

Why is it up to us to repair the world? And who gets to decide where justice lies? Who decides who deserves to live? To die? How can we know these things, we who are lost in the chaos of the world?

YOUNG PRIEST

Tell me! Tell me the answer.

MORTARA

I have no answers, Brother Nicolas.

YOUNG PRIEST

You must! You always know what's right. When you saw me outside the gate, you didn't ask a single question. You just took my hand and let me in.

MORTARA

But I wasn't putting the Abbey at risk.

MARIANNA

Everything is a risk! How can you know what will happen?

MORTARA

(raising his eyes to heaven) Holy Mary, Mother of God! Help us! Guide me now! What should I do? *(beat)* I have three choices. I can save my brethren. I can save the boy. Or I can save myself.

YOUNG PRIEST

(taken aback) Yourself? *(beat)* What do you mean?

MORTARA

I can't explain.

MARIANNA

You *won't* explain.

YOUNG PRIEST

Why is it different to save yourself, Father Pio? You're the head of this Abbey. They're not after you!

April 25, 2024

The room grows quiet. Mortara looks from his mother to the Young Priest. Finally, he makes a decision.

MORTARA

We have no idea who they're after. So we can't take a chance. Bring the child inside, Brother Nicolas. Give him something warm to eat. Hide him as well as you can. *(beat)* If the Germans find him tomorrow, I will tell them it was my choice to rescue him. And then they can do what they like with me. *(beat)* Go on. Don't be afraid.

The Young Priest turns and exits down the hall.

MORTARA

How can I explain, Mamma? How can I tell him? The past is an abyss. I don't have the words...

MARIANNA

You, who are the master of words? You who have been preaching and persuading for *seventy years*? You have taught him so well, my love. If you tell him who you are, he will help you.

MORTARA

He *knows* who I am! I'm a priest. I have always been a priest, since the day I was ordained.

MARIANNA

And why was that?! Explain it to me, one and for all! It was bad enough that you decided to be Catholic—but you had to become a *priest*?

MORTARA

I was *called*, Mamma! Right after Riccardo tried to steal me away. One day I was with the other boys at the Catechumens— there was an altercation with a Jewish boy who had just arrived—

MARIANNA

(instantly interested) What Jewish boy? Had he been kidnapped, like you?

MORTARA

I think his parents had died and someone had turned him in to the Church. He was so angry—I remember—so outraged at being held against his will—he hated the prayers, the fasting, the Latin, the teaching—

MARIANNA

Good for him!

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

I suddenly knew what I had to do! I stood up in the cafeteria! I told him how beautiful his soul would feel if he accepted Christ's love—how magical it was to be chosen-- and as I started talking, the whole room got quiet—

MARIANNA

I'll bet!

MORTARA

They were listening to me with rapt faces, Mamma! I knew how to persuade them, how to open their minds, I could feel God's grace rushing through my whole body, like a mighty river--

MARIANNA

You always did love to talk.

MORTARA

I realized it was my calling. My gift to the world. How could I not claim it? That very day, I became a novitiate.

MARIANNA

What's that?

MORTARA

Someone preparing to live a vowed life. I was the youngest one there. I was the best!

MARIANNA

Of course you were! You could have become anything in the world you wanted-- if only you had escaped. We knew they were trying to spirit you out of Rome— we knew what was about to happen--

MORTARA

I was about to come here! To the Abbey, to be ordained! That day in Rome was the beginning of my new life!

The Rector appears and pulls Mortara towards him.

RECTOR

(whispering) Everything is taken care of, my child. The Pope has sent me to look after you. We'll go to the train station at midnight. No one will recognize you in civilian clothes. They're looking for a young priest. But I warn you—there may be crowds at the stations—agitators—maybe even your family!

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

(suddenly anxious) Then what should I do?

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, if your parents turn up, 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. You understand? *(Mortara nods)* Let's go.

Sounds of the train station in Rome. Crowds of chaos. Momolo and Riccardo rush in on the other side of the stage. A crowd recognizes them and begins chanting: "Mortara! Mortara! Free Edgardo Mortara!"

MORTARA

(to the Rector) Listen! Did you hear that? They're shouting my name! *(The crowd keeps chanting: "Mortara! Mortara! Viva l'Italia!") Mortara sees Momolo and Riccardo in the crowd)*

MORTARA

I see my family over there! My father-- and my brother Riccardo!

RECTOR

I warned you! He's not your father! Or your brother! Not anymore. The day of your baptism as a baby, you became *free!* Free of them! Free of your past and all the horror of that life! *(more shouts offstage, cheers, music)* You're a new man, Edgardo! You have been chosen by God! You're going to be a great priest! A great leader of your flock! It's your calling! Follow your heart!

A soldier of Garibaldi appears with a scarlet sash and a rifle.

GARIBALDINO

(seeing the Rector) Excuse me.

RECTOR

Are you speaking to me? *(quickly)* Viva l'Italia! *(Mortara hides behind the Rector)*

GARIBALDINO

Viva l'Italia! When's the next train to the border?

April 25, 2024

RECTOR

I wouldn't know, officer—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

Garibaldi has liberated the Vatican, but 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.

GARIBALDINO

He would be just his age. The false priest who escaped. *(the sound of a train approaching)*

RECTOR

Ah! *(pointing to a train)* Look, officer! That must be your train!

GHARIBALDINO

Keep your eyes out! I'm warning you! *(beat)* Viva l'Italia! *(he exits)*

RECTOR

The next one will be ours. It's nearly time. Just pretend you're mute and walk slowly to the end of the tracks--

They begin to move towards the tracks. Riccardo and Momolo rush in.

RICCARDO

Edgardo! There you are!

MOMOLO

Thank God!

MORTARA

Riccardo! Papa!

April 25, 2024

RICCARDO

This time you *have* to come!! Quickly!

RECTOR

(*to Mortara*) Shut up and run! God will protect you!

MOMOLO

(*pleading*) Come, Edgardino! You have one more chance!

RICCARDO

Don't turn your back on us again! It's time. Mamma is waiting--

MORTARA

Bring Mamma to *me*! I'm going to be a Priest! I'll lead you all into the Kingdom of Heaven!

RICCARDO

No! That's all over! Let it go!

MORTARA

God will bless you, and love you, always!

RECTOR

We have to go. Now!

MORTARA

Let me save you! Please! Let me show you Christ's mercy!

MOMOLO

Come back to where you were born!

MORTARA

Come to where you will be born again!

RICCARDO

We're your family!

MORTARA

I'm going to have a new family! I'll save so many souls! There will be light in the darkness!

RECTOR

You are the Church's shining light.

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

I am filled with love and light! For all of you!

RICCARDO

We've sacrificed *everything* for you! Don't betray us now!

MORTARA

The Holy Mother is calling! Come with me! I beg you!

RECTOR

God loves you. Get on the train!

The sound of the train builds. Mortara turns and runs towards the train. The stage grows quiet. Riccardo turns and exits. Momolo walks slowly across the stage, towards Marianna. Mortara watches him from the corner of his cell.

MARIANNA

My dearest! Welcome home! *(beat. She looks at her husband, who busies himself with some household task)* Where is Edgardo?

MOMOLO

Marianna, my love...

MARIANNA

Haven't you brought him with you?

MOMOLO

(deflecting) I couldn't.

MARIANNA

Why not?

MOMOLO

(beat) They wouldn't let him go.

MARIANNA

(shocked) Riccardo promised.

MOMOLO

We did our best.

MARIANNA

(in despair) How can that be?

April 25, 2024

MOMOLO

Edgardo loves you so much.

MARIANNA

(rocking herself) You told me he'd come home!

MOMOLO

(suddenly full of rage) What could I do? For twelve years, I have crisscrossed the world, begging for mercy. I've taken the Inquisitor to Court and petitioned the Pope. I've sent letters to Rothschild, to President Buchanan, to Napoleon III. Our son Riccardo joined the militia and defeated the French. The Garibaldini took over Rome. We have done everything humanly possible. And still we have lost our son.

MARIANNA

Is the fight over then?

MOMOLO

(bitterly) The bastards have won.

MARIANNA

No.

MOMOLO

They have stolen Edgardo's mind and broken his will. Like a chair whose glue won't hold. It's over, Marianna. Let him go.

Marianna sinks slowly to the ground. She is finished. Mortara sees this—it's incredibly painful for him to witness. He crosses to her.

MORTARA

Oh my poor Mamma. I never meant to cause you grief. *(beat. Gently)* I kept dreaming that someday, somehow, you would be proud of me. But I was scared... I have always been so scared... I didn't want to lose everything... all over again...

MARIANNA

You're 88 years old! What could you lose now?

MORTARA

Salvation.

MARIANNA

If your Catholic God would withhold salvation for the crime of saving some Jews... maybe he's not a God worth believing in.

April 25, 2024

The Young Priest enters.

YOUNG PRIEST

I did it. I brought him inside and hid him behind the hay, way up high in the loft.

MORTARA

He's safe? And comfortable? *(The Young Priest nods)* Bless you.

YOUNG PRIEST

But there are more people outside. With suitcases and bundles, and babies on their backs...

MORTARA

My God. Why have they come here?

MARIANNA

Where else can they go?

YOUNG PRIEST

(empathetically) They look so terrified, Father Pio. And so lost.

MORTARA

What do you think we should do?

YOUNG PRIEST

I don't know. But first—I found someone huddled in the corridor outside. Will you see him?
The Young Priest exits, and wheels in Brother Boniface. He's played by the same actor as Momolo. Mortara is startled)

MORTARA

Papa! Is it you? *(he leaps up and goes to Boniface, who sits huddled in his chair, terrified)*

YOUNG PRIEST

Poor Brother Boniface has been terrorized by the soldiers—

MORTARA

(full of grief, staring at Boniface) Oh you poor man. I meant to save you—to protect you!

MARIANNA

As you should have saved your own Papa!

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

Forgive me! *(he crosses to Boniface and wheels him into the cell)* Come in—come warm yourself inside my cell!

YOUNG PRIEST

He had wheeled himself into a dark corridor and was hiding from the soldiers—

MORTARA

(kneeling down in front of Boniface. Warms his hands) Have faith. God is here. The Virgin Mary will protect us. *(to the Young Priest)* Can you find him something warm to drink? *(The Young Priest nods and slips out. Mortara turns back to Boniface)* Oh, Brother Boniface, you look just like my Papa! I loved him so much. But I don't think he ever knew... I didn't know how to help him... any of them... and now it's too late... *(Boniface looks hard at Mortara and gestures for him to come near. He whispers something in his ear. Mortara stares at him)* Those people outside? *(Boniface whispers)* You think we should bring them into the Abbey? All of them? *(Boniface nods)* Do you know who they are? *(Boniface nods again)* And do you have any idea what might happen to the Abbey if we try to save them?

MARIANNA

It will happen anyway! Jews are not their only enemy.

MORTARA

(to Boniface) Will the brothers forgive me if I open the gates? *(Boniface smiles and takes Mortara's hands. The Young Priest returns with a cup of something warm. He gently hands it to Boniface, who drinks. As he does so, Mortara eyes the Young Priest)* Brother Boniface believes we must open the gates to the refugees.

YOUNG PRIEST

There are hundreds out there!

MORTARA

What else can we do?

YOUNG PRIEST

Is that what God would want us to do? What shall we tell the brothers?

MORTARA

I don't know.

BONIFACE

(whispering) Abraham...

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

What did he say?

MARIANNA

He said "Abraham"! He's thinking of the story of Abraham and the angels!

MORTARA

You think so? *(Marianna smiles)*

MARIANNA

Tell him!

MORTARA

(turning to the Young Priest) Do you remember the story of Abraham and the angels, Brother Nicolas? Brother Boniface is inviting us to remember it. *(holding Boniface's hands in his own)* Two vagrants arrive at the tent of Abraham and Sarah one night. They are filthy and hungry, and they look exhausted. Abraham invites them inside and bathes their feet. He asks Sarah to prepare food for them, he gives them clean clothes, and he shelters them for the night, even though he can't sleep for fear of something terrible happening. In the morning, the vagrants thank Abraham and set forth on their way. And as they disappear, a light shines down from heaven... and they begin to ascend! Abraham looks on in wonder. Slowly he realizes...

YOUNG PRIEST

... he realizes that the vagrants... are *angels!* *(Boniface smiles)*

MORTARA

Yes. *(softly)* He had been entertaining angels, unawares...

MARIANNA

That was your favorite story as a child.

YOUNG PRIEST

Shall we be like Sarah and Abraham, then?

MORTARA

Those refugees might get us all killed. Or they might lead us to heaven.

YOUNG PRIEST

Might they be angels, Father Pio?

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

Let's choose to believe so, Brother Nicolas. Take Brother Boniface to the dining room where he can get warm by the fire. And then—go open the gates.

(The Young Priest turns and exits quickly, wheeling Brother Boniface)

MARIANNA

Bless you, Edgardino.

MORTARA

Oh, Mamma. May the Virgin bless me, and keep me, and protect me from those dogs...

MARIANNA

I pray she holds you close, your Virgin Mother. That she loves you as much as I do and helps you to survive. *(beat)* 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, Mamma?

MARIANNA

No. That can never happen. But we have found each other now. *(crossing slowly to the bench and pulling out a battered suitcase from underneath)* Take this. Carry it with you. Just like the people outside your gates. People like us always leave a suitcase packed and ready in the hallway in case of disaster. It's what being Jewish means. We wander. We escape. We get spat upon. We start over in new places, with new hopes. Always arguing about where we are going, and who we are.

MORTARA

When will we ever know?

MARIANNA

Try to remember. Try to remember your Torah, my love. Think about the white fire.

MORTARA

(captivated) The white fire?

MARIANNA

(explaining) Words—commandments—language—those are part of the *black* fire—that's how the Bible tells us what to do. But between those words—in and around the black fire—are the empty spaces, Edgardo. The margins. The white fire. And inside the white fire are teachings so deep they defy language. That is where *love* is hidden. In the mysteries of the white fire. Where there are no more words.

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

You should have been ordained yourself, Mamma.

MARIANNA

How I wish I had come to hear you preach! But I didn't dare...

MORTARA

The day I was ordained, I gave my first sermon. My head was dripping wet—like this-- *(he takes the glass of water and pours the rest over his head)* I had just been baptized, in front of the whole congregation. I looked out at the crowd. I longed to see your face. And do you know what I spoke about?

MARIANNA

How would I know?

MORTARA

Papa. Papa and his furniture.

MARIANNA

(surprised) Oh my God-- the *chairs*? I hope you didn't give your first sermon about broken chairs!

MORTARA

What else did I know? It was called "the Ravages of Doubt".

MARIANNA

No!

MORTARA

I explained that for Papa, nothing was easy. He had no money, no help, and nine children. Each time a chair was completed, one of us would leap upon it during a snowstorm, and snap! Its back would break.

MARIANNA

(laughing) That's true!

MORTARA

Or it would get knocked off a cart on the way to delivery and boom—an arm would fall off. Why was he 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 shattered, when the same chair had to be repaired so

April 25, 2024

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

Tell me. *(beat)* Tell me what you said, Edgardino.

MORTARA

I said... *(warming to his sermon)* "Faith is never easy and the glue rarely holds". *(turning to his mother)* That's a metaphor, Mamma! *(back to the sermon)* "God is mysterious and difficult to know. So many days, we feel lost in the snow, abandoned, without a place to land. But we must continue to practice our belief, to repair our hearts, just as Papa kept making his chairs... *(he is thinking)* And bit by bit, if we're lucky, we begin to find a path towards God. The road is dark and strewn with broken pieces. But something lights the way. Our belief that if we keep trying, God will open his arms and call to us, like our parents did when we were small. *(as if hearing this for the first time)* We long for the day that He will shower us with his love... and offer us a place to sit down. A landing place that will not break, no matter how bad the glue is. And on that day... then... *(looking at his mother)* ... maybe then... we will finally be able to rest." *(beat. She looks at him with enormous pride)*

MARIANNA

My bambino! My cherished one!

MORTARA

I thought I'd forgotten it ...

MARIANNA

Furniture and faith—such a good analogy! *(proudly)* You sounded just like a Rabbi.

MORTARA

(A long beat. Then, taking her hands) I am a Priest, Mamma. A Catholic priest.

MARIANNA

(finally accepting him) I know.

MORTARA

(carefully, claiming it for himself) I am a Jewish Catholic Priest. At the end of his life.

(Silence. Then, sudden knocking on the door. Mortara freezes. He and Marianna stare at the door. Beat. Knocking)

MARIANNA

April 25, 2024

They're nothing if not punctual, those animals.

MORTARA

Will they kill me?

MARIANNA

(kissing him) Choose life, that thou mayest live, thou and thy seed. *(beat)* I will always love you.

MORTARA

Why?

MARIANNA

I'm a Jewish mother. The traces of my hands across your cheeks can never be erased.

MORTARA

(taking a deep breath) And now?

MARIANNA

(she brushes her hand across his cheeks) Say your Sh'ma, my little Jewish seagull. Maybe our God will hear you. *(teasing)* Even here. *(Marianna disappears. Mortara begins singing softly.)*

MORTARA

"Sh'ma Yisroel, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad". *(the knocking resumes. Shouts)* In a moment! I'm almost ready. "Hear oh Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One."

(Mortara prays. Beat. The Young Priest enters, ashen. He stops and stares at Mortara)

YOUNG PRIEST

Father Pio. I couldn't even get to the gates. The soldiers had broken them down and come inside!

MORTARA

(looking at him with concern) Are you alright, my child? Did you do what you could?

YOUNG PRIEST

They ransacked the hayloft – where I found your sweater--

MORTARA

Did they find the boy?

YOUNG PRIEST

No. He never made a sound.

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

Bless his heart. God is with us. *(he looks around)* It's so cold. *(feeling his wet hair)* My hair is wet...

YOUNG PRIEST

Father Pio... they asked me--

MORTARA

Tell me. Why is this day different from every other day? *(beat)* 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 Levi Mortara.

YOUNG PRIEST

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

MORTARA

Forgive me. The truth has so many coats...

YOUNG PRIEST

You could have trusted me.

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

I do trust you. You are my gift from God.

YOUNG PRIEST

I would have hidden you under my own bed for as long as it took. I would never have given your name if I'd known. *Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa... -- (the knocking begins again. The Young Priest goes to the door and yells out) Wait! Give us a moment! (The knocking stops. The Young Priest turns to Mortara in despair)* They're waiting for you, Father Pio.

MORTARA

(crossing to the window) Is it snowing? Look! *(beat)* Mamma calls it the White Fire.

YOUNG PRIEST

The refugees call it the White Brigade. It's their own form of rebellion against the collaborators...

MORTARA

Are they resisting?

YOUNG PRIEST

They're trying.

MORTARA

My suitcase is packed. I suppose it has always been packed.

YOUNG PRIEST

Shall I go with you?

MORTARA

No. They need you here.

YOUNG PRIEST

What's going to happen?

MORTARA

Leave me at the crossroads. Make your own journey.

YOUNG PRIEST

You have lived a life of secrets.

April 25, 2024

MORTARA

I have lived the life I could. *(after a beat, taking the Young Priest's hand)* Pray for me,
Brother Nicolas.

YOUNG PRIEST

Are you Edgardo Mortara?

MORTARA

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

BLACKOUT.

END OF PLAY.