

An excerpt from
The Singing of Swans BY MARY SARACINO

CHAPTER I

Night Rider

THE NIGHT SKY HELD NO MOON as Ziza pushed through the roof of her house and soared into the stark blackness. A gust of wind became her wings, pushing her up and up above the slumbering sounds of her small village, Caneva, in Friuli—a province tucked away in the northeastern corner of a country that would someday be known as Italy.

Far below, beneath an inky darkness, only the occasional stray cat peered up from the cobblestones, twitching its tail in anticipation of a passing mouse. Ziza's neighbors snored in their beds. Her husband, Aldo DeSante, tossed and turned, unaware that while his wife's body lay beside him, her spirit traveled elsewhere. She promised to return before the stroke of five to ensure that death would not claim her mortal limbs. Her children were lost in complicated dreams, and her mother, Carmela, nursing a bout of insomnia, sat before the family's ancestral Lare altar, next to the cold hearth in the corner of their small home. She alone knew that Ziza had been called away on official business.

It was cold that Thursday night in the midst of the Ember days of fasting. A sharp wind howled fiercely down the alleyways that third week of September in the year 1575, foreshadowing a long, frigid winter, but Ziza felt nothing of the chill, for her body was as vaporous as air. Light and porous, she flew past the church steeple, the shops that lined the piazza, and over the well in the center of her village. Dense clouds hovered over the land; no stars shone to guide her, but still Ziza kept on. She levitated above the tiled rooftops, pausing a moment to determine if the others were ready, as well. From the darkened bell tower an owl hooted, signaling for her to proceed.

At the edge of town Ziza joined Lucia, Pietro, Sophia, Antonio, and Filaberta. Without a word, the night riders veered west and south, toward the wheat fields on a stony ridge two miles outside of town. There amid acres of bearded grain the others waited. There, during this time between solstices, this midnight of the autumn Ember Days, they would enact the ritual.

The wind bellowed as the cadre of journeyers sped over roads and rivers, byways and stone fences, olive trees and vineyards. Ziza's tangle of snaky dark tresses swirled around her face as she raced through the night sky. The night smelled of damp grass and wet soil, for the rain had pummeled the countryside earlier that evening. The omen had been favorable, and Ziza knew in her bones that after midnight the battle would begin. A victory was possible, if their hearts were pure enough and focused on the welfare of their townspeople.

Ziza and her nocturnal fellows were keepers of the blood ways, guardians of justice and compassion, trustees of spirit and breath. They were shamans, healers, seers, midwives, oracles, herbalists, astral travelers, and earthly angels of mercy. Born remembering the Old Ways, the ancient customs and mores of the Dark Mother, they were charged with ensuring bountiful goodness. Their task was not always easy.

At birth each had been marked by the ancient sign of the *Streghe*—their faces were covered with their birth caul. Word spread among the elder *Streghe*, who soon gathered and rejoiced, making votive offerings to the Great Mother. Gingerly they removed the afterbirth and baked it under the scorching sun. When it had properly withered, they formed the translucent skin into an amulet. This sacred talisman was worn, like holy lei, around each child's neck. It served to ward off harm and to remind them always of their special powers, for they could choose to beget good or evil. The difference was not always clear.

There would be a traditional Catholic baptism for these babies, for the *Streghe* also practiced the ways of the Church, more for safekeeping than for reverence. They answered to a different God; one who was both dark-skinned and female, one whose status had long ago been usurped by the Holy Fathers in Rome.

Through centuries, the Streghe had kept alive the mysteries of the Dark One. They wore their Christian faith like a cloak, protecting them from inclement seasons of witch hunts, stormy cries of heresy, and other such fanaticism.

Long before the holy waters of the cathedral touched the brows of these blessed Streghe babies, Ziza, and the other chosen ones, were anointed into the cadre of *Benandanti*. Their mothers held them close as the elder Streghe invoked the power of the Great Mother. They strung the sun-dried remnant of their child's birth caul on a stand of thick purple thread and placed it around the babies' tiny necks. They vowed to teach these children all they needed to know in order to fulfill their duties and experience the ripening of their gifts. As the

Madalene sat for a moment in one of the church's wooden pews and closed her eyes. Julia's stories about Sicily and its history reverberated inside her head. She felt as if she were being given something as nourishing and precious as food, something for which she had hungered for a long time, without knowing that she craved such sustenance. Madalene opened her eyes when Julia gently touched her shoulder.

"There is something here you must see," she said.

Madalene followed Julia to an alcove in the back of the Cathedral. Affixed to a red marble wall hung a painting of the Blessed Mother holding the Christ Child. The Virgin's head was draped in a veil of dark blue. She wore a red tunic and upon her lap sat her son, Jesus, also dressed in clothes of red. Her skin was the color of espresso....

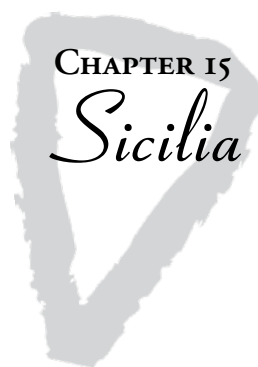
"This is a Byzantine painting of the Black Madonna," Julia explained.

"Why is she black?" Madalene asked...

"There are many theories, of course. But I believe that she is the Christian representation of the Divine Mother, the Dea Madre. The first Divinity known to human kind was both dark-skinned and female. For millennia she was worshipped as the giver of and taker of life. She is known by many names, depending on the cultures in which she was revered. Some, like the Phoenicians, called her Tanit. In west Asia, She was called Cybele. In Egypt, Isis. In the Middle East,

children grew older, they would more completely understand the tasks and obligations to which they had been called.

During the twentieth year of their lives, each *Benandante* was paid a visit during the wee hours of night. The spectral caller entered in darkness when no one stirred and the town was deep in slumber. This Night Guardian, sometimes an experienced Benandante from the village, sometimes a spirit from another plane of existence, appeared to summon the young initiate. "The time has arrived," announced this Wayshower. The long awaited summons had been issued. This night they would rise and embrace the ways of the Benandanti. This night they would be required to fulfill their sacred duties.



Innana, or Astarte or Ishtar. In Sicily she was Persephone, Proserpina or Demeter. She stood for justice with compassion. She is the giver of law and culture. Grain and language. As the Christians became the more dominant force, culturally and politically, she became known as the Black Madonna, Christ's mother. It was one of the ways the authorities could make the new religion more palatable to the conquered. The Virgin became no longer a god but the mother of god. Her skin was lightened through the centuries, as well, but in some places she remains dark-skinned. And where she is thus revered, she is deeply loved by the peasants and the people who have long been oppressed."

"Sort of like Martin Luther King, Jr. Ché. Or Ghandi, eh?"

"Sort of. Yes. Whether you believe in her divinity or not she is a powerful symbol, a metaphor for people left out of the dominant culture, the oppressed. She is the patron of the silenced, the keeper of subaltern reality. She speaks to and for the people who hold the knowledge and memory of the story beneath the story."

..."There's just so much I never knew," Madalene said aloud to no one in particular.

"There is so much they don't want you to know," Julia said. "Because if you knew it, you would never be able to live your life in the same way again."

The Singing of Swans by Mary Saracino
Pearlson Press | October 2006 | \$20.95
Original Trade Paperback | 348 pp |
ISBN: 978-1-59719-006-0
www.pearlson.com | 615-356-5188