When I was four or five I wanted to be ugly, and got very angry when people said I was pretty.

“I’m ugly, brutta, say that I’m ugly.”

But no one listened to me.

“Che bella bambina, what a pretty little girl,” they all said. And inevitably, they added, “Che peccato! What a shame!”

There was such sorrow in their voices, such an anguished look on their faces... I didn’t want my being pretty to make people sad. Better to be ugly, I thought.

I especially didn’t want my being pretty to make my mother sad. As soon as she heard those words, even if she had been laughing a minute before, my mother’s eyes filled with tears and her face turned into a mask of agony. At those times, my mother looked just like the Addolorata.

The Addolorata, the “sorrowful woman,” was the name of a statue in the church across the street from where we lived, in the little town of Riposto, in Sicily. It was a statue of Mary holding the dead Christ, a Sicilian version of Michelangelo’s Pietà. The mother dressed in gold-embroidered purple silk, grief carved deeply into her painted...
face, on her lap her dead son, red-stained slender limbs draped in lifeless abandonment.

People seemed as mournful when they looked at my mother holding me as they were when looking at the Addolorata holding her dead son. Sometimes I thought my mother and the Addolorata were one and the same. They even had the same name: Maria.

I have early memories of being on my mother’s lap as she sat outside with the town women while my father was at work. We sat in the afternoon sun in the winter months, and in the summer we sat in the shade.

My mother told the women the story of when I was born. The midwife, mammana in Sicilian, was impressed that such a slight woman as my mother could give birth to such a big baby as me. She left my mother bleeding on the bed, with my grandmother tending to her for a few minutes, and rushed with me in her arms to the bakery around the corner to weigh me on the bread scale. Not even washed yet, crying loudly because my lungs were so vigorous, wrapped only in a sheet, for it was very warm on the afternoon of May 16, 1948. Over four kilos I weighed, almost nine pounds.

And I was growing so healthy and strong, my mother told the women, already talking, at sixteen months, and walking on my own, and I was never sick, never a fever until... until that fateful night when Crudele Poliomielite, Cruel Poliomyelitis, invaded our happy home and stole me from my family.

I imagined Crudele Poliomielite as an ugly monster with a weird name, who actually appeared out of the darkness to grab me and steal me away. But how could I’ve been stolen when I was still there in my mother’s arms? Could it be what got stolen was the healthy baby she’d given birth to? And what was left was a changeling, me? It took a while before I understood she was talking about my getting sick. Only then could I get over the secret fear that I might not be my parents’ real daughter.

My father’s name was Giovanni. He was always at work. He built
houses—that was his *mestiere*, his trade. He was a master builder, *mastru*. Young men worked for him and he taught them how to mix cement and build walls with bricks.

Even when he was home, my father worked, fixing anything that needed fixing, covering up cracks with plaster, changing the color of the walls to make our house more beautiful.

I adored my father. To me, he was the smartest, strongest, most handsome man in the world. I loved it when my father picked me up and carried me in his work clothes all smeared with cement. My mother complained about my getting dirty. But I liked it. And as my father held me, I felt the muscles in his chest and arms.

“Muscles as hard as his heart is soft,” my mother said.

I liked the way my father smelled—of cement, sweat, and cigarette smoke. I wrapped my arms tightly around his neck and clung to him. My father kissed me and called me *gioia*, joy.

Sometimes my father carried me on his shoulders. I laughed and grabbed on to his head to keep my balance.

“I’m falling, Papà!”

My father laughed, too, and, his strong arms raised, wrapped his hands around my waist. His hands were so big, they almost entirely encircled me.

“Non aver paura, gioia! Don’t be afraid!”

But I wasn’t afraid. I felt I was on top of the world. He moved his shoulders up and down in a rhythmic motion, mimicking the galloping of a horse.

“Where does my princess want to go? Your wish is my command!”

I laughed and laughed.

Whenever my mother told the town women the story of my getting polio, they looked up from their knitting and sewing and murmured “*Che peccato!*” I leaned against my mother’s chest, hiding my face in the folds of her lace-trimmed blouse, and smelled the lavender she rubbed on herself when she washed.
Wasn’t her story proof that my mother was blameless? She had made me big and healthy and strong. What happened to me was not her fault. But those words, “Che peccato,” were not just an expression of regret and sympathy; they carried the connotation of guilt. Peccato means “sin” in Italian. What sin could my mother have committed to deserve such punishment? And if not my mother’s, then whose sin was it that caused me to be the way I was, ciunca, crippled?

Or was it my fate to be a cripple? Fate, destiny. Destino. That word was used incessantly in Riposto. Everything happened because of destiny. Everyone had his or her destiny. All Sicilians knew they could not escape their destinies.

“Che destino!” the women muttered after my mother finished telling her story, trying with that word to exonerate her and comfort her. “Che croce! What a cross you have to bear,” they said, quickly moving their right hand down from their head to their chest and then from shoulder to shoulder, making the sign of the cross.

I understood I was the cross, though I didn’t quite understand how or why. Was it that my mother had to carry me, since I couldn’t walk, like Christ carried the cross in the pictures around the church? Was I such a burden for her? Was I growing that heavy?

My mother rarely complained. She was resigned to her destiny. She knew she had to atone for the sin of having a crippled daughter. She accepted her suffering like a good Sicilian woman. After all, in Sicily all women suffered. They believed a woman’s destiny was to suffer, to atone for the sin of being a woman.

Sometimes, as I sat on my mother’s lap, the women talked about their sufferings: the curse of menstruation, the toil and the ravages to the body of pregnancy and childbirth, the exhaustion of raising children, the rigors of poverty… And many of them suffered their husbands—their brutishness, maybe even their beatings.

My father never beat my mother. He always hugged and kissed her. And he worked hard all the time so we could have all we needed. But because of me, my mother’s suffering was greater than that of
all the other women. Carrying the cross of a crippled child, my mother was the epitome of suffering womanhood. She was indeed the living Addolorata.

I was glad when my mother finally took leave of the women and got up from the rush-seat wooden chair someone had brought out for her. Since she had to carry me, my mother couldn’t bring her own chair out of our house. I hoped none of the women would decide to hug me. But usually at least one of them did.

“Pietà!” the woman whispered, almost to herself, taking me from my mother’s arms to hold me tight against her ample bosom.

“Che peccato, che destino, che croce,” all the women continued to murmur as my mother walked away with me in her arms.

We went past the pensionati, retired men, middle-aged or older, who didn’t have to work and sat smoking cigarettes and cigars, far enough from the women so they couldn’t be heard, as they talked of important matters like the Mafia, the weather, and the government. They didn’t comment, those men, but just looked at my mother and me as we passed by, and clucked their tongues and shook their heads.

Then my mother carried me into our house, through the first room and the second room—that’s how our rooms were named—all the way to the kitchen, where my grandmother was cooking.

“What are you making today, Nanna?”

We all lived in that house, which always smelled of tomato sauce, my maternal grandparents, my parents, and I.

The house was on a street named Via Libertà. Liberty, freedom. How I wanted to be out on that street! But usually, my mother sat me behind the glass panels of our front door, and I looked out at Via Libertà, watched people go by, watched the neighborhood children play.

Until I was three, maybe even four, my mother pushed me in my baby carriage. Almost every day, all through the warm months, she took me to the beach. She’d been told by the doctor in Catania, the nearest big city, that she should bury me in the sand and let me get very hot, then put me in the water to shock my nervous system and cure me of polio.
Or maybe the advice came from the wise old women, who knew how to mix potions and were called witches.

I loved the sea but didn’t like being buried in the sand. Other children, playing nearby, kicked sand into my eyes. Sometimes, I had to beg my mother to take me into the water, because I got so hot that I thought I’d shrivel and turn to ashes like the coals we burned in the middle of winter in the *conca*, a large iron basin or cauldron.

Finally my mother realized the hot sand treatments were useless. By then, I’d grown too big for the cradlelike baby carriage. I felt embarrassed when the other children pointed their fingers at me and laughed. But though I was glad to be rid of the carriage, I missed our trips to the beach. Now that there was no alternative to being carried, I didn’t get out as much or go as far.

My mother usually didn’t carry me any farther than down the block—to join the women knitting and sewing. But she carried me to our sun-drenched courtyard, where I sat with the geraniums in the pots; and sometimes up the steps to our roof terrace, from which we could see the sea. Every day she carried me around our house and to the bathroom whenever I had to go.

“I have to make *pipi*, Mamma.”

As I got bigger, at times she moaned, “Oh please, not again. My back is killing me. Can’t you hold it?”

If my grandmother heard her, she reproached her: “Don’t yell at the poor little girl, *povira picciridda!*, though my mother was not yelling. My grandmother couldn’t carry me, for she wasn’t strong enough. She was a very slight woman, always dressed in black, with her hair tightly pulled back in a knot.

My grandfather was tall and handsome, with well-groomed white hair and a mustache, and he did carry me. If I asked sweetly, he carried me outside on Via Libertà, if only up and down the block. My grandfather was not *pensionato*. He didn’t sit with the men to talk about the government. He despised their idleness. Though he was even older than my grandmother, he sold fruit from a cart he pushed around the town’s
streets. What he didn’t sell, he brought home for us to eat. Because I loved cherries, when they were in season, he made sure he saved some for me before selling them all.

I wished my father didn’t have to work, so he could carry me more often. He was so strong, he carried me up Corso Italia, which everybody called “u stratuni,” the big street, all the way to the next town, Giarre, where my other grandmother and my aunt lived—my father’s mother and sister. My paternal grandfather had died during the war, so I never knew him.

My other grandmother was short and chubby, with a round face that was always smiling. My aunt was even slimmer than my mother, wore an apron, and baked cakes and cookies. My favorite cookies were called piparelle and were crunchy and a bit spicy.

“If you eat too much, your father won’t be able to carry you back home; you’ll get too heavy,” my aunt said.

“I can never be too heavy for my papà!” I laughed.

Though he was a kind and gentle man, my father got angry at times. But his anger was not directed toward any of us. He got angry at what he called ingiustizia. He hated those guilty of injustice, the politicians and the mafiosi, who he said were one and the same, the fascists and the idle rich. Sometimes he headed down to the town square, yelling for people to follow him, to protest against injustice. My father also hated ignorance. Whenever he heard anyone saying “Che peccato, che croce” while he was carrying me, he muttered, “Ignoranti!”

Rather than accepting destiny, my father always spoke of fighting injustice.

While I ate cookies, he sat with his mother and his sister, talking fast and smoking. When my grandmother called my being ciunca God’s will, volontà divina, my father said it was ingiustizia divina.

My grandmother crossed herself. “Bestemmia, blasphemy!”

After I turned five, my mother carried me every morning across the street to the convent in back of the Church of the Addolorata, where
the nuns ran their elementary school. At the door, she handed me over to a nun, who carried me into the classroom and put me in my seat, right in the front row.

At first, the nuns were scary in their long black habits, but I got used to them. They smelled of incense and flowers. In the afternoon, they carried me around the convent. I was passed from one nun’s arms to another’s. They carried me into the church, bending one knee and telling me to cross myself as they passed the altar with the tall crucifix; to the vestry, where baby Jesus, a beautiful doll, slept in a basket covered in lace; and out to the garden, where the palm trees were so high that, no matter how far back I tilted my head, I couldn’t see the tops, and the sparrows flew in circles and sang.

I loved those little birds that always sounded so happy. They woke me up every morning with their singing.

Sister Teresina, the youngest and my favorite, even carried me into the huge kitchen, where they had the biggest pots and pans I’d ever seen. Sister Prisca, the oldest, stirred the minestrone in a blackened iron pot with a giant wooden spoon.

But sometimes, while they carried me, some of the nuns started holding me tighter and tighter against their chests, kissed my head, and whispered, “Pietà, pietà!” That scared me. I felt I was suffocating. Out of fear, I’d start weeping. Thinking they were comforting me, the nuns held me even tighter and rocked me like a baby—which I hated.

Every Sunday, my mother carried me into the church. My father never went with us. Before Mass started, she knelt with me in her arms in front of the Addolorata and lit a candle. I couldn’t stand to look at the Addolorata’s face, which was the same as my mother’s, so beautiful but so sad. I kissed my mother, trying to make her smile, but she never smiled in church. I wrapped my arm around her neck, bent my head down, pressing my forehead against her shoulder, and kept my eyes shut. But though I couldn’t see anything, I was painfully aware of the gaze of the whole congregation.
The nuns did their best to instill in me a sense of guilt and shame, and to teach me to embrace my own destiny of suffering.

“Offer your suffering to the Lord!” they always said to me. I couldn’t understand. What would the Lord possibly want to do with my suffering? One day, when Sister Angelica started her “Offer your suffering” routine, I rebelled.

“But I want to be happy!”

She started stroking me and kissing me.

“Oh, my poor darling, how could you be happy? Pietà! You can never be happy!”

I got furious. “I can so be happy!” I yelled, hitting the nun’s chest with my small fists as I struggled to free myself from her ominous embrace.

But how could I expect to be happy when I didn’t know what awaited me? How much longer could I be carried? What would happen to me when I grew up? What would my destiny be?

In Riposto, every girl learned at an early age that “a woman’s destiny” was to get married and have children. Unless, of course, she was too ugly to find a man who would marry her. Then, she could become a nun or, horror of horrors, end up a zitella, an old maid.

At an early age, I learned that getting married and having children was not my destiny. The message came across quite clear, though never loud; it came in hushed tones and sighs. Since I was not like other girls, I couldn’t grow up to be like other women.

The other girls, who came to our house to play with me once in a while, didn’t bother using hushed tones. They played with my dolls, dressing and undressing them. They unbuttoned their own shirts and held the dolls’ heads against their pink nipples, like they had seen nursing women do. I tried to do the same.

“No,” one of the older girls objected. “My mother says you shouldn’t play with dolls. You should give us your dolls because we need to
practice. You’re never going to get married and have children. You’re crippled, ciunca.”

The others chimed in. How could I argue against them?

If I were ugly, I could at least become a nun or an old maid. I didn’t understand why the other girls thought being a nun or an old maid was so horrible. The nuns seemed content enough to teach us children, do their chores, and pray. I didn’t think the nuns were ugly, at least not all of them. They all spoke of Christ as their husband. I didn’t understand how that could be. But I figured, even if I were ugly, Christ wouldn’t want me as a wife. He already had all those nuns. He didn’t need another wife—especially not a crippled one.

The only old maid I knew, a distant cousin of my mother’s, seemed rather nice and not at all ugly. But whenever she came over, it was to ask for money.

“Why doesn’t she have any money?” I asked my mother.

“Because she has no husband” was always the answer.

If I couldn’t have a husband and children, like other women, what could I do? I couldn’t go around asking relatives for money, since I couldn’t walk. I didn’t know any women who worked outside of their homes. I had heard some women cleaned rich people’s houses. I knew I’d never be able to do that. My mother, who was an expert with needle and thread, told me women could earn money as seamstresses. She tried to teach me to sew, but I hated it. I pricked my finger with the needle and got blood on the cloth.

When I was in third grade, a young woman came to work as a teacher at the convent. I was surprised because I thought only nuns could be teachers. She had long hair, which she wore in a ponytail. I fell in love with her and decided I would not let my mother cut my hair anymore, and I would be a teacher. My heart was broken when she didn’t come back the next year. I heard the nuns say she had gotten married. So I let my mother cut my hair short again, and I called myself stupid for thinking I could be a teacher when I couldn’t walk.

In school I was a model student, the nuns’ pride and joy. The other
children resented me. “My mother says the nuns give you good grades because you’re a cripple,” they sneered. Or: “My mother says you study because you can’t do anything else.”

My progress in school seemed to make my father happy. Other girls’ fathers didn’t care how their daughters did in school. With their sons, it was a different story. Was my father glad I could use my brain, since my body was no good?

I was constantly trying to figure out what my father had in mind for me. He seemed to be making plans. But what were they?

My father had been taking me to doctors and hospitals since I was quite small. We had been to Catania, Messina, Rome, and Bologna. Rome and Bologna were far. It took many hours for the train to get there, crossing the straight on a ferry and going through many dark tunnels.

In Rome, my parents and I stayed with cousins who lived there. A few times, my father carried me to the Trevi Fountain so I could throw in a coin. I liked being in Rome, though I was always nervous knowing that, without a doubt, I would be taken to a doctor.

Doctors scared me, because they always hurt me. One doctor in Messina gave me shock treatments to regenerate the nerves in my spine. The shocks went through my body like a thousand snakes on fire, burning and biting me inside, making me shake all over and pee on the treatment table. I was already big enough to feel embarrassed about peeing. After we got home, for weeks my mother squeezed aloe leaves on the blisters that formed on my back.

In Rome, the doctors made braces for me, but I never learned to walk with them. My mother put them on me, lacing them, starting at my feet and going all the way up my thighs. Then, holding me under my arms, she stood me up. I learned to keep my balance by holding tightly on to my mother’s hand.

“Look how tall you are!” she exclaimed, but I didn’t care.

“They hurt my legs, Mamma.”

When I got those braces, my mother, in order to hide them, made
me a pair of pants. I must have been the only little girl in Sicily who wore pants. The other children laughed at me, but I rather liked wearing pants. The best thing about the braces was that when she took them off, my mother always massaged my legs. The doctor in Catania told her massage was the best therapy. I loved to feel my mother’s cool hands moving up and down my thighs and shins. Then she tickled my feet and made me laugh.

The braces made me too heavy for my mother. She put them on me less and less frequently, and when I grew out of them, I didn’t get new ones. But even when I stopped using the braces, she had me wear pants.

“This way, people can’t see your legs.”

My mother’s words forced me to pay closer attention to my legs. I noticed they weren’t growing as fast as the rest of my body. They seemed smaller and thinner than the legs of other girls my age. In place of calf muscles, I had only soft flesh. My mother thought it best to keep my legs hidden, because she was ashamed of them. So I learned to be ashamed of them, too.

If I had to choose between going to doctors or being taken by one of my grandmothers and my aunts to healers and witches, I’d choose the witches. Oh, they scared me, but it was an exciting kind of scared. All they did was say funny words, rub my legs with weird-smelling herbs, or have me drink something bitter. They didn’t hurt me like the doctors did.

I never thought they could make me walk, but I secretly wished they would teach me how to fly. Some people swore they’d seen the witches flying in a circle, holding on to one another’s hands in the dark of night! My grandmother said that wasn’t true. But I liked picturing the circle of flying witches. What a great game it seemed. Even better than girotondo, ring around the rosie, which all the girls loved and the boys snubbed. Once in a while, I played girotondo. My mother sat me in a chair in the middle of the circle and I sang along, watching the other girls go around me.

Whether I was taken to doctors or witches, it was clear to me that I
was no good the way I was, ciunca. I needed to be fixed. I wished my father could fix me himself, like he fixed everything else. The people who loved me—my parents, my grandparents, all my relatives—none of them wanted me to be the way I was. Only the nuns thought I should accept my destiny and offer my suffering to the Lord. But they agreed such a destiny was a cruel one.

My father worked hard and saved money so he could take me to the best hospitals and the best doctors. Every time we went to a new doctor, his hope was renewed, only to turn into disappointment afterward.

“Italian doctors are too ignorant,” he told me when we came home from yet another trip to Rome. “They don’t do research. They’ll never find a cure.”

Then my father smiled his big bright smile to show me he was not defeated. A new plan had been germinating in his mind. We would leave this backward town and this country where injustice and ignorance ruled. We would go to America.

In America, doctors were different. They were brilliant, and they were always doing research with money that was collected on television. “In America,” my father told me, “every house has a television set, and when they show children like you, people send money to find a cure.”

The American doctors, my father was sure, could accomplish what ignorant people in Riposto would call miracles. There was even a president in America who had been cured of polio.

“In America, guarisci, you’ll be cured,” my father promised. “In America, cammini, you’ll walk.”

I always believed everything my father said. I wasn’t sure how far America was, or how we’d get there. But if that’s where my father wanted to take me, that’s where I’d go.

As the years passed, I started to worry, because sometimes my father’s plans didn’t work out—the money he expected to get for building a house never came, or the mafiosi put their dirty hands in his business
and caused him all kinds of trouble. What if we never made it to America? What if I never got cured?

As I got bigger and heavier, my mother had difficulty carrying me, and she complained about her back hurting. Sometimes an uncle or an older cousin carried me. Once in a while a big neighborhood boy offered to carry me. At first, I was happy, especially when he took me on the main street. But then I started not liking it. He squeezed me too tight and tickled me in places where I didn’t want to be touched.

I didn’t mention it to my mother, because I didn’t want her to get sad. I wanted her to laugh. She always laughed when my father was home. And when she outran my grandmother and got her pick of the fruit my grandfather brought. But sometimes she also laughed when it was just the two of us. She laughed when the neighbor’s cat carried her kittens one by one by the scruff of their necks to our house, and laughed, rather than getting angry, when I knocked over the ink bottle on the table while doing my homework. She struggled to carry me up the steps to the roof terrace, complaining about my being heavy and her aching back; then once we made it all the way up, she pretended to drop me, laid me down on the cement floor, and lay beside me, both of us laughing wildly. At those times, my mother didn’t look like the Addolorata. She called me gioia. I kissed her flushed face, and wondered how I could be both her cross and her joy.

I knew my mother worried about what would become of me as I grew up. Sometimes she said, “I should have given you a sister who could help take care of you.”

“Oh, yes, I want a sister! Can you give me a sister, please?” And I imagined that sister, how she would play with me all the time. But then my mother got sad and said it was too late; she couldn’t raise another child when she had to take care of me.

I heard there were disabled people living in the town, but I never saw them. The women talked about a man who had fallen off a scaffold while working in Catania on a tall building, and was left paralyzed. A good-looking man he was; God should have taken him, poviru ciuncu,
the women said. His unmarried sister sacrificed her youth to take care of him.

My grandmother talked about a friend of hers who took care of her husband, who’d had a stroke and couldn’t walk anymore. Her daughter helped out when she could. I understood crippled grown-ups had to have wives, sisters, or daughters to take care of them, and had to stay home all the time because they were too heavy to be carried.

I didn’t know any disabled children. I often asked my mother if there were others like me. Ever since I could remember, my mother had always told me that, yes, there was a girl just like me who lived in another town. Maybe she made her up, so I wouldn’t feel I was the only crippled girl in the world. I thought of that girl as a lost sister. I fantasized that I would one day find her, and we would talk and laugh together, and hug, and play girotondo.