

SILENCE IN FLORENCE by Ian Creasey

“Silence in Florence” is Ian Creasey’s third story for Asimov’s. He tells us this piece was inspired by a newspaper article about an exhibition devoted to portraits of servants. “One seventeenth-century picture showed a woman whose job was to scour out chamberpots. In the painting, she wielded her broom in a similar style to martial portraits of dukes and generals. It reminded me of how often fiction concentrates on so-called important people, the movers and shakers of their era, while relegating servants to mere background props. I wrote this story to redress the balance, and give the chambermaid her due regard.”

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The chamberpots held only dust. Maria picked one up, and sniffed a faint tang of rose-water from the last time she had cleaned it—three days ago, before the visitors arrived. Did the foreigners think themselves too good to piss in a pot? How could they? Under their fancy robes, everyone had the same bodily functions. Maria had emptied the pots of princes and cardinals, ambassadors and artists; the more wine they drank, the smellier their urine became. But now—none?

Maria shrugged. If the pots were empty, she’d complete her rounds quicker. She needed to finish all these apartments while the occupants toasted the Feast of St. John the Baptist downstairs. To remove the dust, she gave the chamberpots a quick wipe with a jasmine-scented rag. Then she left the visitors’ apartment.

On her way to the next stateroom, she met her daughter scurrying down the corridor. “What is it?” she asked, no longer hoping for an answer in words. At eleven years old, her daughter had still never spoken. Maria hoped the others hadn’t been teasing her again. Sometimes they would send Cristina with messages too complicated to be delivered by gestures.

Cristina tugged at her mother’s apron. Maria allowed herself to be guided through the servants’ passages—the Pitti Palace had a network of cunningly hidden corridors and stairways, so that the nobles never had to meet anyone carrying a chamberpot. Soon they arrived at the artists’ quarters. So many artists spent so much time working in the Palace that Cosimo II had given them their own suite of rooms. Although it was not far from the servants’ own quarters in the basement, the artists made it clear that they considered themselves superior.

Giovanni da San Giovanni panted in short gasps as his sweat shone in the candlelight. A younger artist, holding Giovanni’s arm, said, “He’s getting worse. Take that to Alessandro”—he pointed to a chamberpot—”and tell the good doctor to find out what ails Giovanni. He may have taken some wine, but he is not ‘just drunk.’”

Maria realized they’d summoned her because Cristina couldn’t tell the doctor

whom the chamberpot belonged to. She smelled ordure under the lid. The artists could have taken the pot themselves, but that would have been beneath their dignity. Was it only in Florence that artists considered themselves almost equal to the popes and Medicis who patronized them? Maria didn't know; she had never even crossed the Arno.

On the way to Alessandro's room, Maria said a short prayer over the chamberpot. Giovanni looked as if he might need more than the doctor's aid to recover.

She let Cristina tag along, although there would be work for her somewhere in the Palace—there was always work for everyone. The girl skipped along the corridor, smiling at her mother, running her finger along the frescos until Maria took her hand. Painted angels looked on impassively, as if they didn't care what would become of Cristina when Maria passed away.

In the doctor's small room, a tub of leeches stood among untidy heaps of glassware and steel instruments. Alessandro's moustache twitched as he smiled ruefully and put the chamberpot on his table. "There should be a better way to diagnose sickness than poking around in here." He had said this a dozen times before, but Maria still felt warmed by the words. At least he spoke to her, and treated her as a person. If she met him in the courtyard, his gaze didn't slide away into the distance.

"And how are you today?" Alessandro asked the fair-haired child poking among his scalpels and bloodletting cups.

Cristina didn't answer, but only ducked shyly behind her mother.

"No change?" he asked quietly.

Maria shook her head. Even though she couldn't afford to pay him, Alessandro had examined her daughter several times over the years. He had never been able to find out why she couldn't speak.

It was an old pain, not worth bringing up again. Maria cast around for a change of subject, and remembered the empty chamberpots in the visitors' apartments.

"You'd find treating the foreigners more pleasant," she said. "They produce neither piss nor stools."

Alessandro laughed. "Don't be silly. Every man produces bodily wastes. After all, what goes in must come out."

"I haven't seen any for three days," Maria said.

“They probably go elsewhere in the Palace—the garderobes, or the outside privy. But enough talk of stools. I must get on and examine poor Giovanni’s.”

Maria shook her head as she left. Alessandro might talk of the outside privy, but twenty years as a chambermaid told her that no one would walk all that way from the Palace’s upstairs apartments, not when they could piss in a pot in their own room.

And yet Alessandro was right. What went in, must come out. Did the foreigners even drink, or did they spurn Tuscan wine like Tuscan chamberpots?

Maria turned to her daughter. “Would you like to see the nobles at the banquet?”

Cristina nodded eagerly.

“Then come along.” Maria knew that her silent child could be counted on not to disturb the guests.

They went via the kitchens. Standing just outside the hall, dodging the trolleys of confectionery steered by liveried footmen, Maria and Cristina looked in at the feast. The smell of roast duck and spiced wine rose to the haloed saints on the high-vaulted ceiling.

Everyone was so richly dressed, it took Maria a few moments to spot the three visitors. Yet they stood out, because even now they still hadn’t removed their veils.

The plague had hit Tuscany so many times that people often wore veils when traveling, or even strolling in the city streets. But at table? It seemed an insult to the Duke, to everyone else at the banquet. Yet no one looked offended. Two of the foreigners flanked a middle-aged, bushy-bearded man whom Maria recognized as Professore Galileo Galilei, the philosopher who studied the sky with his spyglass. The group talked animatedly, pushing salt cellars and duck-bones around the table. The third visitor looked away, gazing at the richly decorated walls, full of Bible scenes painted by the finest artists of the age.

Maria saw that the foreigners neither ate nor drank. Galileo sipped wine, and ate sugared citrons. The young Duke Ferdinand and all his guests feasted with gusto. Only the three visitors let nothing past their impenetrable veils. Behind their lace, robes, and gloves, not an inch of skin could be seen. Did any flesh lurk behind the clothes, or were the visitors just hollow masks? Maria shivered.

Cristina had grown fretful while Maria stared, and the kitchen servants began giving them both dirty looks for standing around, shirking. They had to get back to

work.

Upstairs, Maria told her daughter to finish cleaning out the chamberpots from the other staterooms. Maria loitered in the corridor, waiting for the end of the feast, when the guests might return to their apartments. What kind of men neither ate nor drank, nor pissed or shat? What kind of men didn't even show their skin?

Clearly, the foreigners weren't ordinary men. And if not men, what were they? Maria thought they could only be angels. Of course angels wouldn't eat earthly food, or have earthly functions. The robes and veils concealed their divine light.

Angels! The thought was beyond wonder, beyond comprehension, like opening a lamp and finding a star inside. Yet God had uncounted angels, and the Duke's artists showed them talking to saints, walking with people. They had simply stepped from the frescos and donned cloaks.

Why would angels come to Florence? Were they judging the town for sin? Maria trembled for a moment. But then she remembered the friendly way they'd talked with Galileo, who was in trouble with the Church, and she felt they had probably not come for that.

Anyway, if they came to judge sin—why now? Every Sunday, Father Niccolo denounced the town's sinfulness and predicted damnation, as every priest had done since Savonarola's bonfire of vanities more than a hundred years ago. Maria couldn't believe that Florence today was more or less sinful than it had ever been.

No, the angels hadn't descended to punish sin. And so—perhaps they might be merciful.

Maria heard a swell of conversation from downstairs, as the hall doors opened and the guests began to disperse. "Cristina!" she called.

Cristina emerged sullenly from the opposite room. Maria saw people climbing the stairs, and she dragged her daughter behind the servants' door, leaving it ajar to see who approached.

Veiled figures strolled down the corridor, silent as clouds. Maria took deep, shaky breaths. Could she ask a boon? Did she dare? She might annoy them—no doubt they had higher concerns. But if she didn't take this chance, she would never have another. And for the rest of her life, every time she looked at Cristina, she would remember that her own silence had sealed her daughter's.

Maria waited until the visitors neared their apartment. Then she stepped out and confronted them. She had feared she would be too terrified to speak, but holding Cristina's wrist gave her strength. "Most merciful angels," she began. "I pray you in God's name, heal my daughter."

They stopped. Their blank, masked gazes bore into her. Maria wondered what else to say. Surely the angels, with divine wisdom, would know what ailed Cristina. And yet—if they knew all things, they wouldn't need to come down to Earth from Heaven.

The angels glanced at each other, then back to Maria, who said, “Cristina is mute. She hasn't spoken or cried since she was born. Life's hard enough for servants, but for a girl who can't speak to complain of a beating, or of worse things.... What will happen to her when I'm gone?”

One of the angels spoke in a voice resonant as bells. “Can she not write messages?”

Maria bowed her head, stifling her resentment at this mockery. “How can servants ever learn to read? Such luxuries are beyond our means.”

The angels huddled together, and spoke rapidly with a rasping buzz. Maria had heard a dozen languages spoken in the Palace, but this sounded like none of them. Perhaps it was Hebrew, or a purer language spoken only by dead souls in Heaven.

But did people argue in Heaven? Maria couldn't understand what they said, but from the speed and vehemence of the words, she felt sure the angels disagreed among themselves.

Cristina grabbed Maria's arm. Maria looked down and saw her daughter's pained expression. She released her tense grip on Cristina's wrist, revealing red wheals in the flesh where her fingers had gouged. Cristina hadn't, of course, cried out with the hurt.

Finally, a red-robed angel—not the one who had recommended writing messages—said, “We will examine the girl. But you must wait here.”

“Thank you,” said Maria, bowing again. As she sketched the sign of the cross, her heart skipped in exultation. She touched Cristina's cheek for a long moment, then said, “Go with them, my darling. And be brave.”

The angels took Cristina into their room. Maria sat down outside to wait and pray. Time slid by, as slowly as embers dimming into ash. She wondered what Cristina would see, and whether she would ever be able to tell it.

The French ambassador walked down the corridor, and found Maria slumped by the wall. “These servants grow cheekier by the day,” he said to his friend. He kicked Maria hard in the buttock with his fashionably pointed shoe. “Get up, you lazy slattern!”

Her trance broken, Maria looked up at the French nobleman. Whatever he saw in her eyes made him hurry to the stairs, almost tripping over the broken end of his shoe.

Maria gazed at the angels' apartment, wishing she knew what was happening to Cristina. She noticed white light shining through the crack at the bottom of the door, a light brighter than any oil lamp or log fire. The radiance of Heaven!

She pressed her ear to the door, but could hear nothing through the thick wood. The light dimmed.

The door opened, and Maria almost fell through it. One of the angels came out with Cristina, who looked pale and frightened. "We've done the best we can," the resonant voice said. "But don't let the sick crowd our door. We've already done more than we're permitted, and we're leaving tonight." Before Maria could utter any thanks or praise, the veiled figure slipped back inside.

Maria hugged her daughter, and saw a small red mark on Cristina's neck. "Are you all right?" she asked. "Can you speak?"

Cristina opened her mouth. After a few moments, a faint croak emerged from the back of her throat.

"It's a miracle!" Maria dropped to her knees, and pushed Cristina down too. "Oh Lord, we thank you for the gift of your angels."

Maria hoped that Cristina would join her prayer. Her first words should be ones of praise. But Cristina didn't speak. Instead, she made a drinking sign.

Water. They hastened downstairs. After the girl had drunk two cups of water, Maria asked again. "Can you speak?"

Cristina opened her jaw wide. Maria saw the muscles in her neck tense as she strained to make a sound. A squeak burst forth, as harsh as the scrape of a rusted hinge.

It was enough. "Hush now," Maria told her daughter for the first time. "You should rest. Perhaps some honeyed wine, if there's any left from the banquet."

She realized there'd be no sudden gift of tongues. Cristina would have to learn to babble like a babe before she could talk in words. But even this painful squeak sounded as precious as if Cristina had called her "Mama."

Maria gave her daughter a drink of warm sweet wine, and put her to bed. Then she left the cramped servants' quarters in the Palace basement. No matter what

angels might visit, no matter what miracles might occur, she still had work to do. Too many people had seen her slacking today.

She frowned. Cristina had finished the upstairs apartments. What else needed doing? Maria remembered her visit to Dottore Alessandro. She'd have to go back and retrieve Giovanni's chamberpot. The doctor scrutinized so many samples that chamberpots kept accumulating in his room, and people shouted at her for losing them.

And she could tell the doctor about Cristina's marvelous miracle.

She rushed to Alessandro's room, where the eager words spilled out of her like water from the new fountains.

The doctor had been using a spyglass to examine a small brown turd. He gave her an exasperated look and said, "Angels? The artists paint angels all the time. They need something to fill the sky."

"No!" Maria flapped her arm in frustration. "Real angels—here, in the Palace. They cured Cristina!"

Alessandro stood up, his eyes wide with amazement. "Cristina can talk?"

Maria hesitated. "She hasn't said any words. But she made a noise. She squeaked!"

"Angels made your daughter squeak?" The doctor sighed. "Maria, you have to face the truth. If your daughter hasn't spoken in eleven years, she's never going to. Now take this damned chamberpot and tell Giovanni to lay off the wine."

He thrust the pot toward her. Maria threw it to the floor, where it smashed into a dozen pieces and splattered ordure over their feet.

"You're just jealous because you could never heal her. You never heal anyone! Poking around in shit—God knows people look down on me for cleaning it, but what about you? Look at yourself!"

She braced herself for a blow, but Alessandro only sat down and wiped his shoes. "I know we don't heal as many as we should," he said in a tired voice. "The plague reminds us often enough. I'd poke through a whole cesspit if I could find a cure at the bottom. But because we fail, people turn to angels and toads, spells and dreams." He shook his head.

Maria picked up the pieces of the broken pot, already regretting her temper. Alessandro had always done his best; it was no fault of his if angels could surpass him. Yet he should at least listen to her.

“They *are* angels,” she said. “They neither eat nor drink, nor fill chamberpots, nor show their face. They hide their light behind robes and veils.”

“Oh, you mean the easterners.” Alessandro smiled. “They explained why they wear all that—it’s one of their customs. They’re staying in the new wing, aren’t they?”

Maria nodded.

“Then come along, and I’ll show you something.”

Alessandro strode out of the room, and Maria followed him upstairs. To her surprise, he stepped through the servants’ door, into the narrow back corridor. Maria’s eyes took a moment to adjust to the dim evening light coming through windows at each end of the long passage.

She bumped into Alessandro when he stopped in the middle of the corridor. He fumbled along the wall, and swore under his breath. After a long minute, she saw him remove a slice of stone. He pointed to the gap, and made way for her to look.

The block of stone had been hollowed out into a spyhole. Maria pressed her face to the wall and gazed through the tiny gap. She saw the visitors’ apartment beyond, the familiar chairs and fireplace. The occupants were putting things in smooth grey cases—a spyglass, some books, a small sculpture of Christ.

And then she saw that the angels, alone in their room, had removed their veils. Each deformed face, blotched green and blue, had only a pit for a nose, and no chin at all. The brows bulged forward, with narrow slits for eyes.

Leprosy, thought Maria as she staggered away. She had never seen a leper, but had heard rumors of the hideous deformity it caused. Yet how could angels be diseased?

“They’re not angels,” she whispered.

“Of course not,” said Alessandro. “But I’m curious to see whether the Chinese are really as yellow as they say.” He stepped to the spyhole.

Moments later he fell back, his mouth hanging open and his face ashen with shock. “My God, they’re not human. They’re devils!” The slice of stone clattered from his hand to the floor. “Demons in the Palace! Go and fetch Father Niccolo.”

Maria didn’t move. Alessandro pushed her, saying, “Hurry up! We’re in mortal peril of our souls. We need Father Niccolo to cast the demons out.”

Maria's thoughts whirled. The creatures behind the wall were hideous, but were they demons? Could devils touch a statue of Jesus? Could demons heal her daughter?

If Father Niccolo cast them out, would her daughter lose the speech they had given?

In that moment, Maria knew she didn't care whether the visitors were angels or demons or Chinese. When Alessandro shoved her again, she pushed back with such force that he fell to the floor.

"Nobody is fetching Niccolo," she said, her voice husky with rage. "These foreigners healed my daughter. Niccolo wouldn't even pray for her. He said she was mute because she was born in sin—as if I could insist on marrying every drunken ambassador who grabbed my ass. As if a servant can say no!"

Alessandro said, "Do you want your daughter to grow up a witch? If devils touched her—"

"Better a witch who can talk than a servant who can't. And do you suddenly believe in witchcraft, after you sneered at toads and spells?"

"I believe in what I see—and I see demons."

The doctor began to struggle to his feet. Maria pushed him back down. They scuffled, Maria trying to prevent him crawling past. But Alessandro was far stronger. He landed a painful blow in her stomach, and inched down the corridor.

Maria grew desperate. She kicked Alessandro, then scabbled about on the floor, searching for the fallen slice of stone.

Alessandro stood up and rushed past her. Maria ran after him. As he opened the door to the stairway, she bludgeoned his head with the stone.

He fell like a broken puppet. Maria felt a stab of guilt, and she shoved her hand under his shirt, relieved to find his heart still beating. Panting with effort, she dragged Alessandro across the corridor into one of the empty staterooms, where no one would discover him for a while.

Then Maria, sick with worry, ran down to the basement. She found Cristina lying peacefully in bed. Her daughter smiled. The red spot on her throat had faded to a dull flush.

Was that a witch's mark? If they were demons, what else might they have done?

Maria tore the shift from her daughter's body. Cristina squirmed in protest. "Lie still," said Maria, "and let me look at you."

In the faint glow of the few lamps in the servants' quarters, Maria examined every inch of Cristina's flesh. Rumor said that Satan gave witches an extra nipple to feed their familiars. But Cristina still had only the two she was born with. Maria recognized every mole and freckle on her daughter's skin. Other than the mark on her throat—which looked like any ordinary bruise—nothing had changed.

Maria sighed with relief. "Lord, forgive me for doubting you," she said.

Cristina put her shift back on. She gazed inquiringly at her mother, but Maria didn't want to say what she had feared. Why frighten the child with silly talk of demons?

And yet—the thought wouldn't leave her mind. She remembered all the sermons she'd heard, all the talk of how devils could appear and tempt people into sin. Maybe they'd tempted Galileo into sin, and made the Church frown upon him.

She had to find out who'd cured her daughter. She had to know whether it was a tainted gift.

Maria returned to the spyhole upstairs. There she saw that the visitors had finished packing, and had donned their veils once more. They picked up their grey cases and left the apartment.

She walked to the servants' door, opened it a crack, and watched the robed figures descend the main stairs. She followed them at a cautious distance. To her surprise, they didn't head for any of the front doors that led onto the courtyard. Instead, they departed the Palace by the back, and entered the gardens.

Maria kept pace behind them. The evening had darkened into night, and low clouds covered the city. The strangers carried a lamp that showed them the path. Maria had rarely entered the gardens—chambermaids had no duties there, and servants were not allowed to loiter—so she watched where the figures walked, and tried to follow. Terraced lawns and flowerbeds descended the hillside. Maria stumbled down steps that she could barely see. The figures drew further ahead.

Their lamp dimmed. Ahead, Maria heard the sound of leaves rustling in the wind. The trees obscured her view. She rushed forward, trying to catch up, and fell painfully as she tripped over something in the dark. She had lost the path. The black night had swallowed her up.

Maria climbed to her feet, and trod more slowly and carefully. But when she left the clump of trees, she saw only distant yellow specks, the lamps and candles in houses at the edge of the city. Somewhere down there lay the Porta Romana, the

southern gate of Florence.

She couldn't see the robed visitors who had cured her daughter.

Maria sat down to rest on the grass, damp with evening dew. She felt no desire to rush back to the Palace. Indeed, after beating Alessandro senseless, there was no way she could return to her old life. Servants could not strike their masters like that.

But all over Florence, chamberpots needed emptying—all across Tuscany and the world. And when Cristina could speak, the promise of a better life lay somewhere ahead.

After a while, Maria saw a dazzling white light south of the city. It rose into the air, slowly at first. Then the bright starry light rushed up through the clouds and disappeared into the heavens.

Maria smiled. "So they *were* angels," she said.

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