

Young Man with Prospects

by Orson Scott Card



Artwork by Julie Dillon

"Do you know what I did today, Alessandra?"

"No, Mother." Thirteen-year-old Alessandra set her book bag on the floor by the front door and walked past her mother to the sink, where she poured herself a glass of water.

"Guess!"

"Got the electricity turned back on?"

"The elves would not speak to me," said Mother. It had once been funny, this game that electricity came from elves. But it wasn't funny now, in the sweltering Adriatic summer, with no refrigeration for the food, no air-conditioning, and no vids to distract her from the heat.

"Then I don't know what you did, Mother."

"I changed our lives," said Mother. "I created a future for us."

Alessandra froze in place and uttered a silent prayer. She had long since given up hope that any of her prayers would be answered, but she figured each unanswered prayer would add to the list of grievances she would take up with God, should the occasion arise.

"What future is that, Mother?"

Mother could hardly contain herself. "We are going to be colonists."

Alessandra sighed with relief. She had heard all about the Dispersal Project in school. Now that the Formics had been destroyed, the idea was for humans to colonize all their former worlds, so that humanity's fate would not be tied to that of a single planet. But the requirements for colonists were strict. There was no chance that an unstable, irresponsible -- no, pardon me, I meant "feckless and fay" -- person like Mother would be accepted.

"Well, Mother, that's wonderful."

"You don't sound excited."

"It takes a long time for an application to be approved. Why would they take us? What do we know how to do?"

"You're such a pessimist, Alessandra. You'll have no future if you must frown at every new thing." Mother danced around her, holding a fluttering piece of paper in front of her. "I put in our application months ago, darling Alessandra. Today I got word that we have been accepted!"

"You kept a secret for all this time?"

"I can keep secrets," said Mother. "I have all kinds of secrets. But this is no secret, this piece of paper says that we will journey to a new world, and on that new world you will not

be part of a persecuted surplus, you will be needed, all your talents and charms will be noticed and admired."

All her talents and charms. At the collegio, no one seemed to notice them. She was merely another gawky girl, all arms and legs, who sat in the back and did her work and made no waves. Only Mother thought of Alessandra as some extraordinary, magical creature.

"Mother, may I read that paper?" asked Alessandra.

"Why, do you doubt me?" Mother danced away with the letter.

Alessandra was too hot and tired to play. She did not chase after her. "Of course I doubt you."

"You are no fun today, Alessandra."

"Even if it's true, it's a horrible idea. You should have asked me. Do you know what colonists' lives will be like? Sweating in the fields as farmers."

"Don't be silly," said Mother. "They have machines for that."

"And they're not sure we can eat any of the native vegetation. When the Formics first attacked Earth, they simply destroyed all the vegetation in the part of China where they landed. They had no intention of eating anything that grew here naturally. We don't know if our plants can grow on their planets. All the colonists might die."

"The survivors of the fleet that defeated the Formics will already have those problems resolved by the time we get there."

"Mother," said Alessandra patiently. "I don't want to go."

"That's because you have been convinced by the dead souls at the school that you are an ordinary child.

But you are not. You are magical. You must get away from this world of dust and misery and go to a land that is green and filled with ancient powers. We will live in the caves of the dead ogres and go out to harvest the fields that once were theirs! And in the cool evening, with sweet green breezes fluttering your skirts, you will dance with young men who gasp at your beauty and grace!"

"And where will we find young men like *that*?"

"You'll see," said Mother. Then she sang it: "You shall see! You shall see! A fine young man with prospects will give his heart to you."

Finally the paper fluttered close enough for Alessandra to snatch it out of Mother's hands. She read it, with Mother bending down to hover just behind the paper, smiling her fairy smile. It was real. Dorabella Toscano (29) and daughter Alessandra Toscano (14), accepted into Colony I.

"Obviously there's no sort of psychological screening after all," said Alessandra.

"You try to hurt me but I will not be hurt. Mother knows what is best for you. You shall not make the mistakes that I have made."

"No, but I'll pay for them," said Alessandra.

"Think, my darling, beautiful, brilliant, graceful, kind, generous, and poutful girl, think of this: What do you have to look forward to here in Monopoli, Italia, living in a flat in the unfashionable end of Via Luigi Indelli?"

"There is no *fashionable* end of Luigi Indelli."

"You make my point for me."

"Mother, I don't dream of marrying a prince and riding off into the sunset."

"That's a good thing, my darling, because there are no princes -- only men and animals who pretend to be men. I married one of the latter but he at least provided you with the genes for those amazing cheekbones, that dazzling smile. Your father had very good teeth."

"If only he had been a more attentive bicyclist."

"It was not his fault, dear."

"The streetcars run on tracks, Mother. You don't get hit if you stay out from between the tracks."

"Your father was not a genius but fortunately I am, and therefore you have the blood of the fairies in you."

"Who knew that fairies sweat so much?" Alessandra pulled one of Mother's dripping locks of hair away from her face. "Oh, Mother, we won't do well in a colony. Please don't do this."

"The voyage takes forty years -- I went next door and looked it up on the net."

"Did you *ask* them this time?"

"Of course I did, they lock their windows now. They were thrilled to hear we were going to be colonists."

"I have no doubt they were."

"But because of magic, to us it will be only two years."

"Because of the relativistic effects of near-light-speed travel."

"Such a genius, my daughter is. And even those two years we can sleep through, so we won't even age."

"Much."

"It will be as if our bodies slept a week, and we wake up forty years away."

"And everyone we know on Earth will be forty years older than we are."

"And mostly dead," sang Mother. "Including *my* hideous hag of a mother, who disowned me when I married the man I loved, and who therefore will never get her hands on my darling daughter." The melody to this refrain was always cheery-sounding. Alessandra had never met her grandmother. Now, though, it occurred to her that maybe a grandmother could get her out of joining a colony.

"I'm not going, Mother."

"You are a minor child and you will go where I go, tra-la."

"You are a madwoman and I will sue for emancipation rather than go, tra-lee."

"You will think about it first because I am going whether you go or not and if you think your life with me is hard you should see what it's like without me."

"Yes, I should," said Alessandra. "Let me meet my grandmother." Mother's glare was immediate, but Alessandra plowed ahead. "Let me live with her. You go with the colony."

"But there's no reason for me to go with the colony, my darling. I'm doing this for you. So without you, I will not go."

"Then we're not going. Tell them."

"We *are* going, and we are thrilled about it."

Might as well get off the merry-go-round; Mother didn't mind endlessly repeating circular arguments, but

Alessandra got bored with it. "What lies did you have to tell, to get accepted?"

"I told no lies," said Mother, pretending to be shocked at the accusation. "I only proved my identity. They do all the research, so if they have false information it's their own fault. Do you know why they want us?"

"Do *you*?" asked Alessandra. "Did they actually tell you?"

"It doesn't take a genius to figure it out, or even a fairy," said Mother. "They want us because we are both of child-bearing age."

Alessandra groaned in disgust, but Mother was preening in front of an imaginary full-length mirror.

"I am still young," said Mother, "and you are just flowering into womanhood. They have men from the fleet there, young men who have never married. They will be waiting eagerly for us to arrive. So I will mate with a very eager old man of sixty and bear him babies and then he will die. I'm used to that. But you -- you will be a prize for a young man to marry. You will be a treasure."

"My *uterus* will, you mean," said Alessandra. "You're right, that's exactly what they're thinking. I bet they took practically any healthy female who applied."

"We fairies are always healthy."

It was true enough -- Alessandra had no memory of ever being sick, except for food poisoning that time when Mother insisted they would eat supper from a street vendor's cart at the end of a very hot day.

"So they're sending a herd of women, like cows."

"You're only a cow if you choose to be," said Mother. "The only question I have to decide now is whether we want to sleep through the voyage and wake up just before landing, or stay awake for the two years, receiving training and acquiring skills so we're ready to be productive in the first wave of colonists."

Alessandra was impressed. "You actually read the documentation?"

"This is the most important decision of our lives, my darling Alessa. I am being extraordinarily careful."

"If only you had read the bills from the power company."

"They were not interesting. They only spoke of our poverty. Now I see that God was preparing us for a world without air-conditioning and vids and nets. A world of nature. We were born for nature, we elvish folk. You will come to the dance and with your fairy grace you will charm the son of the king, and the king's son will dance with you until he is so in love his heart will break for you. Then it will be for *you* to decide if he's the one for you."

"I doubt there'll be a king."

"But there'll be a governor. And other high officials. And young men with prospects. I will help you choose."

"You will certainly *not* help me choose."

"It's as easy to fall in love with a rich man as a poor one."

"As if you'd know."

"I know better than you, having done it badly once. The rush of hot blood into the heart is the darkest magic, and it must be tamed. You must not let it happen until you have chosen a man worthy of your love. I will help you choose."

No point in arguing. Alessandra had long since learned that fighting with Mother accomplished nothing, whereas ignoring her worked very well.

Except for this. A colony. It was definitely time to look up Grandmother. She lived in Polignano a Mare, the next city of any size up the Adriatic coast, that's all that she knew of her. And Mother's mother would not be named Toscano. Alessandra would have to do some serious research.

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A week later, Mother was still going back and forth about whether they should sleep through the voyage or not, while Alessandra was discovering that there's a lot of information that they won't let children get at. Snooping in the house, she found her own birth certificate, but that wasn't helpful, it only listed her own parents. She needed Mother's certificate, and that was not findable in the apartment.

The government people barely acknowledged she existed and when they heard her errand sent her away. It was only when she finally thought of the Catholic Church that she made any headway. They hadn't actually attended Mass since Alessandra was little, but at the parish, the priest on duty helped her search back to find her own baptism. They had a record of baby Alessandra Toscano's godparents as well as her parents, and Alessandro figured that either the godparents *were* her grandparents, or they would know who her grandparents were.

At school she searched the net and found that Leopoldo and Isabella Santangelo lived in Polignano a Mare, which was a good sign, since that was the town where grandmother lived.

Instead of going home, she used her student pass and hopped the train to Polignano and then spent forty-five minutes walking around the town searching for the address. To her disgust, it ended up being on a stub of a street just off Via Antonio Ardito, a trashy-looking apartment building backing on the train tracks. There was no buzzer. Alessandra trudged up to the fourth floor and knocked.

"You want to knock something, knock your own head!" shouted an woman from inside.

"Are you Isabella Santangelo?"

"I'm the Holy Virgin and I'm busy answering prayers. Go away!"

Alessandra's first thought was: So Mother lied about being a child of the fairies. She's really Jesus' younger sister.

But she decided that flippancy wasn't a good approach today. She was already going to be in trouble for leaving Monopoli without permission, and she needed to find out from the Holy Virgin here whether or not she was her grandmother.

"I'm so sorry to trouble you, but I'm the daughter of Dorabella Toscano and I --"

The woman must have been standing right at the door, waiting, because it flew open before Alessandra could finish her sentence.

"Dorabella *Toscano* is a dead woman! How can a dead woman have daughters!"

"My mother isn't dead," said Alessandra, stunned. "You were signed as my godmother on the parish register."

"That was the worst mistake of my life. She marries this pig boy, this

bike messenger, when she's barely fifteen, and why? Because her belly's getting fat with you, that's why! She thinks a wedding makes it all clean and pure! And then her idiot husband gets himself killed. I told her, this proves there is a God! Now go to hell!"

The door slammed in Alessandra's face.

She had come so far. Her grandmother couldn't really mean to send her away like this. They hadn't even had time to do more than *glance* at each other.

"But I'm your granddaughter," said Alessandra.

"How can I have a granddaughter when I have no daughter? You tell your mother that before she sends her little quasi-bastard begging at my door, she'd better come to me herself with some serious apologizing."

"She's going away to a colony," said Alessandra.

The door was yanked open again. "She's even more insane than ever," said Grandmother. "Come in. Sit down. Tell me what stupid thing she's done."

The apartment was absolutely neat. Everything in it was unbelievably cheap, the lowest possible quality, but there was a lot of it -- ceramics, tiny framed art pieces -- and everything had been dusted and polished. The sofa and chairs were so piled with quilts and throws and twee little embroidered pillows that there was nowhere to sit. Grandmother Isabella moved nothing, and finally Alessandra sat on top of one of the pillow piles.

Feeling suddenly quite disloyal and childish herself, telling on Mother like a schoolyard tattletale, Alessandra now tried to softpedal the outrage. "She has her reasons, I

know it, and I think she truly believes she's doing it for me --"

"What what what is she doing for you that you don't want her to do! I don't have all day!"

The woman who embroidered all of these pillows has all day *every* day. But Alessandra kept her sassy remark to herself. "She has signed us up for a colony ship, and they accepted us."

"A colony ship? There aren't any colonies. All those places have countries of their own now. Not that Italy ever *did* have any real colonies, not since the Roman Empire. Lost their balls after that, the men did. Italian men have been worthless ever since. Your grandfather, God keep him buried, was worthless enough, never stood up for himself, let everybody push him around, but at least he worked hard and provided for me until my ungrateful daughter spat in my face and married that bike boy. Not like that worthless father of yours, never made a dime."

"Well, not since he died, anyway," said Alessandra, feeling more than a little outraged.

"I'm talking about when he was alive! He only worked the fewest hours he could get by with. I think he was on drugs. You were probably a cocaine baby."

"I don't think so."

"How would *you* know anything?" said Grandmother. "You couldn't even talk then!"

Alessandra sat and waited.

"Well? Tell me."

"I did but you wouldn't believe me."

"What was it you said?"

"A colony ship. A *starship* to one of the Formic planets, to farm and explore."

"Won't the Formics complain?"

"There aren't any more Formics, Grandmother. They were all killed."

"A nasty piece of business but it needed doing. If that Ender Wiggin boy is available, I've got a list of other people that need some good serious destruction. What do you want, anyway?"

"I don't want to go into space. With Mother. But I'm still a minor. If you would sign as my guardian, I could get emancipated and stay home. It's in the law."

"As your guardian?"

"Yes. To supervise me and provide for me. I'd live here."

"Get out."

"What?"

"Stand up and get out. You think this is a hotel? Where exactly do you think you'd sleep? On the floor, where I'd trip on you in the night and break my hip? There's no room for you here. I should have known you'd be making demands. Out!"

There was no room for argument. In moments Alessandra found herself charging down the stairs, furious and humiliated. This woman was even crazier than Mother.

I have nowhere to go, thought Alessandra. Surely the law doesn't allow my mother to *force* me to go into space, does it? I'm not a baby, I'm not a *child*, I'm fourteen, I can read and write and make rational choices.

When the train got back to Monopoli, Alessandra did not go directly home. She had to think up a

good lie about where she'd been, so she might as well come up with one that covered a longer time. Maybe the Dispersal Project office was still open.

But it wasn't. She couldn't even get a brochure. And what was the point? Anything interesting would be on the net. She could have stayed after school and found out all she wanted to know. Instead she went to visit her grandmother.

That's proving what good decisions I make.

Mother was sitting at the table, a cup of chocolate in front of her. She looked up and watched Alessandra shut the door and set down her book bag, but she said nothing.

"Mother, I'm sorry, I --"

"Before you lie," said Mother softly, "the witch called me and screamed at me for sending you. I hung up on her, which is what I usually end up doing, and then I unplugged the phone from the wall."

"I'm sorry," said Alessandra.

"You didn't think I had a *reason* for keeping her out of your life?"

For some reason, that pulled the trigger on something inside Alessandra and instead of trying to retreat, she erupted. "It doesn't matter whether you had a reason," she said. "You could have ten million reasons, but you didn't tell any of them to me! You expected me to obey you blindly. But you don't obey *your* mother blindly."

"*Your* mother isn't a monster," said Mother.

"There are many kinds of monsters," said Alessandra. "You're the kind that flits around like a butterfly but never lands near me long enough to even know who I am."

"Everything I do is for you!"

"Nothing is for me. Everything is for the child you imagine you had, the one that doesn't exist, the perfect, happy child that was bound to result from your being the exact opposite of your mother in every way. Well, I'm not that child. And in your mother's house, the electricity is on!"

"Then go live there!"

"She won't let me!"

"You would hate it. Never able to touch anything. Always having to do things *her* way."

"Like going off on a colony ship?"

"I signed up for the colony ship *for* you."

"Which is like buying me a supersized bra. Why don't you look at who I am before you decide what I need?"

"I'll tell you what you are. You're a girl who's too young and inexperienced to know what a woman needs. I'm ten kilometers ahead of you on that road, I know what's coming, I'm trying to get you what you'll need to make that road easy and smooth, and you know what? In spite of you, I've done it. You've fought me every step of the way, but I've done a great job with you. You don't even *know* how good a job I've done because you don't know what you could have been."

"What could I have been, Mother? You?"

"You were never going to be me," said Mother.

"What are you saying? That I would have been *her*?"

"We'll never know what you would have been, will we? Because you already are what I made you."

"Wrong. I *look* like whatever I have to *look* like in order to stay alive in your home. Down inside, what I really am is a complete stranger to you. A stranger that you intend to drag off into space without even asking me if I wanted to go. They used to have a word for people you treated like that. They called them *slaves*."

Alessandra wanted more than ever before in her life to run to her bedroom and slam the door. But she didn't have a bedroom. She slept on the sofa in the same room with the kitchen and the kitchen table.

"I understand," said Mother. "I'll go into my bedroom and you can slam the door on me."

The fact that Mother really did know what she was thinking was the most infuriating thing of all. But Alessandra did not scream and did not scratch at her mother and did not fall on the floor and throw a tantrum and did not even dive onto the sofa and bury her face in the pillow. Instead she sat down at the table directly across from her mother and said, "What's for dinner?"

"So. Just like that, the discussion is over?"

"Discuss while we cook. I'm hungry."

"There's nothing *to* eat, because I haven't turned in our final acceptance because I haven't decided yet whether we should sleep or stay awake through the voyage, and so we haven't got the signing bonus, and so there's no money to buy food."

"So what are we going to do about dinner?"

Mother just looked away from her.

"I know," said Alessandra excitedly. "Let's go over to Grandma's!"

Mother turned back and glared at her.

"Mother," said Alessandra, "how can we run out of money when we're living on the dole? Other people on the dole manage to buy enough food and pay their electric bills."

"What do *you* think?" said Mother. "Look around you. What have I spent all the government's money on? Where's all the extravagance? Look in my closet, count the outfits I own."

Alessandra thought for a moment. "I never thought about that. Do you owe money to the mafia? Did Father, before he died?"

"No," said Mother contemptuously. "You now have all the information you need to understand completely, and yet you still haven't figured it out, smart and grown up as you are."

Alessandra couldn't imagine what Mother was talking about. Alessandra didn't have *any* new information. She also didn't have anything to eat.

She got up and started opening cupboards. She found a box of dry radiatori and a jar of black pepper. She took a pan to the sink and put in some water and set it on the stove and turned on the gas.

"There's no sauce for the pasta," said Mother.

"There's pepper. There's oil."

"You can't eat radiatori with just pepper and oil. It's like putting fistfuls of wet flour in your mouth."

"That's not my problem," said Alessandra. "At this point, it's pasta or shoe leather, so you'd better start guarding your closet."

Mother tried to turn things light again. "Of course, just like a daughter, you'd eat *my* shoes."

"Just be glad if I stop before I get to your leg."

Mother pretended she was still joking when she airily said, "Children eat their parents alive, that's what they do."

"Then why is that hideous creature still living in that flat in Polignano a Mare?"

"I broke my teeth on her skin!" It was Mother's last attempt at humor.

"You tell me what terrible things daughters do, but you're a daughter, too. Did you do them?"

"I married the first man who showed me any hint of what kindness and pleasure could be. I married stupidly."

"I have half the genes of the man you married," said Alessandra. "Is that why I'm too stupid to decide what planet I want to live on?"

"It's obvious that you want to live on any planet where I am not."

"You're the one who came up with the colony idea, not me! But now I think you've named your *own* reason. Yes! You want to colonize another planet because *your* mother isn't there!"

Mother slumped in her seat. "Yes, that is part of it. I won't pretend that I wasn't thinking of that as one of the best things about going."

"So you admit you *weren't* doing it all for me."

"I do not admit such a lie. It's all for you."

"Getting away from your mother, that is for you," said Alessandra.

"It is for you."

"How can it be for me? Until today I didn't even know what my grandmother looked like. I had never seen her face. I didn't even know her name."

"And do you know how much that cost me?" asked Mother.

"What do you mean?"

Mother looked away. "The water is boiling."

"No, that's my temper you're hearing. Tell me what you meant. What did it cost *you* to keep *me* from knowing my own grandmother?"

Mother got up and went into her bedroom and closed the door.

"You forgot to slam it, Mother! Who's the parent here, anyway? Who's the one who shows a sense of responsibility? Who's fixing *dinner*?"

The water took three more minutes before it got to a boil. Alessandra threw in two fistfuls of radiatori and then got her books and started studying at the table. She ended up overcooking the pasta and it was so cheaply made that it clumped up and the oil didn't bind with it. It just pooled on the plate, and the pepper barely helped make it possible to swallow the mess. She kept her eyes on her book and her paper as she ate, and swallowed mechanically until finally the bite in her mouth made her gag and she got up and spat it into the sink and then drank down a glass of water and almost threw the whole mess back up again. As it was, she retched twice at the sink before she was able to get her gorge under control. "Mmmmm, delicious," she murmured. Then she turned back to the table.

Mother was sitting there, picking out a single piece of pasta with her

fingers. She put it in her mouth. "What a good mother I am," she said softly.

"I'm doing homework now, Mother. We've already used up our quarreling time."

"Be honest, darling. We almost never quarrel."

"That's true. You flit around ignoring whatever I say, being full of happiness. But believe me, *my* end of the argument is running through my head all the time."

"I'm going to tell you something because you're right, you're old enough to understand things."

Alessandra sat down. "All right, tell me." She looked her mother in the eye.

Mother looked away.

"So you're *not* going to tell me. I'll do my homework."

"I'm going to tell you," said Mother. "I'm just not going to look at you while I do."

"And I won't look at you either." She went back to her homework.

"About ten days into the month, my mother calls me. I answer the phone because if I don't she gets on the train and comes over, and then I have a hard time getting her out of the house before you get home from school. So I answer the phone and she tells me I don't love her, I'm an ungrateful daughter, because here she is all alone in her house, and she's out of money, she can't have anything lovely in her life. Move in with me, she says, bring your beautiful daughter, we can live in my apartment and share our money and then there'll be enough. No, Mama, I say to her. I will not move in with you. And she weeps and screams and says I am a hateful daughter who is

tearing all joy and beauty out of her life because I leave her alone and I leave her penniless and so I promise her, I'll send you a little something. She says, don't send it, that wastes postage, I'll come get it and I say, No, I won't be here, it costs more to ride the train than to mail it, so I'm mailing it. And somehow I get her off the phone before you get home. Then I sit for a while not cutting my wrists, and then I put some amount of money into an envelope and I take it to the post office and I mail it, and then she takes the money and buys some hideous piece of garbage and puts it on her wall or on a little shelf until her house is so full of things I've paid for out of money that should go to my daughter's upbringing, and I pay for all of that, I run out of money every month even though I get the same money on the dole that *she* gets, because it's worth it. Being hungry is worth it. Having you be angry with me is worth it, because you do not have to know that woman, you do not have to have her in your *life*. So yes, Alessandra, I do it *all* for you. And if I can get us off this planet, I won't have to send her any more money, and she won't phone me any more, because by the time we reach that other world she will be dead. I only wish you had trusted me enough that we could have arrived there without your ever having to see her evil face or hear her evil voice."

Mother got up from the table and returned to her room.

Alessandra finished her homework and put it into her backpack and then went and sat on the sofa and stared at the nonfunctioning television. She remembered coming home every day from school, for all these years, and there was Mother, every time, flitting through the house, full of silly talk about fairies and magic and all the beautiful things she did during the day and all the while, the thing she did during the day was fight the monster to keep it from getting into

the house, getting its clutches on little Alessandra.

It explained the hunger. It explained the electricity. It explained everything.

It didn't mean Mother wasn't crazy. But now the craziness made a kind of sense. And the colony meant that finally Mother would be free. It wasn't Alessandra who was ready for emancipation.

She got up and went to the door and tapped on it. "I say we sleep during the voyage."

A long wait. Then, from the other side of the door, "That's what I think, too." After a moment, Mother added, "There'll be a young man for you in that colony. A fine young man with prospects."

"I believe there will," said Alessandra. "And I know he'll adore my happy, crazy mother. And my wonderful mother will love him too."

And then silence.

It was unbearably hot inside the flat. Even with the windows open, the air wasn't stirring so there was no relief for it. Alessandra lay on the sofa in her underwear, wishing the upholstery weren't so soft and clinging. She lay on the floor, thinking that maybe the air was a tiny bit cooler there because hot air rises. Only the hot air in the flat below must be rising and heating the floor so it didn't help, and the floor was too hard.

Or maybe it wasn't, because the next morning she woke up on the floor and there was a breath of a breeze coming in off the Adriatic and Mother was frying something in the kitchen.

"Where did you get eggs?" asked Alessandra after she came back from the toilet.

"I begged," said Mother.

"One of the neighbors?"

"A couple of the neighbors' chickens," said Mother.

"No one saw you?"

"No one stopped me, whether they saw me or not."

Alessandra laughed and hugged her. She went to school and this time was not too proud to eat the charity lunch, because she thought: My mother paid for this food for me.

That night there was food on the table, and not just food, but fish and sauce and fresh vegetables. So Mother must have turned in the final papers and received the signing bonus. They were going.

Mother was scrupulous. She took Alessandra with her when she went to both of the neighbors' houses where chickens were kept, and thanked them for not calling the police on her, and paid them for the eggs she had taken. They tried to refuse, but she insisted that she could not leave town with such a debt unpaid, that their kindness was still counted for them in heaven, and there was kissing and crying and Mother walked, not in her pretend fairy way, but light of step, a woman who has had a burden taken from her shoulders.

Two weeks later, Alessandra was on the net at school and she learned something that made her gasp out loud, right there in the library, so that several people rushed toward her and she had to flick to another view and then they were all sure she had been looking at pornography but she didn't care, she couldn't wait to get home and tell Mother the news.

"Do you know who the governor of our colony is going to be?"

Mother did not know. "Does it matter? He'll be an old fat man. Or a bold adventurer."

"What if it's not a man at all? What if it's a boy, a mere boy of thirteen or fourteen, a boy so brilliantly smart and good that he saved the human race?"

"What are you saying?"

"They've announced the crew of our colony ship. The pilot of the ship will be Mazer Rackham, and the governor of the colony will be Ender Wiggin."

Now it was Mother's turn to gasp. "A boy? They make a *boy* the governor?"

"He commanded the fleet in the war, he can certainly govern a colony," said Alessandra.

"A boy. A little boy."

"Not so little. My age."

Mother turned to her. "What, you're so big?"

"I'm big enough, you know. As you said -- of child-bearing age!"

Mother's face turned reflective. "And the same age as Ender Wiggin."

Alessandra felt her face turning red. "Mother! Don't think what I know you're thinking!"

"And why not think it? He'll have to marry somebody on that distant lonely world. Why not you?" Then Mother's face also turned red and she fluttered her hands against her cheeks. "Oh, oh, Alessandra, I was so afraid to tell you, and now I'm glad, and you'll be glad!"

"Tell me what?"

"You know how we decided to sleep through the voyage? Well, I got to

the office to turn in the paper, but I saw that I had accidentally checked the other box, to stay awake and study and be in the first wave of colonists. And I thought, what if they don't let me change the paper? And I decided, I'll make them change it! But when I sat there with the woman I became afraid and I didn't even mention it, I just turned it in like a coward. But now I see I wasn't a coward, it was God guiding my hand, it truly was. Because now you'll be awake through the whole voyage. How many fourteen-year-olds will there be on the ship, awake? You and Ender, that's what I think. The two of you."

"He's not going to fall in love with a stupid girl like me."

"You get very good grades and besides, a smart boy isn't looking for a girl who is even smarter, he's looking for a girl who will love him. He's a soldier who will never come home from the war. You will become his friend. A good friend. It will be years before it's time for him and you to marry. But when that time comes he'll *know* you."

"Maybe you'll marry Mazer Rackham."

"If he's lucky," said Mother. "But I'll be content with whatever old man asks me, as long as I can see you happy."

"I will not marry Ender Wiggin, Mother. Don't hope for what isn't possible."

"Don't you *dare* tell me what to hope for. But I will be content for you merely to become his friend."

"I'll be content merely to see him and not wet my pants. He's the most famous human being in the world, the greatest hero in all of history."

"Not wetting your pants, that's a good first step. Wet pants don't make a good impression."

The school year ended. They received instructions and tickets. They would take the train to Napoli and then fly to Kenya, where the colonists from Europe and Africa were gathering to take the shuttle into space. Their last few days were spent in doing all the things they loved to do in Monopoli -- going to the wharf, to the little parks where she had played as a child, to the library, saying good-bye to everything that had been pleasant about their lives in the city. To Father's grave, to lay their last flowers there. "I wish you could have come with us," whispered Mother, but Alessandra wondered -- if he had not died, would they have needed to go into space to find happiness?

They got home late on their last night in Monopoli, and when they reached the flat, there was Grandmother on the front stoop of the building. She rose to her feet the moment she saw them and began screaming, even before they were near enough to hear what she was saying.

"Let's not go back," said Alessandra. "There's nothing there that we need."

"We need clothing for the journey to Kenya," said Mother. "And besides, I'm not afraid of her."

So they trudged on up the street, as neighbors looked out to see what was going on. Grandmother's voice became clearer and clearer.

"Ungrateful daughter! You plan to steal away my beloved granddaughter and take her into space! I'll never see her again, and you didn't even tell me so I could say good-bye! What kind of monster does that! You never cared for me! You leave me alone in my old age -- what kind of duty is that? You in this neighborhood, what do you think of a daughter like that? What a monster

has been living among you, a monster of ingratitude!" And on and on.

But Alessandra felt no shame. Tomorrow these would not be her neighbors. She did not have to care. Besides, any of them with sense would realize: No wonder Dorabella Toscano is taking her daughter away from this vile witch. Space is barely far enough to get away from *this* hag.

Grandmother got directly in front of Mother and screamed into her face. Mother did not speak, merely sidestepped around her and went to the door of the building. But she did not open the door. She turned around and held out her hand to stop Grandmother from speaking.

Grandmother did not stop.

But Mother simply continued to hold up her hand. Finally Grandmother wound up her rant by saying, "So now she wants to speak to me! She didn't want to speak to me for all these weeks that she's been planning to go into space, only when I come here with my broken heart and my bruised face will she bother to speak to me, only now! So speak already! What are you waiting for! Speak! I'm listening! Who's stopping you?"

Finally Alessandra stepped between them and screamed into Grandmother's face, "Nobody can speak till you shut up!"

Grandmother slapped Alessandra's face. It was a hard slap, and it knocked Alessandra a step to the side.

Then Mother held out an envelope to grandmother. "Here is all the money that's left from our signing bonus. Everything I have in all the world except the clothes we take to Kenya. I give it to you. And now I'm done with you. You've taken the last thing you will ever get from me. Except this."

She slapped Grandmother hard across the face.

Grandmother staggered, and was about to start screaming when Mother, light-hearted fairy-born Dorabella Toscano, put her face into Grandmother's and screamed, "Nobody ever, ever, ever hits my little girl!" Then she jammed the envelope with the check in it into Grandmother's blouse, took her by the shoulders, turned her around, and gave her a shove down the street.

Alessandra threw her arms around her mother and sobbed. "Mama, I never understood till now, I never knew."

Mother held her tight and looked over her shoulder at the neighbors who were watching, awestruck. "Yes," she said, "I am a terrible daughter. But I am a very, very good *mother!*"

Several of the neighbors applauded and laughed, though others clucked their tongues and turned away. Alessandra did not care.

"Let me look at you," said Mother.

Alessandra stepped back. Mother inspected her face. "A bruise, I think, but not too bad. It will heal quickly. I think there won't be a trace of it left by the time you meet that fine young man with prospects."