



# THE LEAVEN OF THE HEART

*Posted on February 1, 2022 by Ignazio Silone*



*We are so very pleased to bring to our readers the first translation into English of a short story by Ignazio Silone (1900-1978). This story (in Italian, [Il lievito del cuore](#)) was published in 1956, in the magazine Prospettive Meridionali. Silone, novelist and short-story writer, was nominated several times for the Nobel Prize. His most famous novels are [Fontamara](#), [Bread and Wine](#), and the [Secret of Luca](#).*

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A truck sped along a flat paved road, lined with young poplar, locust and elm trees. It was the month of August, just after the wheat had been threshed. The truck passed a roadside billboard that read: FUCINO CORPORATION—BORGONUOVO RESIDENTIAL VILLAGE.

Right after appeared the village. From a distance, it appeared to be of recent construction. In all, about fifty two-story farmhouses, with four rooms each. On village piazza, the usual Sunday crowd of peasants, broken up into many groups talking animatedly. In the middle of the piazza, a large fountain: on one side the church; on the other a shed for the storage of farm machinery and work tools. Some large posters, planted on the four corners of the piazza, showed graphs and statistics on the early results of land reform throughout southern Italy. In the distance, silhouettes of other farmhouses under construction.

Under the canopy, some peasants looked curiously at a rotovator, which replaced the plow pulled by oxen for breaking up the clods of soil (the traditional *ristruccatura*). Others were being told about how a cereal weeder worked. But the dominant thrust of the conversations was sad. The harvest was meager, the wheat had blight and was shrunken; the ears were full, the grains empty. No one wanted to buy it; the farmers needed money and the prices of new wheat were low. What was going to happen at sowing? You can't sow wheat that had rust.

The truck seen earlier stopped in the middle of the piazza, near the fountain, and the driver, a vigorous young man in shorts and a T-shirt, got out. He was immediately approached by some farmers who were waiting for him.

"Your final answer, Marco?" they asked him.

"No," he replied.

A lively altercation ensued.

Marco refused to join the production and work cooperative. He was against cooperatives. He was for risk and individual profit. Others now took part in the discussion. The words got violent.

The cooperative was in a critical phase. Maybe it had made too many expenditures. Now it needed a truck and was unable to buy or rent one. Marco refused to work on credit.

"You've been a black marketeer and you're still a black marketeer," a young farmer, a certain Achille, shouted at him.

A scuffle ensued. Marco brutally knocked Achille down, but his shirt was also torn to shreds. At that moment, a group of believers, mostly women, came out of the nearby church. Some young men followed their girlfriends, from a safe distance.

A young woman, Silvia, Marco's girlfriend and Achille's sister, came near.

"What happened to you?" she asked them both, but talking mostly to her brother, who had a swollen eye.

"It was your black marketeer," Achille replied.

The argument flared up again.

Silvia took her brother away and did not even reply to Marco who asked her to come with him to the cinema for the afternoon. Some of the farmers commented on Marco's attitude. They repeated their pros and cons, but the prevailing opinion was that the cooperative had failed and should be dissolved. Some had already resigned.

Two old peasants, evidently not from Borgo Nuovo, approached the fountain to water their donkeys. But Marco pushed them away. He had to put water into his truck.

One of the old men looked at Marco, first with curiosity, then smiling, and said to the other, "Don't you recognize this young man? Look at him well. Doesn't he look like the son of that good soul Antonio Orecchione?"

The other old man confirmed this. "Like him, it must be him."

Marco heard the words of the two and asked resentfully: "What have you got against my father?"

"Against? Nothing," one of the two old men answered him cheerfully. "I can really only wish you one thing. I wish you looked like him."

"Did you know him?"

"We grew up together. We even did a little jail time together."

After watering the donkeys, the two of them walked away.

"Do you know them? Who are they?" Marco asked a fruit dealer who had his cart near the fountain.

"They're from Borgo Vecchio," the fruit seller replied, mentioning the village on the hill. "One of them they call Biagio the basket maker."

In the evening, Silvia waited in vain for Marco to make up. Some of her friends passed under her window and invited her to go for a walk. But she refused, giving some excuse. Irritated by her fiancé's delay, she ended up bickering with her brother Achille, who took the opportunity to spill the beans on Marco.

"We do not know whose son he is," he said. "His father died, was murdered. Great job reference. He

grew up, he says, in an orphanage. But others say in a correctional facility. He's fiercely selfish, shamelessly so. He has the mentality of a black marketeer, he wants to earn a lot, immediately and with little effort. While you're waiting for him, maybe he's with another girl."

Silvia took refuge in her room and cried.

In the meantime, Marco had gone up to Borgo Vecchio, in search of Biagio the basket-maker.

On the hill, the land is harsh and bare. The houses of the village are poor, black, smoky; hovels and stables all in confusion. Marco left the truck at the entrance to the village and wandered through the alleys.

The contrast with Borgo Nuovo was striking. In a little piazza, a farmer was beating wheat the old-fashioned way, with a stick. A woman was fanning the lentils with the còscina, a wooden crate used at grape harvest. You could hear goats bleating and children crying. The old people sat on thresholds of houses and looked at Marco with indifference.

In one of the alleys, he meets an acquaintance.

"What are you doing here? I thought you were in Switzerland," he told him.

"I was in fact there two years and now I'm back," the other replied.

"How much did you earn up there?"

"More than here. With the money brought back I bought the vineyard."

"Quit work? Why did you come back?"

"What do you mean, why? I was born and raised here. Money's not everything."

Marco looked at him with pity. What a fool. But he led him to Biagio's house.

The old man was at the door and at once recognized Marco. He called his wife, the neighbors. "Guess who this is? Take a good look at his face."

There was a general commotion.

"He looks like his father resurrected," said one.

"Your face is like his, but are you like him in character too?" said another.

"I don't know," said Marco, "you know, I never knew him."

Biagio invited the guest into the house and offered him a drink.

"It's a light wine, but it's from our vineyard," he said.

The table was covered with a waxed canvas on which was depicted the Brooklyn Bridge, with the water of the East River phosphorescent.

"Have you been down there, too? Were you making good money? And why did you come back?"

"See, that's a question your father wouldn't have asked me," Biagio told him.

"What was my father like? I know almost nothing about him. Some speak of him as a saint, others as a criminal," said Marco.

"Neither one nor the other, but an honest man," Biagio replied. "Let's sit outside, in the cool air," he suggested. "We'll talk better."

Marco, Biagio and his wife sat outside the door. In front of them lay the Fucino basin. At the edge of the basin, at the foot of the hill, the lights of Borgo Nuovo could be seen.

"At that time," Biagio said, "life was difficult for honest men. They were times of misery. The phylloxera and the downy mildew ruined us. We ate meat once or twice a year. We walked barefoot. We saved the use of shoes for great occasions. Young people smoked corn leaves. We worked from dawn to dusk. We were paid a pittance. We still had oil lamps and wooden plows. Those who could, ran away. In November, every year we celebrated the 'mass of the Americans,' the mass for those who were leaving for America. Every year the church was full. The rest of us would be in the square every morning, waiting for a master or a farmer to call us for the day. Those who were not called would tighten their belts.

"As for strength of will to work no one was equal to Antonio Orecchione. He was a strong and generous young man, and always good company. For several years he was always first in the race of the straight furrow. He was unsurpassed in taming foals and calves. Only misfortune could reduce such a man to landlessness. In the same year, the flood took away his crops and his father broke his leg. When such misfortunes happen even once, you have to pay over a lifetime. Your father had to sell everything. There were worse things. As it is written in the Gospel, there were those who, though they had a thousand sheep, wanted the sheep of the poor man who had only one. To get it, in this case, he used the law, deception or violence.

"One year your father Antonio went to winter with the sheep in the Puglie. When he returned here in the spring, he told us: 'Along the way, I heard that there is a law for the poor peasants of Southern Italy that also concerns us and that no one here has ever explained to us.'

"We wrote for information to a lawyer in Sulmona who confirmed the fact. The law wasn't much, but still it was the law. A farmer who had only one donkey or only a couple of goats was not paying taxes.

"Antonio rounded up about ten friends and we showed up at the town hall. We apologized for the disturbance and explained the reason for the visit. The gentlemen at the town hall did not deny that the law existed; but, in order to benefit from it, they told us, an application from each person concerned was necessary. And since up to that day no one had made an application...

"So, we all made the application. For those who could not write, Antonio made the application for them and they signed it with a cross; and we were exempted from the tax. I won't tell you the resentment of the two or three landowners of the village against Antonio, especially since he, at that time, didn't even have a donkey or a goat.

"From that moment on, they targeted him; cowardly trying to starve him. In the enthusiasm for the result of the tax, a league of peasants was formed here. And in the headquarters of the league, they opened a small cooperative that resold, almost at the price of purchase, some consumer goods, such as oil, cod, sulfur for the vineyards. It was not, in itself, anything extraordinary. 'What is extraordinary,' said Antonio, 'is that we are united and that we advise one another.'

"It was harvest time. For a month, as usual, there was a great lack of labor. One morning, we went to the piazza to wait for the call. The bosses arrived with their farmers, and quick as anything they grabbed up all the laborers. The piazza was empty. The only one who wasn't called was your father, Antonio, even though there was not another reaper to be found like him here. It was punishment.

"Things only got worse. To work during harvest Antonio had to go to Celano, where he had some acquaintances. One evening, where Borgo Nuovo is now, someone burned a hundred sheaves belonging to one of our landowners. Even before establishing whether it was an accident or a crime, several of us were arrested as suspects. Among those arrested was Antonio, although he could prove that at the time of the fire he was at a great distance from the place.

"We were only released when the time of harvest work was over and the profit lost. Antonio was in the greatest distress. He had been engaged for three years to Assunta the dyer; he could not postpone the wedding for long. For love of that girl, he made a turnaround that surprised us all.

"One evening he came to the league and told us that he was resigning and not to count on him anymore, because he had to mind his own business. The next day he entered the service of one of the local landlords, as a guardian. 'Guardian' was a way of saying something like the manager's henchman, but also his bailiff. When a dispute of the master became complicated, the manager said that it would be given to the guardian to deal with.

"The day we saw Antonio for the first time with his rifle on his shoulder, his leather leggings and his cap with a visor, we could not believe our eyes. To tell the truth, he too was ashamed. If he met us, he would slip away or look elsewhere, although no one dared reproach him—he had to look after himself



too. But you had to know Antonio to know if he would stay in that job for long. He could be violent, but not evil.

"One night a fire broke out in the league office. The few goods of the cooperative were destroyed. The next morning Antonio reappeared in the piazza without rifle, nor leggings, nor cap. He had resigned from his post. He had resigned from his job and the reason for his resignation soon became known. He had refused to take part in the fire at the cooperative's headquarters. Did he know the arsonists and their instigator? 'If the judge questions me,' he said, 'I will tell the truth.'

"He spent what was to be his last evening here, where we are sitting now, together with other friends. Although he certainly knew he was in danger, he made no mention of it. He was a man of who loved company and enjoyed being with friends again. Some of his words from that evening have never left my mind since. 'Everyone has the right to look after himself,' he said, 'but not at the expense of others.' Even selfishness has its limits.

"He wanted to go home fairly soon, because his wife, Assunta, was seven or eight months pregnant and he didn't want to leave her alone. He left here at nine o'clock, but the sky was overcast and so the alleyway was in complete darkness. We followed the sound of his footsteps. Then a gunshot thundered.

"I grabbed a lantern and we ran. We found him lying on the ground in a pool of blood, dying.

"That murder made a huge impression on the whole neighborhood. In a way, it was from that night on that things changed here. I mean, not in appearance, but on the inside, in the way we look at ourselves. The landlord, who had Antonio's life on his conscience, was not harassed by justice, but he left here anyway and never came back. The delinquent we suspected as the perpetrator of the murder was not harassed either, but he went away and never came back. There is only the agony of poor Assunta now to tell... "

"Continue, please," said Marco to Biagio.

"The one who can tell you about your mother better than us," said Biagio's wife, "is Francesca the soap-maker. The two were always close and remained so until the end. Should I go get her?"

"I can go to her. Where does she live?" replied Marco.

"Up there behind the church."

Marco found Francesca also sitting on the doorstep.

"What do you want? Who are you looking for?" the old woman asked him.

"Auntie, did you know a certain Assunta the dyer, the wife of Antonio Orecchione?" asked Marco.

"Leave the dead alone."

"Do you remember that Assunta had a son?"

"Yes, according to the will of her father, who was already dead when she gave birth, she named him after her grandfather, Marco. He was raised in the city, in an orphanage, and it seems that he became a bad boy."

"Auntie, you mustn't believe the gossip."

"No, no, I've heard about it from people who know him. He stays in Avezzano, but he hangs out a lot in Borgo Nuovo. Apparently, he's a real scoundrel. in short, the opposite of his father and mother."

"Please stop, Auntie, because I am Marco."

Francesca's emotion and excuses had no end. Then the old woman started shouting for the neighbors to come running. "Do you know who this is? Don't you recognize him? Look at his face, I recognized him right away."

Many people surrounded and welcomed Marco. Then Francesca invited him into the house and offered him, according to ancient custom, a piece of bread, a glass of wine to drink, and an egg.

"Biagio the basket-maker told me that you knew my mother well," said Marco.

"We shared sleep and tears," says Francesca. "If one went on a pilgrimage, the other could not stay at home. If one took communion, the other couldn't abstain from it. If one received a letter, the other could not hide it from the other. Do you know why she liked Antonio and married him? He was gracious man. For friends he would pawn his own shirt.

"When Antonio, forced by need, had to wear the uniform of the bully, hardships for poor Assunta began. Her remorse was that Antonio had done it out of love for her. Then came that night of blood. We feared that the unhappy wife would go out of her mind. The birth that brought you into the world was very difficult. The doctor said right away, 'She won't live.'

"She still lived, a week, but with a totally clear mind. She knew she was dying; her anxiety was for the future of her son. She begged the priest to have him admitted to an institution. Before dying, she offered her life to God so that her son would grow up as honest as his father. 'I don't care if he's rich or poor, but that he's honest' were her last words."

Marco shuddered.

Francesca watched him in silence. "You don't seem mean to me," she told him. "Maybe the disease of easy money has gotten hold of you. I have a relative down in Borgo Nuovo, I know how people live down there. Much better than here. But are they happy? They do nothing but quarrel. And how long will the abundance last? The government has given you the flour, but everyone must put in the leaven himself."

"What do you mean by leaven?"

The old woman pointed in the direction of the heart. "Without a little heart nothing good is done. In what man does, the heart is like the leaven in bread. It makes it grow again...."

Marco's truck quickly descended towards the plain. The countryside was dark and silent. All around Borgo Nuovo, only crickets and frogs were heard.

The truck stopped at a street corner. He tiptoed to a ground-floor window and knocked lightly on a shutter.

"Silvia," he called under his breath.

The girl was watching, waiting, still dressed. She came over to the window and moved away the shutters, just a hand-breadth.

"What do you want, you shameless man?" she said to him.

"You must excuse me," Marco replied.

"No," she answered back. "I've had enough of you. You're mean and selfish. You don't have one true friend. I'm having tea. It's over," the girl said and shut the shutter in his face.

While this brief dialogue was taking place, in the next room Achille, Silvia's brother, had woken up. He recognized the voices, and fearing that Silvia was going to bring Marco into her room, he took the revolver from the drawer of the bedside table and stood guard behind the shutters until he saw Marco walk away.

Marco returned to his truck and continued on his way. As he crossed the yard, he saw banners still wet with glue around the poles of the electric streetlamps. He got out of the truck to find out what they said. It was a summons for an extraordinary meeting of the cooperative, set for the evening of the next day. The topic was—"Proposal for Dissolution."

The next day Silvia, on her bicycle, roamed the length and breadth of Borgo Nuovo, giving her acquaintances the most diverse excuses, in the hope of meeting Marco, not being very happy with the way she had treated him the night before. Passing through the square again, Silvia stopped for a while near a group of farmers and housewives discussing the latest news of the agrarian reform and the fate of the cooperative.

"We've overstepped our bounds," said one. "The wagon is new, but the donkey is old. We're not used to

so much news at once. The cooperative spent everything it owned on the threshing machine; it did wrong. The government should take care of it."

"God help you," said another.

The school teacher intervened. "Do you know how much has been spent so far on roads? For canals? For farmhouses?" He quoted figures. Some contradicted him. Each one had something to say.

"After all the effort came fatigue. Were you waiting for gnocchi all cooked and ready to dig into?"

Silvia continued her search. She asked the young attendant at the gas station, "Have you seen Marco?" "I was waiting for him, but he didn't show up," she said.

Marco spent the whole day in his garage in Avezzano. He was in a foul mood, and didn't respond to his mechanics' jokes, and missed an opportunity for an adventure with a foreign lady who needed a small repair to her car and who invited him on a trip.

In the evening he returned to Borgo Nuovo. The square was unusually deserted. From the meeting room behind the farm machinery shed, he heard the echoes of the cooperative's assembly. Everyone was there, even non-members.

Marco got closer, listening through the door. At the end of the room there is a small table. The president was seated. Next to him someone was reading the administrative report, trying to justify the expenses, wanting to show that everything had been done correctly.

Several voices interrupted him: "If that is so, why did things go wrong? Put it to the vote! A vote! Dissolution!"

The speaker himself admitted that this was not the way to go. "We do urgently need a truck, but we lack the money to buy or rent it. We have some receivables, but they are uncollectible. So, all right, dissolution! But mind you, it's a loss. We will lose what little we had done."

New shouts interrupted him: "To the vote! To the vote!"

Before the vote, the president asked if anyone wanted to speak against the dissolution. It was at this point that a violent scuffle broke out near the door, around Marco who was the cause of it. Some people interpreted his presence as mockery. Shouts of "Out! Out! Throw him out!" were heard.

Marco struck formidable blows left and right and managed to break through into the middle of the room. He asked the president to let him speak.

"About what?"

"Against the dissolution."

"But you are not a member. In fact, you have been the cooperative's most ardent opponent."

"I've changed my mind. Right now, I'm all for it. What do you lack to keep going? A truck with a driver? I am at your disposal, with my truck."

The surprise was general, and let's overlook the issue of formality that Marco did not have the right to speak.

"Come forward," the president told him. "Say what you have to say, but start by swearing that you are not drunk and that this is not a joke."

Marco stepped forward, frank and resolute.

"Speak," the president told him.

"Since I'm not a lawyer, but a driver, I don't know how to make speeches, so don't interrupt me," he said. "If you interrupt me, it'll end in fist-fight, and you know I'm not afraid of that."

"Talk," the president told him.

"Do you know why things went wrong here?" says Marco. "The fault lies with two categories of men who, no offense intended, can be called by names of animals: the wolf-men and the sheep-men. The wolf-men, I too have been one of them so far, are the absolute selfish ones, without the slightest regard for their neighbors; the ones who are better off if they see that their neighbors are hurting. Then there are the sheep-men, the passive and indifferent ones. Those who have grown up with the aid to earthquake victims, who've settled for the subsidies for the various wars, who've survived with the UNRRA, the Pontifical Commission, the Quakers, and who consider land reform as manna falling from heaven and therefore are in the habit of sleeping on their backs with their mouths open. Is it possible for things to go well with the majority being wolf-men and sheep-men? Sure, we've received the land, the machines, the fertilizers, the houses. But it's not enough."

"What's missing?" someone shouted at him.

"Don't interrupt him," the president pleaded. "Don't get him swinging his fists!"

"What's missing," Marco continued, "an old peasant woman from Borgo Vecchio, who maybe some of you know, called Francesca the Soap-maker, explained it to me. The government has given you flour, Francesca told me, but it's not enough to make bread, because you need leaven to make it grow again. The whole day long, I thought about the words of that old woman, and I think I now understand one thing. Wolf-men and sheep-men cannot do anything good, because they themselves are nothing good. Whatever men do, if they want it to 'grow,' they have to put their hearts into it. How do you want the business of a cooperative to grow, if it's made up of wolf-men and sheep-men? The difference, however, is this—wolves die wolves and sheep die sheep. But men, we do not know how but it is certain, can change. "So, if you're up for it, I'll tell you frankly, I'm not backing down. Tomorrow morning, at five o'clock, I'll be here, in front of the door with my truck and, if I find a team of you, we will go and load up."

As Marco spoke, the assembly quickly went from surprise, to disbelief, to enthusiasm. At the end, a great ovation stifled his words.

Achille, Silvia's brother, walked up to him and embraced him.

The next morning, Marco's truck was in front of the cooperative's door, when the men chosen as loaders arrived.

As the truck was about to leave, Silvia came on a bicycle.

"What do you want?" shouted Marco. "We're in a hurry!"

"I can't shout what I want," Silvia replied.

The girl jumped on the step to talk to him without the others understanding.

"All right," she told him, "that land reform takes heart, but a little bit you have to reserve for me."

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*Featured image: The Fiat 615, from 1952.*



