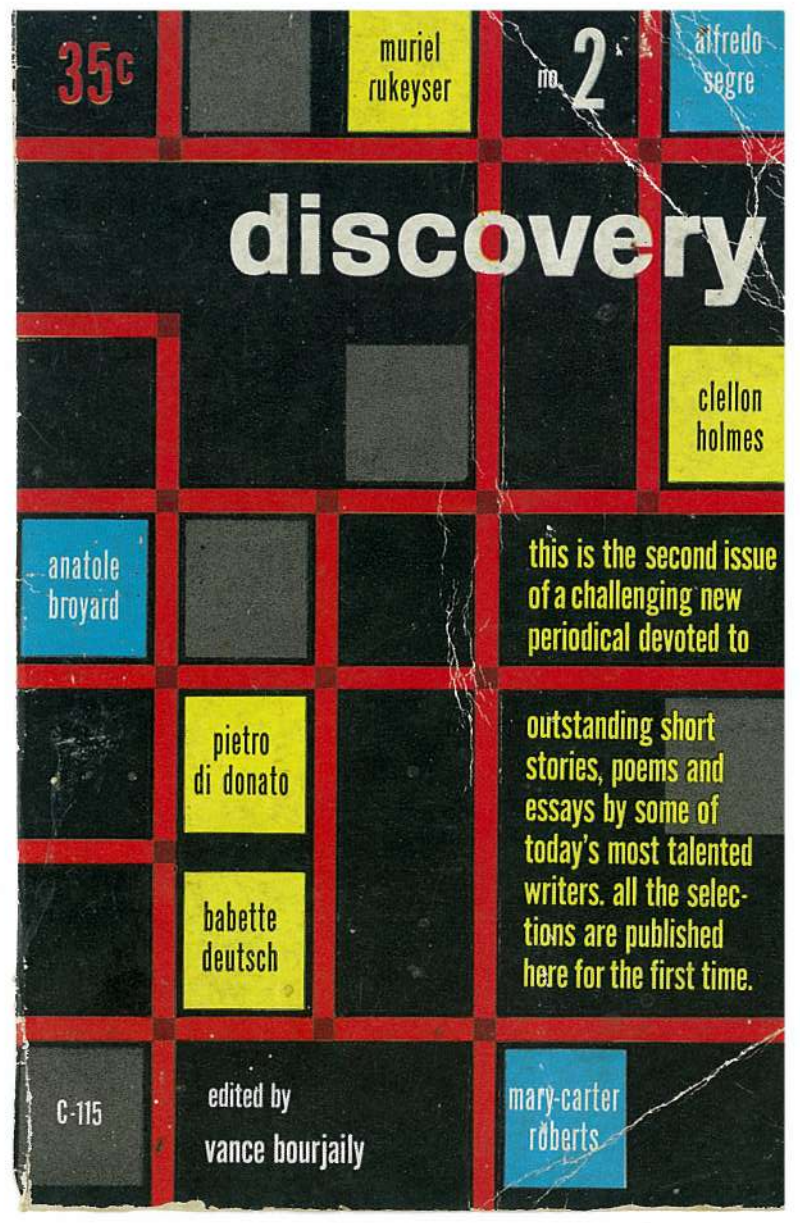
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PIETRO di DONATO

the widow of whadda-you-want

LEFT TO itself the mind is a rather honest functionary, but put people together—particularly my paesanos—well then, say addio to facts. And yet, the magnified bubble of fiction can also become the mother of history. Let's go back to West Hoboken, 1922, a ten-cent piece, the number 99, and a buttonhole maker called "Carnivale."

I remember the day of Whadda-you-want's death. You wonder why: Whadda-you-want. My paesanos were perfectly illiterate, or as they themselves said: "—without alphabet." They hardly knew their own names let alone the spelling of the names. To them anything written on paper was magic; only in the archives of the city hall in Vasto, Italy, and on their passports would you find their actual names—if actual. What names did they know themselves as? By American nicknames, or by others they earned from some uncomplimentary characteristic or idiosyncrasy. A Vincenzo became a "Jimmy" in America, a Simone became "Harry," a Sebastiano "Jack." In the years Simone Whadda-you-want had been in America all the English he learned to say was a vociferous "Whadda-you-want?" And thus to the paesanos from Simone-to-Harry he became Whadda-you-want, his wife, the woman of Whad-

da-you-want, his nine sons, the masculines of Whadda-you-want.

One afternoon a voice raised itself like the call of a horn. Mother paused at the coal stove. The call was a low muted quavering summoning. Mother went to the window. Across the backyards and framed in her kitchen window was Rosamaria, the wife of Whadda-you-want. Mother respectfully made the sign of the Cross. The Black Angel had visited the house of Whadda-you-want.

The home of Whadda-you-want resembled a warehouse; it was stocked with the miscellaneous stuffs carried on freighters, for Whadda-you-want was a longshoreman on the Lackawanna docks in Hoboken along the Hudson River. Whadda-you-want died by drowning. He had stumbled off the gangplank while leaving the ship for home. Whether he could swim or not was beside the point—when the police grapneled his body up from bottom they found some one hundred pounds of salt pork cached under his overcoat.

When our paesano mothers rushed to the scene of death, christening or wedding they scruffed along their entire brood. Picture the Whadda-you-want flat with its assembled duty-bound keeners and their hordes of children ranging from breast-clingers to bashful young men and women. Rosamaria (the fair) Whadda-you-want was a simple Amazonian woman. For the women of my people procreation, aside from religious dictates and certain initial pleasures, seemed a blooming form of beauty treatments. Their complexions were baby-smooth, and their flesh had a sweet mammillary fragrance. Mother used to say: "The woman who does not have babies, fruits and purges soon turns sour." A buxom wife was at a premium. Any woman who weighed less than one hundred and eighty pounds was "wasting away."

As for paint and powder and short hair—that was the trademark of a shameless woman, a prostitute.

The lament of Rosamaria and her chorus of mourners began that afternoon and endured until the sun had set and arose again. This ritual which came to America with my paesanos and that had been performed with exact fidelity has since become lost in the fusing blends of the new composite creature, the American Man. But that afternoon, Rosamaria, sitting on the couch in the kitchen surrounded by the Vastese women, could just as well have been Rosamaria the freshly notified widow of Caesar's warrior drowned in the Rubicon. I sat on the floor pinned in with the children of "The hairy one," "The Meatball," "The Cheesegrater," "The Artichoke," and others. On the wall above Rosamaria was an out-dated calendar in the Italian red, white and green, with the wistfully small King Umberto standing behind his seated queen, princes and princesses, against a background of belching cannon, gondolas, Mt. Vesuvius, the Colosseum, and the ruins of Pompeii. To the side of the calendar was a faded lithograph of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Hanging on a hook between these two pictures was an object that I always beheld in awe whenever I was in the Whadda-you-want kitchen, a large loaded pistol, recalling Whadda-you-want's military service under the ill-fated Baratire in Ethiopia.

In this, the keening, Rosamaria was the Chosen; mother and the other paesano women were the Simulators. Here was the tonal fugue of grief, music raw from the flesh-embedded soul. In this vocal exorcism was the propitiation to the Death God; Rosamaria the deprived, and her handmaidens whom it behove to pretend they also had been robbed by the Death God, therefore confusing the Reaper that he might overlook their homes. Rosamaria's wordless song came throaty and lifted ever so slowly, even as a burdened bird. The paesano women followed her passage with synchronized dissonance. Hour upon hour it continued, the tenor and tempo increasing imperceptibly. By late evening the paesano men arrived—my father included. They watched obediently. This belonged strictly to the women; the women who had borne children,

the high priestesses of bed and board. By dawn the keening had reached the highest possible peak of shrilling. Then Rosamaria spoke. "In God's will lies my peace." Catharsis had been achieved. When father and mother gathered us tired children to leave, Rosamaria was wolfishly eating a heroic portion of hot peppers and bread immersed in wine.

How fiction became a fact, how the abstract made of itself substance in the life of the widow of Whadda-you-want, came about through a dime and the numerals 9 and 9—or if you please: "head to head." The paesanos played the "numbers" daily. Numbers were picked through hunches, combinations, dates, coincidences, but mostly decided by dreams, and the dream-form was called La Smorphia. "Chicken" Compitello, a roguish Neapolitan, was the numbers man. Every day for twenty years Compitello had collected ten cents from Rosamaria for the number she had faith in, 99, head-to-head. On the Friday after Whadda-you-want had been buried 99 came through.

"Rosamaria!" said Compitello with fanfare, "head-to-head has proven!" He did not bother to tell her how much, and if she had not been an incredibly simple woman she would have learned from him that she had won eighty dollars.

"It will take a little time to get the money; papers, signatures, letters, lawyers and so on—" Although "The Chicken" had the eighty dollars right in his pocket. The Neapolitan Chicken never spoke forthrightly; even in privacy he would work his sole listener into a corner and whisper from the side of his mouth, making of ordinary talk a secret subject, the while bobbing his head about to apprehend eavesdroppers. He confided to the Artichoke that Rosamaria had won eight hundred dollars; a stretching of fact that could only boot the paesanos to pursue more furiously the numbers. The Artichoke's woman immediately relayed to Teresina the Meatball that the widow of Whadda-you-want had "done the numbers to the tune of eighteen hundred dollars, or, more like

twenty-eight hundred dollars." By evening mother informed father that Rosamaria had "taken the numbers for at least forty-eight hundred dollars." Through peddlers of pots, pans, needles, and holy articles, by word of mouth, rumor spread to the other outposts of Vastese colonials, from West Hoboken to Harlem to Baltimore to Cleveland. In Cleveland the figure was eight thousand dollars. Through a professional letter writer the news went trans-Atlantic to the ancient home village, Vasto, Italy. Between illiteracy and the mysteries of dollars and lire, the correspondence from Vasto back to West Hoboken leveled off the figure at eighty thousand dollars!

West Hoboken, aside from being a stew of nationalities, was a humming textile town; the Schwarzenbach Huber silk mill on Highpoint avenue and Spring street, dyeing mills, numerous small Swiss embroidery mills and clothing sweat shops. "Carnivale" Tedeschi had made millions of buttonholes since his steerage glimpse of the Statue of Liberty. Automatic buttonhole machines were rare in those days. Bent over his lumpy manual machine, he whistled incessantly. "Chinese" Giovanni alongside of him would mutter: "The bird in the cage sings either for joy or rage."

Tedeschi slipped a garment over the bedplate. Guided by the tailor's chalk marks he clamped the garment in buttonhole position; he pulled the lever arm and down came the small knife cutting the eye and slit in the cloth; his short legs push-pedaled the sprocket, shuttling the upper and lower threaded needles through the throat-plate to edge a neat chain-stitch around the buttonhole.

"Eighty thousand skins," sighed the Chinese, "eighty thousand American pictures!"

"What mouthing of 'eighty thousand' is this?" questioned Carnivale Tedeschi.

"How the wheel of fortune rotates," philosophized the Chinese. "One week the police drag Whadda-you-want out of the river on the end of a hook like a swollen stinking cod;

the next week his widow hooks the numbers for eighty thousand fish!"

Upon hearing that Carnivale trembled and nearly put a buttonhole through the palm of his hand. Carnivale Tedeschi was not a true paesano, a blooded paesano. He had originally come from Ortona-a-Mare, a village to the north of Vasto. He was somewhat accepted by our tribe through marriage to Fiammetta, a withered unpleasant Vastese woman who bore him nine daughters. The clannishness of the Vastese was monolithic. Their pride in being Vastese was such that feuds, hatreds, curses, violence and murder were reserved only for their own kind. The Vastese ("Strong but gentle!") had their own special language—more like a code; a woman was: La Mat, a man: U-Bitzuare, silent: A-Buzenai. Anyone not born in Vasto was looked down upon—and that took in the whole world. Tedeschi, like any outsider who married a Vastese, had to be circumspect and defer to the birthright Vastese. Vincenzo (Jimmy) Tedeschi was a short, stout, balding, middle-aged man with a florid cherubic face; his manner was mild and fumbling, and he had the habit of rolling his head, as if constantly trying to dodge the quick hands of his wife. The sallow, grim, attenuated Fiammetta was his antipode; and it was she who derisively dubbed him "Carnivale," which meant clown, shambling fool. "Carnivale! Your fat buffoon face invites slapping!"

As though in revenge upon Nature for weighting her with nine daughters, Fiammetta was desperately penurious. The wine in the Tedeschi household was watered dregs, the meals, the very cheapest: dried beans, pasta, kale, stale bread, beef heart, pig's blood, knuckle bones, chickens' necks. She worked fiendishly at embroidery, cutting far into the night by candlelight, driving her daughters with their scissors scalloping the endless rolls of embroidery, blaming them for being female and lashing out at Carnivale whose only defense was to whistle—which made her bile flow faster. It was not uncommon to see Fiammetta pushing a scraggly baby carriage loaded with salable rubbish she had retrieved from the evil-smelling town dump. It was on one of these scavenging trips that a large dump rat ripped her leg, and the very day Carnivale was apprised of Rosamaria's eighty thousand dollars, Fiammetta lay in bed hopelessly sick with bloodpoisoning. A sense of destiny struck Carnivale. Rosamaria had won the fabulous riches with 99; she had nine sons, he had nine daughters, Rosamaria was without man, and he—Fiammetta was in condition grave. Of course, if the Lord saw fit—he shuddered to contemplate a second wife while the first one was still warm.

Fiammetta personally supervised the event of her passing. It was a primitive scene of adjudication. The ceremony attendant upon a woman's death was in delineation distinctly unique from that of the male's demise. The male was the laboring deity from whose brow was wrought bread and shelter, from whose loins were sown the seeds of resurging life—the male was the crude muscular sacerdote and chieftain of the cave; his fall from the earthly world was heralded with elaborate anguished acclaim, attrition and mortification. But the female had ruled: "Better the father shall be taken from the children than the mother." The traditional and voluntary subjugation of the Vastese women was a surface rubric; beneath lay their complete correct power, perpetuated upon the rock-bottom base of fidelity, fount of birth and keeper of legend. It was for them to glorify the male, despise their own kind, and yet wield the true force. A paesano mother's death though establishing greater disaster to the institution of the home did not invoke flamboyance. That morning Fiammetta had sent her daughters to notify kith and kin of her approaching death. My mother promptly went to Fiammetta's side, sat on the bed, propped up the wasted buttonhole-maker's wife and held her in her stanch arms. Fiammetta

was in her wedding dress. She looked a cadaver. She spoke gaspingly in her strident adenoidal voice.

"In the night dark as a hound's jaws, there came a lucid knocking thrice, and thrice repeated." She pointed to her husband who stood immobile at the foot of the bed. "Upon hearing it this carnival coward hid his cabbage 'neath cover. I arose and went to the kitchen, and inquired aloud: 'Who seeks to rob the poor?'

"There was someone in the kitchen. This someone lit the lamp. 'Twas a woman not of our time nor of the living; flames of light shone from her. She responded me thus: 'When I tell thee who I am thou wilt ken thy obligation. I am Zia Philomela.' " The antique women of West Hoboken recalled Zia Philomela, "The Sainted Nightingale," from their childhood. Zia Philomela had been dead the last seventy-five years, but since had been unofficially canonized by the Vastese.

"Zia Philomela swept the kitchen and set the table for collation:

" 'Fiammetta, with the vision of dawn, cleanse thy flesh, don thy wedding dress, fire three scented candles, inform the paesanos, lay thee down in bed, make thy confession and holy communion; say thy farewells, for at three the Angels shall come for thee.' "

I remember the moribund stench from Fiammetta's infected leg where the rat had bitten her at the garbage dump; and the gagging lamb fat fumes that came in from the light-shaft window from the Armenian flats, the scarred and tattooed Armenians; the pungent winey smoke of the paesano men's di Nobili cigars (how I longed to grow up and puff sternfacedly, arrogantly on a man-full black di Nobili!); and the unforgettable wonderful natural woman-perfume of the paesano women with their abundant she-meat and voluminous hair; the room being crushed with women; the Pimpinellis from the Bronx, the "Cheesegraters" from "One hundred and seventeen" (Harlem), the Cinquinas from Mulberry

Street, the Molinos from Brooklyn, the Sandrinos from North Bergen, and the "Pipe-stems" from West New York. Fiammetta gathered her final strength and hurled it at her husband.

"You shoulder-shrugging clowning skin-headed sack of pulp, hear you these parting excoriations—though inwardly you grin and rejoice—were it not for bitter scrounging Fiammetta your be-skirted offsprings would be barefoot in the streets. You dungeoned me with nine daughters in your gelatinous image. Sure, scratch securely the violoncello, dream of the opera and 'romance' while this fool of a wife scissored her blood away in embroidery! You buffoon of indecision, who will meet the landlord at the door after I'm gone? You never even had the courage nor the taste to beat me as every real husband does to a wife. And then the last cross: your infernal whistling, Phtt—phtt—phtt!" Carnivale was looking at Rosamaria Whadda-you-want with cow-eyed sympatico.

"Carnivale Tedeschi," spat Fiammetta, "this is my prophecy: if you marry again you won't live long enough to lick your chops—and in the other world we'll see—we'll see if you continue to whistle!" Barely breathing, Fiammetta could say no more. Padre Onorio, in vestments, and assisted by two altar boys, bestowed upon her the Last Sacrament. The paesano women, in their long black shawls, knelt to their beads. That was a tableau puppeted in the niche of memory; where are the women of shawls who knew not reading nor writing, the Biblical, who stylized emotion, who of their flesh and raiment made note, portrait and choreography of passion?

Fiammetta beckoned to her husband, and whispered: "Leaves of corn . . ." She then bolted back upright in my mother's arms and died with her eyes wide open, and though lifeless glared contemptuously at the man she had named Carnivale. Mother pulled Fiammetta's lids shut and laid her out. Pimpinelli's sixteen-year-old daughter decided to initiate herself into the estate of hysteria; that tantrumic erotica

precious to the occasion of death. She had no call to do so as that right was delegated to the married women, they who through God and law knew man. Her mother speedily thrashed her; while the Artichoke's wife serenely breast-fed her infant.

One stroke of fate had removed Fiammetta. The sudden rush of freedom and peace dizzied Carnivale. The scourge, the snapper was gone. The role of being wrong had long since become a well-worn coat that he had gotten used to. Sprung from his incubus of torment he found himself in a vacuum of loneliness.

As night follows day, the paesanos realized there was a "situation" in the clan; there was a widow and there was a widower. In our own little Vastese world of West Hoboken the direction of these two lives could not have taken any other course . . . it impinged upon a widow and a widower to join; the lame with the lame, the blind with the blind, the bereaved with the bereaved. We had our very own fashioned propriety. The possible and probable marital arrangements native and common to modern American society such as divorce, separation, mixed national or religious marriages, young unmarried men wedding older widowed women, were absolutely unthought of or tabooed. Let alone the outlanders from provinces in Italy beyond the sacred confines of Vasto, the creatures of other races and creeds were considered as strange and unbelonging as the denizens of the jungles, the cold fish of the sea or the unseen peoples of the moon. They were wont to say: "A Vastese who has not been washed all his life smells sweeter than an outsider." "The ugliest Vastese is a beauty compared to any outsider!" And come to think of it, Vasto being located centrally along the Adriatic shore of the Boot offers the classic head and face; Italy for centuries had been History's most important blending pot for the Roman empire. My paesanos were spared the long equine

head of the North and the squat square jaw of the Campobasso.

"Leaves of corn," Fiammetta had whispered to Carnivale with her dying breath. Man and woman bound by Heaven need firstly leaves of corn—a mattress. Around that mattress they build a home. Vastese mattresses were made at home. The under-mattress that lay upon the bedspring (homemade: heavy hemp or wire knotted net-like and stapled to timbers that fit in the bedstead) was a bulk of corn leaves contained in coarse ticking. The top mattress was of fine strong cotton fat with goose down. Carnivale understood that Fiammetta's savings were in the bottom mattress. From amongst the yellow withered corn leaves Carnivale garnered a bushel of wrinkled, soiled, one dollar bills—three thousand.

The sight of money is a clandestine thrill; naked green denominations can make a middle-aged man's blood pound and plan, and stir his limbs to act. A man with a basketful of purchasing power cannot be chained to a buttonhole machine. Carnivale then had the courage to request of the Artichoke and the Meatball to "combine" for him the marriage with the widow of Whadda-you-want. The hierarchy of the elder paesanos deemed it Christian and salutary that Rosamaria have a mate; after all, she only had nine children and had at least a decade of fruitful years before her.

"Rosamaria, a walled city must open its portals. You are without man and Carnivale is without woman. Children need parents. Carnivale is honest and felicitous. One back will warm the other."

The wedding was quick and unadorned, as second marriages did not rate the orgy attendant upon the espousal of the new, the young, the untried, the innocent. Had Carnivale been a literate, or for that matter, a crafty man he would have investigated the facts of the eighty thousand dollars before he immured himself with another wife and her nine children. But he did not. Fiammetta's bone-scraping, scrimp-

ingly accumulated three thousand dollars was the author of his successful campaign to become the husband of Whadda-you-want's widow, that he might share the eighty thousand dollars. He had Fiammetta's hoard converted into one-hundred-dollar bills—which he carried ostentatiously on his person and flourishingly referred to as his "lotsa casha moneys." Being a sensitive man he put off broaching to Rosamaria the business of her alleged fortune. He was generously willing to use up his thirty one-hundred-dollar bills before participating in Rosamaria's money. What was three as against eighty! Fiammetta's sweat-stained sacrifice started the avalanche of credit and goodwill that was heaped upon Carnivale. Carnivale's casha moneys, visible to all, determined beyond any doubt the reality of Rosamaria's numbers bonanza—convincing for once and for all even the simple Rosamaria—she imagining that he as her new master was dutifully ministering her interests. Real estate agents vied to sell Carnivale a house. A few of the one-hundred-dollar bills down and the multitudinous new family was ensconced in the big cream-colored brick house on the corner of Summit Avenue and Jane Street. In the memory of our colony in "the Vasto Hoboke" there had never been a paesano who did not have to work hard for an ordinary living. The leisure and opulence of Carnivale was a phenomenon. Salesmen came from Jersey City and as far as Newark to give Carnivale furniture and what not. They were discreet enough not to demand full payment. "A small down payment—it's yours—pay as you wish—no hurry—your credit is good—" The paesanos trafficked daily through Carnivale's house. When we visited our eyes popped out; real rugs—why, no paesano had more than shoddy linoleum in the front room! I think Carnivale and Rosamaria were the very first to have electricity, steam heat and a bathtub.

Father and mother sat gaping as Carnivale tuned his battery radio and out of the horn-speaker we heard Caruso (who had returned to Naples to die) sing "I Remember Napoli in the

Morning." Soon after, Caruso died and we heard on Carnivale's radio, "They Needed a Songbird in Heaven, That's Why God Took Caruso Away."

The sensation came when a sales-happy auto dealer sold Carnivale a gigantic secondhand yellow Pierce Arrow touring car that looked like a towering stage coach. Father admitted, "The America is paved with gold." Rosamaria and Carnivale were given the new appropriate names, The Millionaires, The Gentry. Rosamaria took it in her phlegmatic way; Carnivale lived in an aura of dazzling comets. Mention of "The Millionaires" was constantly on the paesanos' tongues; it was nice to have a Millionaire Vastese family. The playing of the numbers raged; dreams of pregnancy, birth, death, sickness, travel, accidents, love and the Evil Eye were turned into numbers to be gamed.

It was every paesano's ambition to own a grocery store. Carnivale opened one on Central Avenue. What a feeling of well-being to be the padrone in this hanging forest of edibles! —gourd-shaped cheeses, highly seasoned hams and salamis, stacks of dried cod, wicker baskets brimming with snails, bushels of dried fava beans, ceci, chestnuts.

The grocery store guaranteed alimentary security; subconsciously, instinctively, the paesanos worshiped at the intestinal altar. They lived jubilantly through the hot coursing vehicle of their bones and flesh; auto-negation, psychoanalysis were beneath them; such repulsive treasures belonged to pallid, literate commercial man, the permanent tenant of Purgatory; my paesanos disdained navel-mucking Limbo; they were either in the raptures of Heaven or of Hell.

The grocery store was where the women gathered news and passed judgments. How rare fortune can change a man! Carnivale 'midst the women in his grocery store did not whistle and roll his head; he was jolly—nay, bawdy! He greeted his female customer with a familiar pat on her rump. When she asked for a pound of baccala (dried cod), he'd hold the

saw upside down and pretend he was sawing his hand off at the wrist unbeknownst—to shrieks and howls, and then he'd throw in an extra pound free. Everyone blessed the extravagant Carnivale—no longer Fiammetta's badgered ridiculous Carnivale, but Millionaire-Rosamaria-Whadda-you-want's smiling, assuring, guffawing Carnivale—even though he laughed epileptically and in the wrong places. His Pierce Arrow parked in front of the grocery store was tagged by the paesanos as The Yellow Tornado; and his green driving terrorized West Hoboken.

An eager American insurance agent (oh yes, a William Kennedy III) dogged Carnivale, trying to convince him that a person of his importance merited a sizable policy. But none of my people countenanced life insurance. Any wife who would ever have dared mention life insurance would have been accused of wishing her husband's death; she would have been ostracized by the women and severely beaten by her husband. It was considered ill portent to discuss the subject or even listen to the overtures of an insurance agent—after all, was not insurance a posted reward for the death of the husband?

Carnivale was sucked into a vortex of momentous social life. Through appointed envoys he was invited to the wedding in the Bronx of Gennaro Sparafucil (starveling, freebooting reporter of the Italo-American Fascist sheet *La Verita*) to the daughter of the rich contractor, La Peppe.

It was potato-nose Sparafucil who arranged for the Italian Consul to have Carnivale elevated to the rank of "Commendatore"—a racket plied by the Consulate to bilk donations for Mussolini. Then the trip to Brooklyn as guest of Gaetano Impelliteri, the foreman of the spumoni factory. Impelliteri worked and saved the many years to go back to Italy and glory in the Nuovo Roma. They say after he arrived in Italy he was denuded by the Fascists, and his American-born children declared Italian nationals. Carnivale even voyaged to

Mulberry street to accept the honor of becoming the twelfth "Disciple" in Il Cenacolo, a group of doctors, lawyers and undertakers, dedicated to arts, sciences and ideals.

Ere long, Carnivale was pressed against reality; the thick wad of casha moneys in his pocket had dwindled to four one-hundred-dollar bills. He finally mentioned to Rosamaria that they would have to begin nibbling at the edges of her eighty thousand dollars.

Said Rosamaria: "Husband, since we wed you have been master of wife, family and the common purse; continue to employ the lottery winnings. The money has been in your hands and shall remain in your hands."

Realization of the truth about the eighty thousand dollars came to Carnivale like the shock of a bomb bursting in the center of his head.

Everyone it seems, had said, had sworn, that Rosamaria had eighty thousand dollars. But Rosamaria herself had never said it. Then she, as everyone else, thought the casha moneys in his pocket was part of her winnings. And that was why Compitello the numbers agent eluded him, and left West Hoboken to work the Baltimore colony!

It was the week before Lent, and Mr. William Kennedy III, the American insurance man who was determined to sell Carnivale a juicy policy found him ripe.

"Mr. Tedeschi, a man with your wealth is only making another good investment when he takes this policy; six hundred dollars a year you pay; we give you interest and compound interest—better than the money you have in the bank. If you die of old age or sickness your family gets forty thousand dollars—and if, God forbid—ten minutes after you sign this policy, you break your neck, your family gets eighty thousand dollars."

"Eighty thousand dollars?" queried Carnivale somberly.

"God forbid—in case of accidental death Mrs. Tedeschi will

be paid quickly and without question the sum of eighty thousand dollars."

Carnivale broke out into healthy jovial laughter. Agreed. He gave Mr. William Kennedy III three one-hundred-dollar bills, and put his X on the policy. Mr. William Kennedy III took Carnivale to a speakeasy, bought him a steak dinner, and brought him home drunk.

After secretly taking out the insurance Carnivale's open-handedness knew no bounds. If macaroni sold for two dollars a twenty-five-pound box, Carnivale with a philanthropic gesture said one dollar, and then pretended to put it on account. It was Utopia for the paesano women. "Benedictions on Carnivale; he squeezed my thigh and presented me with a bushel of peppers—let him squeeze on—may he live a hundred years!"

The Burial of Carnival ushers in the Lenten period, meaning that with this earthy rite frivolities and indulgences—all too human—cease until the glorious resurrection. To the delight of the paesanos, Carnivale Tedeschi proclaimed that the expense of the festivities was his treat. There had been memorable picnics to the Campagna; but the outing to celebrate the Vastese festival of the Burial of Carnival was more exciting than the triumphal march of Aida.

I wonder what the outlanders, the English, Irish, etc. (to us Vastese: foreigners, fish on legs) thought as we proceeded out of West Hoboken towards Weehawken and the Palisades? Carnivale and his Pierce Arrow jammed with his and Rosamaria's eighteen children, led the way, followed by a horse-drawn black hearse which bore the effigy of *Carnival* sitting up by the driver, Tony, The Meatball's son. (Tony was the Rodolpho Valentino of West Hoboken; he had played as an extra at the Fort Lee studios; a mail-clad knight run through by the hero's lance. The picture came to the Strand, and the paesanos attended; when the scene with Tony's vanquishment appeared, his mother, The Meatball, ran screaming down the aisle towards the screen to save him!) After the hearse came

a mélange of wagons; garbage wagon, iceman's wagon, peddler's wagon, and beer wagon. Father was a bricklayer-foreman; young Patsy Manna who worked under Father, bought a Flint touring car, and we rode with Patsy; he was showing off the Flint chassis demonstration stunt—removing one of the disc front wheels and driving on three wheels.

We camped on a plain atop King's Mountain, overlooking the Hudson. The men put scaffold planks on sawhorses for tables in a grove, and unloaded the prodigious foodstuffs supplied by Carnivale from his grocery store; and the bellying wine casks were set up under shade trees. The big bowling contest got under way. Leather straps were wound around the narrow flat rim of large wheel-like hard black-wax-covered cheeses. With long underhand sweeps the brawny arms of the men sent the cheeses spinning over the grassy plain, down the slopes and up the hillsides. The object was to knock the other man's cheese out of its course—the while they refreshed themselves with great draughts of wine from wooden and goatskin bottles. Then came quoits and the rock-splitting game. Mighty fieldstones were designated as Hunger, Illness, Poverty, Mischance; the man who sledged them clean in half with the fewest blows won the laurel of grape leaves.

The women competed to see who could skin and prepare for roasting a kid goat the soonest. Then came the making of the community paschal wine—half of which in the spring was given to St. Rocco's church to be blessed and served by Padre Onorio at Mass. The women carried heavy baskets of Alicante and Barbera grapes from the wagon to the treading troughs. Barefoot men, women and children stamped and crushed the grapes while the old men sang:

"Water can do thee harm
Wine will bring thee charm.

With water thou might chance
Wine will make thee dance.
What joy can water bring
When wine will have thee sing!"

By the time the ceremonies for the effigy of *Carnival* commenced the men were reelingly wined, and paying no heed to the humid overcast sky closing in. Four male paesanos dressed as gravediggers, and with long reed-stemmed clay pipes in their mouths, and bottles of wine slung from their shoulder belts, bore the effigy of *Carnival* on a bier. Everyone carried a Radica, a root; and the women flauntingly danced the Saltarello. Teresina The Meatball elected to play the mourning mate of *Carnival*. She was shrouded in weeds and preceded the bier.

Carnivale Tedeschi was gaily drunk. He threw himself with tearful maudlin laughter upon the effigy.

"Brother-soul, that sour shrew Fiammetta joined us; she made you, me, and me, you. Birthed Vincenzo Tedeschi; in the America become Jimmy; by marriage become Carnivale; justly have I become thee; we live for nothing more serious than joy, and joy shall seriously do us in . . . poor, poor *Carnival*." And with that he kissed the effigy.

"Right! Rightly put!" cried the paesanos with glee. They heaved Carnivale onto the bier and stuck the effigy's paper clown hat upon his head. Though impromptu it was in character with the Vastese; whether the clan gathered for weal or woe for a certainty there would be an original improvisation; this they had inherited from the dawn of man in the caves of Latium, ages before they had adopted as Father, Son and Holy Ghost, the Prince of Peace.

The cortege moved to the din of a blasphemous dirge made by pots and pans, bottles and horns, which stopped abruptly to permit Carnivale and The Meatball to address the paesanos, pointing out the plight of frail man's and woman's desires and

frustrations. With each complete round of words and counter-words the noisy music and march resumed. Leaving off the general nature of the occasion, Carnivale and The Meatball engaged in personal defections with grotesque parody, which the paesanos expected, relished and lauded.

"The Heavens must have found you savory to their liking," sang Teresina The Meatball, "they did in your shriveled scathing Fiammetta and put you to bed with the goose-fat pleasant lottery-lucky widow of Whadda-you-want, and thus have you been skipping like a drunken goat upon Fiammetta's cold dome since."

"Bravo for Carnivale!" approvingly shouted the men. The convivial funeral train halted with much fun-pomp at a huge bonfire, tossed the limp effigy of *Carnival* onto the pyre, and each threw his root into the fire chanting: "*Carnival* is dead! Return, oh *Carnival*; come back to us with the Primavera! Thou wilt be as old wine for new barrels!" The gravediggers dug a semblance of a grave; a few shovels full of ashes represented the remains of *Carnival*.

"*Carnival* is dead! Dead with his joy in hand!" The wives pelted their husbands with chestnuts, and ran—the men madly after them, as though to commit outrage. The men were too heady with wine to regard the ominous signals of storm. The dusky calm of early evening was suddenly disturbed by swirling bellowing winds; the skies fired a lurid orange, lighting up King's Mountain lividly; the women's skirts flew up, showing their stout legs, garters, corsets and petticoats; bolt upon bolt of lightning veined the sky and trembled the hills; the tethered horses broke loose, kicking and neighing; paper, burning sticks from the bonfire, dust, hats, leaves and utensils took wings, and the cries of the children were swallowed in the whirl.

In the eerie lumination globs of rain rifled down. Parents dragged their children beneath the wagons for refuge. Darkness clapped the Palisades and the rain rammed down inex-

haustibly. Man, woman, child and beast were drenched and shivering. Father managed to corral our family into Patsy Manna's Flint. The car had no curtains, and its three wheels were deeply mired. Mother prayed.

Father cursed through grinding teeth and found solace in repeating: "The unmentionable ultimate finish of the unmentionable infinite world!!!"

The abandoned chaos reminded me of the time—I was about five—my impulsive romantic young father took me to the construction job, and at the end of a day of bricklaying, and in his mortar-whitened work shoes, took me to the Metropolitan to see Caruso in *Faust;* we sat in the gallery seats tiered up near the ceiling; in a Hades scene with Caruso in the role of Mephistopheles all Hell broke apart with the souls of sinners spilling in flames and screams—and I had nightmares for years.

Carnivale Tedeschi's Pierce Arrow stood alongside us. He shouted to Father that he would drive Rosamaria and their 18 children back to West Hoboken, and return to try to relay the other paesano children. He accelerated the massive twelve-cylinder motor; the high wooden-spoked wheels spun mud and the Yellow Tornado roared away across the fields.

I'll never forget that night we had to spend on King's Mountain; by rights we should have all died of exposure; we eight children were plastered to mother's bosom. Mother's prayers surpassed Father's maledictions; the world did not end; the smashing rain had left by morning, which was Ash Wednesday. We scouted about and found cast-off heels of bread and scraps of food that tasted divine, while the men organized the trek back to West Hoboken; how clear our hunger, how caressing the bright youthful morning sun!

To succor the paesano children had been a legitimate pretext for Carnivale to return alone to King's Mountain after he had safely taken Rosamaria and the children home. He raced the Pierce Arrow back up the steep Weehawken hill in the blinding storm. There was not a penny left of Fiammetta's

three thousand dollars, Fiammetta's grim efforts for security. He had secretly wished for Fiammetta's death and had aspired to Rosamaria's alleged fortune. He was guilty of mortal sin. But there was no fortune; it was all a chimera; he had believed the Vastese paesanos; the paesanos believed in belief; he should have known the Vastese; to them a jot was a continent; an invisible thread they wove into whole cloth; hearsay they fabricated into a structure; for the Vastese, tongue and ear manipulated with enthusiasm, made grandiose fables which they honored as common fact; that was all well and good in Italy where there were peasants, poets and princes, and fables gained legs only amongst the peasants, but in the America there were no proper nobility who kept you happily in your place—the fantastic Americans thought him monied and forced many rich goods with credit upon him.

The Vastese had vaulted him to lofty height and had impaled him upon the glowing pinnacle of wishful thinking; he could not de-ascend to careless joking obscurity; the creditors would put him in jail; he'd never again have the faithful companionship of his buttonhole machine; Fiammetta's nine daughters and Rosamaria's nine sons would rue the name of Carnivale Tedeschi; so soon as the Vastese learned he was a fraud and destitute he'd become a silhouette for their exceedingly fine and merciless scissors. While the Pierce Arrow raged up toward the Palisades Carnivale's head rolled from side to side and the funny little phttt—phttt whistling escaped his lips. At the summit near the stone monument to Alexander Hamilton was the precipitous turn that led to the King's Mountain road. Carnivale pressed the gas pedal to the floor; the Yellow Tornado did not round the turn. The top-heavy touring car snorted through the iron railing and sailed out over the rim of the Palisades. In mid-air Carnivale relaxed; he belonged with Fiammetta; a man is eternally branded by his first marriage. And gods fashioned of men were made to be destroyed.

From King's Mountain the celebrants of the previous day,

Shrove Tuesday, pilgrimaged to St. Rocco's to receive the blessed Palm Ashes upon their brows. And the hearse that had mockingly borne the effigy of *Carnival* to the festival, brought back Carnivale Tedeschi's charred body.

And how spoke the scissors of the Vastese?

"Rosamaria loses one husband by water—the other by fire."

"If God meant man to travel by auto He would have given him wheels instead of legs."

"Friday's winnings bear misfortune, and gold is the mother of sorrow."

"Better a live poor naked hungry man than a rich fried corpse."

"In Death's lottery three is favorite: Whadda-you-want, Fiammetta, and Carnivale Tedeschi add to three."

Fiammetta's sweated famished savings staked Carnivale's insurance premium; the insurance company punctually paid Rosamaria eighty thousand dollars double indemnity for Carnivale's "accidental" death. When Rosamaria affixed her X to the settlement papers and received a certified check for eighty thousand dollars she was positive that it was her numbers' winnings.

The paesanos were never wrong; they were right; ninety-nine, "head to head" had brought the widow of Whadda-you-want eighty thousand dollars. Who shall dispute the Vastese!