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A Woman's Identity

they wanted to marry me off
I was barely 14
a young man from the old village
came to visit
three weekends in a row
all the way from Hamilton

part of me was intrigued
another part scared to death
in my room,
I studied my French grammar
ignored him

he talked to my parents
in the welcoming kitchen
I felt funny
a bit like a good horse at a fair
my tender years my only defense
against any kind of quick agreement

as I studied the pluperfect subjunctive
I set my mind the task
of finding a loophole in his plans
I already understood the trap of marriage
the role it played in their traditions—
marriage was all they seemed to plan for

to talk about—
interminable Sunday afternoons,
evenings of *paesani*
talking about who had married whom
who had established
what relationship with what family
over the past hundred years
they remembered everyone's name,
date of birth, death and marriage dates
all offspring were known by name
family lineage
carefully tracked for several generations
and even those who went to America
the promised land of peasants,
were not lost to the tribal stories.
repeated in these conversations

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that afternoon and every Sunday
that followed
my parents claimed the purity
of my lineage: it was,
they assured the young man,
more elevated than some
honourable pedigrees on both sides
no scandals of any consequence,
my father descended from Spanish blood,
my mother from French aristocracy
landowners, travellers
all good stock and traceable

I was more saleable than some
a good catch—
pretty, smart, educated

a promising cook
and even though
I could be headstrong
and too forthright
too English
I could be counted on
to do the right thing
especially in a family crisis
for three weeks,
each Sunday, the boy came to visit
he was twenty or so
and though anxious to marry
he promised to wait for me
if they agreed to the match

and so, they went over my pedigree
counted my wifely attributes
and each Sunday
the visitor asked my parents about marriage:

She's keen on her studies,
said my mother wistfully,
not too loud,
with the voice of a proper woman

She's keen to study all right,
added my father,
ignoring my mother
but she'll soon be ready,
she'll make some paesano a good wife.

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Not me, said I to myself
listening from behind the closed
door of my bedroom

I'm leaving this transplanted village life—
leaving it far behind—
one day it will be a part me
like this physics I don't understand.
I'll pass the test tomorrow,
and then it will be gone.

I'll become someone else
someone
even the familiar stars won't know
more than marriage
and housework
I want to discover
myself,
learn everything,
go everywhere
become the one
I still don't know
the one they don't suspect
me of being
the woman
they can never
never
sell into bondage.