



a heartbreakingly beautiful piece of work — Dorothy Allison



*Homestead*



*Rosina Lippi*

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Anna

Bengat Homestead

1909

The faded proclamation painted above the Wainwright's door read

Man Proposes GOD Disposes

With those stern words over her head, Anna of Bengat homestead stood hesitating on the stone steps that led to the village shop. Beside her was her nephew Stante; at her back and all around was a near perfect circle of mountains.

The Wainwright's homestead took up a good portion of the center of Rosenau, sprawling along the square across from the church, the Golden Eagle, and Goat-Cheese Willi's tidy homestead. Long ago the house had been painted with steer's blood in the old fashion, but now the shingled walls were a flaking, clotted reddish-brown. Down the west side of the house ran the long passageway of the Schopf, an enclosed two-story gallery of silver-gray wood; it was piled high with feed sacks leaking pale streams of oats. A heap of wagon wheels awaiting repair erupted from the workshop into the dirt road. At the far end of the building where the house melded into cowshed and barn, a speckled hen pecked despondently around a manure heap so old and high that even the flies had tired of it. A procession of sunflowers with hunched shoulders and drooping heads stretched out into the pasture toward God's Acre.

Stante tugged at Anna's sleeve. She took his hand and together they went into the shop, which smelled of vinegar and axle grease and cinnamon. Here the Wainwright's spinster daughter waited on customers every morning with cold efficiency and a notable lack of goodwill. Her father might run a slovenly farmstead, but the household and the shop were Grumpy Marie's domain, and she kept them as clean and stern as she kept herself. In exchange for cloth, ribbons, buttons, hairpins, thread and needles, lye, whetstones, penny nails, tin buckets, mustache wax, nail clippers, tobacco, paper stock, ink, horse tonic, cooking pots and pottery, coffee beans and tea leaves, brown and white sugar, salt, spices, feed cake and three grades of cornmeal, Grumpy Marie took in coins, gossip, surplus eggs, and an occasional bottle

of homemade schnapps or crock of honey. On Mondays and Thursdays Marie was less surly, for on those mornings it fell to her to sort the mail that came up from Ackenau with the courier. When snow closed the road and kept the courier away, folks kept clear of the shop and Marie as long as they could.

On this particular Monday morning in early July, Anna was surprised to see Marie perched high on a box in the middle of the dim room, surrounded by a crowd of women. Small and lean, she was flushed with high color, and her mood put a hum in the air. What business she could have with these women--all ages, from all over the village--on a workday morning, Anna could not imagine. But she had been called, and she had come.

"Finally," Marie said when she caught sight of Anna. "Took long enough. Now we can get started." She fixed Stante with a stare and gestured over her shoulder with a toss of her head. "Go look after your brother."

The boy glanced quickly at Anna and scooted out the door.

Marie worked her jaw silently and looked around the circle of women as if there were marks on their foreheads only she could see. They looked back at her, perplexed but curious enough to bide awhile.

"You all sign your names Anna Fink," she stated.

"A-yo," Gide's Annakatrín agreed in a long drawl. "I guess that's true enough. Every one of us baptized an Anna-something-or-other, and a Fink too."

"Half the folks in the village sign themselves Fink," added Annobüobli's Anna, sixteen and easily bored. "Did you haul us all down here to tell us our names?"

Marie's stare was enough to make the girl fluster and drop her gaze. She said, "Today the courier brought a picture postcard, addressed to Anna Fink."

There was a hesitation as the women looked at each other.

"That postcard can't be for me," Anna said, confused. "Peter took me home to Bengat ten years ago, and I've been signing myself Sutterlüty ever since."

Marie shrugged. "You belonged to Jodok Fink of River's Bend before you married Bengato Peter. And I got a card here addressed to Anna Fink, which I am obliged to deliver, or return."

"Well, ain't there no housename on the thing?" asked Annimi, her gaze wandering over the bolts of calico and muslin.

With a withering look, Marie reached into her apron pocket and withdrew the postcard. Watery blues and greens glinted between her muscular fingers. "'Anna Fink'," she read. "'At the River's Bend, Rosenaus.'"

They turned together to look at Bengato Peter's Anna.

"It's been ten years!" she repeated, squirming slightly.

"But you were Anna Fink before that," said Annakatrinn. "No Fink women ever lived down to the River's Bend homestead except you and Rosa."

"Ten years is a long time, though," conceded Pitchfork Paulus's Annatheres, thoughtfully.

"Well, there's an easier way," said Fellele's Annele. She alternated her weight clumsily from one foot to the other, trying to shift the burden of a nine-month pregnancy from the small of her back. "Who's it from, Marie?"

"I don't read the mail!"

"Course you don't," said Annimi, too smoothly. "Give it over to us and we'll sort it out amongst ourselves."

"Never mind that," Marie snapped, jerking the card up and away as if Annimi had snatched at it. "I got a feeling this has to do with you," she said, turning to Anna. "No matter how long you been up at Bengat."

"Well, all I know is, I'm eighty this past Maundy Tuesday, and I have never got a picture postcard in the mail," Annakatrinn said, shaking her head. "Don't know who'd send me one."

"Then you take it, Annakatrinn," said Anna, frustrated now.

But Marie grunted and thrust the card toward her. The simpleness of the gesture was disarming, and Anna, who had just told herself that she had no intention of taking it, found the postcard in her hand.

"There's a mistake," Marie said with grim satisfaction, hovering as if Anna were a stranger from the flatlands and Marie had just been obliged to put a newborn into her arms, against all good judgment. "You'll see."

Anna fingered the thick card stock. She saw a fine drawing of an imposing building, lawns running down to a pier, people strolling, sailboats scattered on blue waves, Lake Constance as smooth and clear as expensive paper could render it. "The White Horse Hotel" stood in sloping letters across the bottom, and: "For the discerning traveler."

"Get on with it!" Marie said, so Anna turned the card over and read out loud, the book language filling her mouth with its sparseness. It had always reminded her of unripe fruit, resistant and without flavor, something unnatural and of little use or beauty.

"Dear Anna," she read. "It has been so long. Please forgive me. I never meant it to be so long. Please have patience. Your Anton. P.S. Please write to me here, I am very lonely."

There was a small silence.

"Look at those boats. How many folks you think can ride in one of those?"

"Anton. We got enough of them around here, but don't suppose this is one of ours."

"He writes pretty."

"What does 'P.S.' mean?"

"It means 'I ain't done yet.'"

"Where is that place?"

"Never seen the lake myself, except could be from the northmost ridge of the Third Sister on a clear day."

"Why's that woman carrying a rain-roof in the bright sunlight?"

"That's no rain-roof, you ijit. That's called a parasol. Keeps the sun off her white skin." This from Annatheres, who had inherited from her mother, a flatlander, three copies of the Ladies Afternoon Journal: January 1891, February 1895, and the general favorite in the village, July 1900. Annatheres had committed most of all three to memory, and could hold forth on articles of clothing of strange construction and dubious utility.

"What does 'discerning' mean then, if you're so smart?"

"Rich," said Annatheres. "Sticky rich."

Anna never looked up from the card. She saw that this man with the same name as her youngest boy, this man who stayed at expensive hotels and wrote in an elegant hand (Anna had never seen the like, not even from Father Meusburger, who had taught her her letters), had written "please" three times in five short sentences. She wondered how disappointed he would be when he had no reply from his Anna.

Marie stuck out her hand. "I'll send it back where it come from," she said in a tone that allowed no disagreement, but Annakatrín stepped in.

"Marie, you would have made a fine nun. You got the knack."

"The tongue, too," muttered Annatheres.

"There's business needs looking after," Marie said hotly.

"We're looking after it, ain't we? Now let Anna have her say."

"It's mine," Anna said, surprising herself as much as she did Grumpy Marie. She put the card in her basket, and with that she went outside and walked toward the public well in the center of the church square. Anna sat down on the edge of the horse trough with the postcard in her lap.

Marie stood in the doorway, hands on her hips, and watched as the others trailed out after Anna.

With considerable shifting and nudging they managed to balance seven abreast on the edge of the trough, seven blue work aprons over pleated black linen skirts, once glassy with starch but now softened and wilting, like crackled sugar glaze. Below the skirts, seven sets of dusty bare feet peeked out. Without comment, Anna passed the card to her right, and one by one each of the Annas claimed it. Each read it slowly, ran a fingertip over the cool surface, spelled out the mysterious abbreviations on the stamp and the cancellation. Broommaker's Annamarile, who had not dared say a word in front of Grumpy Marie, let out an audible sigh when she got up to hand it back, finally, to Anna.

The church bell rang nine, and they startled at the morning half gone. In a flurry of skirts they were up and headed for home.

Anna got up to go too but froze when Annakatrín turned back from across the square and hollered. "You best write and tell the man he's gone wrong!"

Halfway home to Bengat, Anna stopped and retrieved the card: the blue-green waters, the little pier, the grass that stretched in a cool sheet down to the shore. A gentleman with a walking stick. A lady in white linen, wearing long gloves and carrying a parasol, her hair rolled elaborately on the back of her head. Anna touched the braids wrapped around her own head.

She was about to set out again when she caught a flash of color: Stante, bolting straight up the lower hang of the Second Sister as if the devil were close behind. She watched him climb the hang like a ladder, ignoring the dirt path and its switchbacks. The July sun shone like a cap on his head.

He came to a sudden halt just before her and smiled, not even short of breath.

"What is it?" Anna asked. "Did Marie send you chasing after me?"

His blue eyes were striking for their contrast to his sun-browed skin, and for their perpetual look of confusion. Anna watched Stante try to find the words he wanted, and fail. As she often did, she found herself wishing that she could give this child, her dead sister's boy, what God had seen fit to hold back: the ability to open his mouth and say what was on his mind. For a moment Anna was tempted to sit down right where she was and take him into her lap and rock him.

"Were you wanting to come visit up at Bengat?"

The flash of excitement in Stante's eyes told her that she had guessed why he'd come running after her. The way he dropped his gaze told her that he had come without permission.

It was so rare that the Wainwright let Stante or Michel come up to Bengat. He put little value on the twins, but neither would he let them go. Every year on their birthday--the anniversary of her sister's death--Anna asked once again if she could take the boys in and see to their raising; every year the Wainwright turned her down.

"You best be getting back," Anna said softly. "But you come up again soon and bring Michel with you. In the wheelbarrow. You think you can push your brother all the way up to Bengat for some plum dumplings?"

Stante grinned at her and nodded.

"But next time come by the road," she said, laughing. Anna rubbed her palm over the crown of his head, and he turned and preened like a cat under her touch.

The men were most taken by the lawn. Their lives were ruled by a simple cycle: they needed milk from the cows to make cheese, the cows needed grass to produce milk, the grass needed fertilizer from the cows to grow. Peter and his father could not understand grass without a purpose, without animals.

"Maybe they graze goats in the night," suggested Anna's mother-in-law, Isabella.

But they looked silently at the lawn, smooth as a silk handkerchief, and put no real credence in that idea.

"So you'll write an answer," Alois said. Her father-in-law was a reasonable man, but not one disposed to long discussion.

"If you think so--" Anna glanced at Peter, who nodded.

"Imagine the man," said Barbara, Peter's sister. "Waiting and waiting on a word from her, from this Anna. Whoever she is."

"I'll write it for you, Mama," Olga volunteered. At nine she was Anna's oldest, more interested in schoolwork than raking hay or taking care of two little brothers, and proud of her handwriting.

"It's your mama's business," Peter said gently.

Alois gave Anna his fountain pen and showed her how to fill the barrel. Her sister-in-law cut edges and blanks spots out of the Farmer's Weekly for Anna to practice on. Olga sharpened the pencil with Alois's penknife, under Isabella's careful eye. Only Peter seemed content to let Anna get on with it in her own time, but even that didn't last.

"There's a Rosenau over on the other side of Innsbruck, I seem to recall," Peter said when he climbed into bed that night. "Maybe you could say so."

"You don't mind me writing to this stranger?"

"Don't suppose you could fall in love with a man on the strength of his handwriting," said Peter, yawning. Then he fell asleep, as he always did, without warning.

Lying next to him, drowsy but strangely content to be awake, Anna realized that she had no clear memory of Peter's handwriting, having seen it so few times in her life. He had finished his four years of schooling before she began her own; when she married him, she had never once seen him with a pen in his hand. Then Anna remembered the marriage registry and Peter's signature, uneven and awkward. She put the thought away and reached for sleep.

The next afternoon, when Isabella and Barbara took Olga off to Lost Calf meadow to rake hay, Anna settled her two boys down to nap. Then she put a clean blue bibbed apron over her workday Juppa, crossing the wide starched strings neatly over her back, winding them around her waist, and tying the ends into a bow at the base of her spine. Out of habit she put her marketing basket over her arm and went down to the village to buy a postcard. On the way she was stopped three times by folks who wanted to see the picture of the fine hotel and were disappointed that she had left it behind.

"There's a village called Rosanna way over in the Pustertal," Goat-Cheese Willi called to her across his dung heap. The innkeeper came out of the Golden Eagle to tell her the same thing.

Stepping from sunlight into the pungent shadows of the shop, Anna heard the Wainwright before she saw him. "Woolly-woolly," he was crooning softly in his crackly old man's voice. "Woolly-head."

Stante stood red-faced next to his grandfather. The Wainwright was wobbling the boy's head back and forth with a shovel-like hand. He looked up at Anna as she came in, and stopped. It wasn't her disapproval that worried him, Anna knew that: he was just tired of the game.

With a forced nod to the Wainwright, Anna addressed her first words to Stante, and was rewarded immediately with his smile. There was a scuffling in the far corner of the room and that is where Anna found Michel, tied with a shank of rope to a foot of the tiled oven.

"He will run off," the Wainwright said to Anna's back. "Can't keep track of him otherwise. The Lord knows what devilment he'd get up to."

Where Stante seemed incapable of expecting anything from Anna that wasn't soft and soothing, Michel could only look at her with hooded eyes. She crouched down next to him and

reached out; Michel tolerated her caress. Anna was surprised once again, as she always was when she saw him, at how much of her sister she could find in his face.

"It's been a while since you come up to see us, Michel," Anna said, and he looked at her hopefully. "We'll see what we can do," she whispered.

Rosa had died before she knew about Stante, who had his mother's beauty but nothing else to call his own; or about Michel, whose mind was whole but whose body was frail and bird-like, the bones bent into unlikely angles at all the wrong spots. Stante could barely put a sentence together; Michel had a clear high voice and a head full of things to say, but he seldom chose to speak. Rosa had died and left these boys to her husband; her husband had taken the influenza and died the year after, leaving the boys not to Anna, who wanted to take them in, but to his father, the Wainwright.

"Your sister," said the Wainwright behind Anna, as if that explained everything away, Stante's tears, the rope burns on Michel's ankle.

Anna straightened up and lifted an eyebrow, her face stiff with anger. "My sister?"

"How'd she manage it, I often wonder. Two half boys instead of a whole one."

"These children are welcome at Bengat," Anna said, her words feeling tight and small and insufficient.

"They are my only grandsons, sorry as they may be. Nobody will ever say I ain't done my duty by these two since my Richard passed on. Woolly here may never be the craftsman his daddy was, but he is a good hand in the toolshop when he keeps his few wits about him, ain't you, Woolly?"

"Where is it?" Marie said from the doorway, and both Anna and the Wainwright turned in surprise. "Did you bring it back?"

Anna looked from her nephews to Marie.

"Did you bring the picture postcard back?" Marie said again, flapping her apron.

"I'd like a penny postcard," Anna said.

Marie drew up. "So you are fixing to write."

Anna put a coin on the counter.

"I'd like a postcard," she repeated.

"That's all you got to say?"

"And a stamp."

The Wainwright held up a hand to cut Marie off. "Let me ask you this," he said as he put the postcard on the counter in front of Anna. "When's the last time you spoke the book language?"

Confused by this question, Anna dropped her eyes from his toothy smile.

"Bet you haven't spoke the book language in years. Couldn't write book-like any more than you could write Greek."

"I'm the postmistress," Marie said with a withering look at her father, who had clearly missed the point. "It is my responsibility."

Anna turned away from them, from their sourness and grim self-righteousness, and left without another word to her nephews.

"Could have been any one of you Finka-Annas!" Marie called after her. "Or none of you!"

Anna forced herself to walk at a steady pace through the square, although she could feel their gaze on her back, hot and demanding as the July sun: Stante's eyes like dusty windows, willing her to turn around because he loved her; Marie's eyes, narrowed and flickering with irritation because she had let Anna get the upper hand and hadn't yet figured out how to put things right.

That evening Anna was distracted; she stoked the stove thoughtlessly and the milk billowed up and over; she snapped at Olga and then made the boys sit still so she could cut their hair. At just over one, Tony had little to cut and she was quickly finished with him, but Anna made Jos wait too long, fussing at the job when it was clear that the boy just wanted to be up and gone. Barbara pressed her lips together hard and left the kitchen, but Isabella gave her a penetrating look, her brown eyes all the sharper in the soft roundness of her face. Anna looked away, and counted on the fact that her mother-in-law was the sort who kept her opinion to herself.

Later, by lamplight, Anna sat alone at the table in the Stube with her things gathered round her: the blank card propped up against the oil lamp, the fountain pen in its stand, the pile of scrap paper. She took a pencil and wrote "Dear Sir," and then: "Your postcard came to me."

Anna felt her fingers cramping on the pencil; a fine line of sweat broke out on her brow. Suddenly she wondered why she had taken the card from Marie, what she had meant by it. She turned it over to read it again, and again she counted: he had written "please" three times. Knowing she was being unfair, knowing herself fortunate in marriage, Anna tried to remember the last time Peter had asked her with "please." She forced her mind back over old conversations, days and weeks old, with increasing disquiet. The truth was, Peter didn't use the word much, but then he had such a gentle way about him that it had never occurred to her before to feel a lack. This stranger, this Anton, he was a different kind of creature from Peter; even in those few lines she could feel it. Anna picked up the pencil again, and tried to put down what she thought he would need to know.

I grew up on the River's Bend homestead in Rosenau. That was some years ago, afore my folks passed on and my sister Rosa and her husband took over and I married away, up the mountain side. The house there has stood empty since Rosa and her husband died. The hayfields are pacted out now. I live at Bengat with my husband and his folks and my own children. I am a farmer's wife and nothing more. Your card is very beautiful, but it does not belong to me.

Anna looked at these words for some time, and it seemed to her she could hear Father Meusburger standing behind her, his fingers rasping softly in the folds of his cassock. She was suffused with the same compressed dread she had felt in the schoolroom of the little rectory, where she hunched over her square of chalk tablet, copying out catechism sentences written on the board in the priest's sharp-edged hand. The book language was a strange maze, but she saw now she could find her way through it, if she moved slowly, and if she felt her way carefully along the barren walls, and most important, if she could be content with half-truths. The pencil was heavy in her hand, and it found the paper again. What came from it surprised her, but she let it flow:

Once a young man came through Rosenau on a mountain tour. He was tall and his skin was the color of old honey. His eyes shiny black like his

hair. He talked strange, bookish but not bookish, putting his sentences round backwards at times. He stayed in our barn for some days. He ate with us, and paid Daddy good coin. Our Rosa was taken with him. She would sit at the window and watch him come down the road. That was before she married Wainwright's Richard, before her twins came along. Rosa died in childbed.

When Anna went up upstairs, Peter was asleep. She undressed slowly without the lamp so as not to disturb him. Then she got into bed and shook him awake.

"Those boys are my flesh and blood, and I want them here," she told her husband, her voice hard and full, and then she let Peter hold her instead of saying all the things she already knew but didn't want to hear, instead of making her empty promises about children she could not claim, but to whom she was bound by guilt and love.

The next evening Anna worked over her postcard while the family sat together out in the Schopf with the wooden shutters folded and propped up to let in the evening breeze. The newspaper scraps Barbara had cut out for her were soon gone, so with a furtive look out the window Anna took three sheets of yellowing stationery from her father-in-law's oaken lap desk and hoped it would be enough. She wrote in pencil, in a hand that was small and cramped but became looser, more generous, more complex with every line. In time she didn't have to wait for the words to come to her in the book language; it was as if she had opened some creaky gate that now swung smooth.

At first she wrote about her sister and her sister's boys, about Michel's egg-like skull that seemed to twist sideways on his neck as if his ear were attached to the shoulder, so you could never know what he was looking at. She wrote about Stante's blue eyes. Anna took more paper and wrote about how Peter first came courting, about her father-in-law's habit of whistling to the barn swallows and how they seemed to listen.

She forgot she was writing to a stranger, a man she had never seen: she imagined him love-struck, lonely, wearing a white linen suit and silk hat and smoking a carved pipe under the striped awnings of the the White Horse Hotel. Slowly this image faded away into the paper

under her hands until she could see much less of him than she could of herself, as a young girl, a bride, a mother, an aunt.

When she had used all the stationery in the lap desk, ten sheets, Anna looked up with a start and saw it was near midnight. She folded all the newsprint and paper into one packet and tied it up with string. Then she took the blank postcard and the pen, and in quick, easy strokes she wrote out the address one side:

TO: Anton, a guest of the Hotel

Who Wrote to Anna at River's Bend, Rosenau

The White Horse Hotel

Lake Constance

On the other side she wrote "Dear Sir," and then, with little hesitation:

Your card came to me by mistake. I do not know you. There is no other Anna here in Rosenau who lives at the River's Bend, as I did before I married. If you have not heard from your Anna, perhaps it is because she never received your card. I wish you well.

Sincerely,

Anna Sutterlüty nee Fink

Bengat Homestead, Lower Hang of the Second Sister

On her way up to bed Anna stopped to check on Olga and then went into the boys' room. Tony had crept under his blanket; she tugged him back into place and smoothed his damp hair away from his face. Jos had managed to wiggle out of his nightclothes, as he always did, and he lay naked on top of his covers. Anna admired the sheen of the moonlight on his skin even as she tucked him in. Sitting on the edge of Jos's bed, Anna listened to her boys breathing in counterpoint, and she wondered, as she had first done when Olga was born and as she had every day since, what she would do if the next breath didn't come, if her children were to slip away from her against her will, and refuse to return.

Peter was awake and waiting for her.

"It's a good thing we already got a Tony of our own," he said, folding back the covers.

Anna raised an eyebrow at his playful tone. "How so?"

"Because we could never baptize an Anton now without the whole village wondering what we been up to."

She laughed. "What I been up to, you mean." With her back turned to Peter she slipped her nightdress over her head. "You jealous?"

"Don't know, exactly," Peter said, reaching out to catch her wrist and pull her into bed. "You finished writing?"

She nodded.

"Then I'm not jealous." He paused. "Just what did you say?"

Anna rubbed her hand across her husband's cheek. "Want to read it?"

Peter grinned. "I'm not much of a reading man."

"Might find it interesting," Anna whispered.

"There are more interesting things in life," he said, reaching for her buttons.

"You counting on another baptism?" she asked, and this caused him to look up from her nightdress to her face.

"Why, I suppose we could manage to accommodate a few more at our table," Peter said slowly.

I have never seen Michel smile at anyone but his brother, Anna had written.

"Children need more than food," she said against Peter's hair; then, feeling the warmth of his silence and his attention, she closed her eyes.

The next morning Anna handed Grumpy Marie the card and watched her read it right there, mouthing the words one by one. Anna looked away. Neither Stante nor Michel was anywhere to be seen.

"That'll be the end of that," Marie said, and Anna was struck not by Marie's ridicule or disdain but instead by the regret in her voice. Marie was the only woman on this homestead, with animals, the wagonsmithy, the shop, two burdensome boys, and a contentious and aging

father to look after; Anna was not surprised to see white in Marie's hair at less than thirty, or the weariness that hunched her back. But she was startled deep down by this glimpse of a loneliness she had never considered. Anna felt a surge of compassion and sadness for this woman, and for a moment she wished she had left the whole business to Marie, who was looking at her now with glittering eyes.

"I do my best," she said. "I do my best for those boys. They want for nothing."

Anna turned away, knowing this for the truth, but finding little comfort in it.

That afternoon Anna was sitting in the Schopf with the mending in her lap while Jos and Tony played in the dooryard. It was overcast and threatening rain, but they had gotten the hay into the barn before breakfast and hadn't mowed any more in the meantime. Every so often Anna felt the outline of the folded pages still in her apron pocket as she tracked the storm, approaching in fits and starts like a moody and untrustworthy lover.

The narrow road and the path that fell steeply away from it to the house were hidden from the Schopf, which looked down into the garden and over the village; it was a while before Anna realized that somebody was coming. She was just putting her mending aside when the first scream came, clear and shrill. The boys looked up from their play with round, blank stares; they had been brought up on the screams of pigs, goats, and cows under the knife, but this was something different. Anna leapt the stairs and rounded the corner to see Stante come flying down the road toward them, pushing Michel in a rickety wheelbarrow at a dead run over the hard-packed earth, his face transformed with joy. From inside the wheelbarrow Michel bellowed an odd, deep laughter, his mouth gaping wide, his milky skin flushed with color. Like fragile folded wings, his hands clutched at the sides of the wheelbarrow as it bounced and rattled.

Anna saw Isabella leaning out of a window, and then Alois stepped out of the barn with a wrench in his hand. Olga, caught in Stante's path with a bag of feed on her back, jumped out of the way as they sped past, and then stood staring longingly after them. Peter, his arms white with curd, had come out of the creamery. He leaned there against the wall, his chin lowered to his chest while he laughed, laughter honest and clean, a boy's laughter.

They watched as Stante raced his brother toward the house, faster and faster, breathing hard, pushing with all the strength in his legs and arms and back, while Michel rolled in the wheelbarrow, beating with his heels, his head turned against his shoulder, laughing and shouting up into the summer sky.