

We reached Pontedera, and he started again about his van. He was not altogether easy in his mind about the way he had acquired it.

"I ought really to have given it back to my comrades on the committee, I suppose, but there it is, I didn't."

He could see I had no strong views on the subject.

"I ought to have, but I couldn't. I'd been driving it for two months, so I just couldn't."

"Most people would have done the same," I said.

"I thought, I'll never have another van all my life. Things can happen like that, you know, you can't stop yourself, you even steal. Well, I stole this car, I admit. But I just can't be sorry I did it."

It was just an old wreck, as I could see, couldn't do more than sixty kilometers an hour, but still he was glad to have it. He was mad about cars. Besides, if the valves were properly re-bored, she'd go up to eighty. But he never had time to get them done. Still, she was a boon to him. Because of her he was able to go to a little fishing port on the Mediterranean for weekends during the spring and summer; he could take a few friends with him too. It was much cheaper than going by train. I asked him where it was. A place called Rocca, he told me. He had relations there. It wasn't far. It was difficult to get there every week because of the petrol rationing, but he could manage once a fortnight. He'd been there the previous week. Oh, it was only a tiny little place. The last time there had been some rich American woman there, and no one could make out what she could want in a place like that. At least, people said she was an American. She had a lovely yacht anchored just off-shore. He'd seen her bathing: a marvelous woman. It just showed you couldn't afford to generalize

about anything. Until then he'd believed people when they said American women were not so beautiful as Italians. But there was no doubt about it, this one was so beautiful he couldn't remember ever seeing anyone to surpass her. He didn't say she was pretty or attractive, simply that she was beautiful. He said it seriously, in Italian: "Bellissima." And he added: "E sola."

Then he talked about Rocca. Why didn't I go there myself if I had time? You couldn't get a proper idea of Italy if you only went to the big towns. You ought to go to a village or two, to the country. And Rocca was just the place for seeing how the ordinary Italians, the poor people, lived. They'd been through such a lot, they'd worked harder than anyone, and just you see how kind they are. [ . . . ]

Without noticing, he began to use the familiar form of address.

"And what do you do?" he asked.

"I'm in the Colonial Ministry," I told him. "Registry section."

"Do you like the work?"

"Loathe it."

"What do you do?"

"Copy out birth and death certificates."

"I see," he said. "Have you been doing it long?"

"Eight years."

After a moment he said, "I wouldn't be able to stick that myself."

"No," I said, "you wouldn't."

"Being a mason's hard enough—cold in the winter, hot in the summer. But copying things out all the time—I couldn't. It's a good thing some people can, mind you—but me, no, I couldn't."

"I can't either," I said.

"But you do?"

"Yes. At first I thought it would kill me, but I do it, you know how it is."

"And do you still think that?"

"That it could kill someone? Yes, but someone else, not me any more."

"It must be awful, always copying things," he said slowly.

"You can't imagine," I said.

I probably said it as if I was joking. It must have sounded either as if it wasn't as bad as all that, or as if that was just my way of talking about my personal affairs.

"The sort of work people do is very important," he said. "You can't just do any old thing."

"But somebody has to do it," I said. "Why not me?"

"No," he said. "Why should it be you?"

"I tried to do something else but I could never find anything."

"Sometimes," he said, "it's better just to die of hunger. In your place I'd rather have died of hunger."

"There's always that fear of being out of work. And then you feel ashamed, somehow, I don't know."

"Still, there are some things it's more shameful to do than not to do." ■