

## Preface

*Fagnano Olona, Lombardia, Italy, May 15, 1915*

*In the name of God I, being sound of mind, declare that I am issuing the following testament. I request that my funeral be celebrated by ten priests, and that a decent tombstone be placed at the cemetery, where the ground has already been assigned and paid for, and that a requiem mass be said. I want no music, flowers, or coach, but only that those who carry me be paid well. I leave to my nephews Giovanni and Enea Macchi my bed with two mattresses, three pillows, a duvet, a blanket, a wardrobe, a chest of drawers, a bedside table, four chairs, a coffee table, and a mirror. I leave to the poor of Fagnano 49 lire, and to the poor of Bergoro 10 lire. As for my savings in the bank of Gallarate, in the amount of 300 lire, I leave it to my grandniece Francesca, daughter of my nephew Giovanni Macchi, on the condition that it be used for her education in a religious institution. As for the painting of the Holy Family at the head of my bed, I leave it to my nephew Odoardo Fontana.*

*Cristina Fontana  
Widow of Gagliardi*

This testament lay there for decades, in the bottom shelf of a wardrobe, forgotten in the buzz of a crowded household. A tin box, and in it a small piece of paper yellowed with time, with the handwriting and seals still visible. That's all that is left of Cristina Fontana. Gone is the tombstone at the cemetery, gone are the pillows and furniture of her bedroom, which had witnessed so much of life. And where is the painting of the Holy Family? And the people she mentioned? They are all gone, some unexpectedly, before their time, like

Francesca, in whom she placed so much hope for a better future, a proper education. Francesca's father Giovanni Macchi died after her, his heart broken by the loss of two wives and a daughter in a few years, and he too left a piece of paper behind:

*Fagnano Olona, September 23, 1939*

*With a serene mind I dispose of all I own; I name my children Fausto and Enrica equally as residual heirs. To my son Fausto I leave the business, to my daughter Enrica the furniture that was her deceased mother's, with the mattresses, blankets, linen, and all she brought as her dowry. My son Fausto is not to claim anything else, since he has already received a great deal with the restaurant and hotel.*

*Giovanni Macchi – Hotel Garibaldi*

Giovanni knew he could trust Fausto, for he had already proven himself in the business. As for Enrica, well, she had always been a bit special. She lived in her own world, not much interested in the one she was passing through, so Giovanni was sure that she wouldn't mind not being put in charge of the hotel and restaurant, but she would never lack material support and shelter.

What would you leave to your children and relatives? What can you? And how would you like your last steps in this world to be? Fausto could not tell his daughter, my mother, about his intentions, nor leave behind a piece of paper that would turn yellow over time. He died of Alzheimer's twenty years ago.

The rooms, the objects, the bits of paper at the bottom of a tin box. It is the stuff of life, speaking to us of the lives of the dead, so closely connected with those of the living. From tangible fragments like these a whole world arises. That, ultimately, is what this book is about. As the reader will see, it revolves around testaments of indigenous people written in central Mexico hundreds of years ago in a language unfamiliar to most of us. Yet I cannot help being struck by how much those people were like us today, and that affinity has motivated me and helped me along the way.

The living have been behind this book as much as the dead, and quite a few of them, as a matter of fact, so I would like to thank them here. First of all, I thank Jim Lockhart, with whom I started to think of this project some years ago and without whom I would have never finished it. The road has been incredibly exciting, if bumpy at times, and I have learned so much from him and from his generosity. My gratitude and affection are not enough. Thank you, Jim.

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