

CHRIST IN CONCRETE

A N O V E L B Y

PIETRO DI DONATO

Preface by Studs Terkel
Introduction by Fred L. Gardaphé



A SIGNET CLASSIC

Paul embraced him, and they did not speak until the third bell.

"I will see you often, Ci Luigi, and shall bring you home to us someday. Rest . . . and good night."

Luigi brushed the thin sensitive face with his mustache, and his twisted eye eagerly followed Paul's form out of the ward.

April night.

Luigi finds himself down in the foundation pit. The men are working. He does not know them all. When did the whistle blow and why isn't he with them as he looks here—there in the shed near the crane on the stones under the machines between the timbers—and he cannot find his pick and he knows the foreman blueshirt is watching him—but he makes believe that he Luigi doesn't see him and that he is on an important singular mission, and he tries to hem and cough like someone else until he finds his pick and when he approaches the men they look at him sideways and as he recognizes them and wants to smile greeting they lower their eyes and turn away as though they don't know him and there is no noise and they work stiffly like quiet zombies in a spell and the foreman's eyes are big black angry spots under the lid of his felt hat always staring at him and he puts his head down and wants to do *something* or run away but he can't find his way out of the pit when by a wall Geremio is smiling with that overtopping twinkle and motions for him and hands him a brick hammer so that he can break stones with the men and Luigi wants to feel and embrace him because he knows that he is proud and lonely and has done something and for some reason it is known that Geremio is not supposed to mix with people and Geremio glides away from him and shakes his head smilingly like a stranger and Luigi feels the blueshirt's foreboding black eyes and spontaneously swings the little brick hammer as though he were wound up at the big stone that he recognizes and the hammer handle becomes smaller and

smaller and the big black eyes blow up bigger and bigger and he no longer has any hammer and is frantically beating the stone with his hands and the stony face looms larger *larger* and rolls over on him and does not hurt him and he starts to laugh to think that somewhere that he couldn't place that stone had frightened him and when he laughs louder the men break out in storms of high-pitched laughter. But what is Annunziata doing there holding all her children in her arms and looking with terrible hungry sad eyes at him and he whispers to her that he will find Geremio for her and will work all his life for her and the children for she has nothing to worry about and that she should laugh and teach the children to laugh with the men whose laughter blows in gales—but she looks at his legs and he becomes terribly fearful and afraid to follow her eyes and when he tries to jump to his feet he cannot move and his two legs begin to pump like engines and pump pain through him and she lowers her vacant eyes and her mouth hangs meaning that she expected him to fail her and he tries to beat the stone from his legs and cries above the laughing men sister dear sister it was not I who betrayed you—it was someone stronger than you and me—someone who does not tell why—sister believe me it was not I who betrayed you!

"There, there, Luigi, no one will hurt you . . . no one will hurt you. You must not try to move your legs. Did you have bad dream?"

"... Nurse-a . . . I no spick—I no can-a spick . . ."

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Annunziata arose before her time. The thirtieth of March had broken her blood and painted age in her face. With the dawn, there no longer were Katarina or the Regina or the other women at the bedside, dressing

Geremino or the children, or preparing food or washing clothes. . . . Annunziata arose alone, and in weeds of black. At the meager dresser where a votive light flickered low in a red glass, she stood weakly and with clasped hands.

God of my fathers, God of my girlhood, God of my mating, God of my innocent children, upon your sacred bosom I lay my voice: To this widow alone blackenshrouded, lend of your strength that she may live only to raise her children. God of my life, death and spirit . . . Amen.

Her head reeled. Sitting on the bedside she felt balance leaving her. She lay back on the bed. She was drifting off when Geremino's squall brought her to, and for a minute she did not know where she was. She reached for her breasts, but when she drew one it was limp, empty. Johnny, awakened by Geremino, swung his bottle and called for milk. Annunziata planted her feet on the floor and walked unsteadily toward the kitchen. In the next bedroom the other six children were curled closely in one bed. She held to the bedstead and blessed them.

Through the dining room and into the dark kitchen she dragged her feet. She felt in the cupboard and found a loaf of fresh bread, half a loaf of stale bread, two onions, a handful of old potatoes, and a can of evaporated milk. She fingered the food mechanically. She would not eat. And still that leaves eight. With three meals each, the day requires twenty-four portions. Who would bring into the house that great necessity? What magic power would supply twenty-four portions each day? And the rent? And the fuel? And the clothes? *Andandand* . . . ? Geremino and Johnny yelled impatiently—enraged. Annunziata shook the grate of the coal stove and fired it. She heated water, mixed it with evaporated milk and filled the babies' bottles. Geremino and Johnny pulled them snugly to their breasts and sucked and gurgled with ogle-ogle-grumble-joy. For breakfast Annunziata gave the children the rest of the

evaporated milk diluted with warm water, and dry bread.

"Mama, aren't you going to eat?"

"I am not hungry, Paul."

The two onions and few potatoes stood out on the table.

Mama does not eat for there is nothing to eat. The children will be hungry again . . . what will mama and I say to them? And even understanding, hunger would yet remain. How did these onions and potatoes come to our table . . . and where are father's hands . . . ?

Father's hands were our home. They gave to us food and warmth. They gave us love, and they gave us joy. From the buildings he brought us life . . . and now strange hands are pushing us down and I feel we are sliding and there is nothing to grasp . . . father-father, I am scared!

Annunziata sat with folded hands.

Two onions. Four potatoes. One-two-three-four-five-six large crumbs one-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight-nine-ten-eleven small crumbs. Paul Annina Lucia Giorgio Joseph Adela Johnny Geremino two onions four potatoes. Who will tap on the door to put baskets of food on Geremio's table? Who will come in quietly and feed the family of Geremio day upon day week upon week month upon month year upon year until they are strong men and women and I join Geremio? *Jesu-Giuseppe e' Mari* . . .

Paul read her eyes and the working of her lips.

I cannot sit here. I must find those whom God has chosen to feed us . . . for the Lord will take these two onions and four potatoes and break them into portions to last until my arms are strong for work.

He put on his faded green overcoat and left the house.

Where shall I go first? And how shall I say?

* FINE GROCERIES *

Into the grocery.

Here comes the son of the dead Geremio. On his face I read that he has come to obtain for nothing the goods for which I have paid money.

Paul waited. When he and the grocer were alone he spoke. "... we have always bought here and right now we have no money—"

I have my own family. I sympathize. What would happen to my children if I undertook to feed the widow and her eight? ... No. "Yes yes."

"I will work for you."

Thin arms—you'll die on my hand. ... No. "Ahhh, if I only had that much business."

"... Perhaps? you could? give us credit? until I went to work ... ? The Sisters at school say that I am smart and shall someday—"

No no no no no no no no. "I would like to do that, but I cannot. In fact there is a bill here already, but tell mama not to worry about that now. You see, Paul, I only make maybe a penny on a sale and—"

We are Christians together—we go to church together—father in Heaven watches and will pray for you—we will pray to the Lord Jesus for every bit of help you give us and that He shall reward you ...

"Father John should be able to do something for your mother. You might tell him that I suggested you see him. I make donations to St. Prisca."

But you have the food here. Please.

No.

Please!

No.

"Thank you. I'll go to Father John."

"Do that. Tell I suggested. —I make donations ..."

And Paul soon found himself wandering along the crowded street.

* MEATS OUR SPECIALTY *

He hesitated before the window and waited until the customers had left. Big thick red hands pushed a wire brush over the meat block and did not notice Paul. Over him a cardboard poster said in gilt letters on black that:

IN GOD WE TRUST * * * OTHERS PAY CASH!

The red meat-face came toward him and asked loudly, "Well?"

Paul walked out of the store. He moved with the street world for hours not knowing where to present himself.

MUNICIPAL BUILDING
JUSTICE
EQUALITY

Into the big building he went, and from corridor to corridor.

ROOM 302
OVERSEER OF THE POOR

Yes, he had a right to go in.

"What building collapse? Never heard about it. Was he an American citizen?"

"He had taken out his first papers."

"But he's dead."

"Yes ..."

"Well, then he wasn't a citizen."

... My children will dance for me someday ... and in the American style ...

Dogging thin feet along the pavements and big strong people coming out of food shops with great bundles and laughing with lit eyes and store after store choked and flowing with bread and steak and fruit and shoes and cake and clothes and toys and darkness push-

ing day over tenement tops and Paul's thin wrists getting thinner and thinner.

Shrill note, steam's blow, siren and bell sounded labor still and sent feet from Job. Endless living feet bringing message of tired bodies to someone, something, that waited somewhere. . . . And Annunziata waited at the front window. . . .

Feet-feet-feet to my ears like rain . . . and whither Geremio's? Whither the dark eyes and tanned face of beauty to twinkle love's greeting? Whither the Roman figure of man, the broad chest and curved back, the quick light step, and hands so strong? What do I here with only window ledge at bosom: the sight of many men stepping to wife and little ones, the rising-falling feet of husband-fathers on stairway, the opening and shutting of home doors, the shuffling legs of master and colting of little ones, the wonderful fantasy of eventide, of plates and bread and soup and spoons' clatter and sweet-sweet disturbing duties of table, of late evening's voicing twos and twos—fours and fours, of husband's pipe and smoke, of noddings, of husband's smell so precious, of husband's sanctified flesh of toil, of whispering between husband, God, and wife, of night . . . and husband-man. . . . What do I with only window ledge at bosom, and none to equal Geremio . . . ?

Paul had wandered to the hospital.

"Little uncle, you are white and tired. Have you eaten?"

Paul did not answer.

Luigi looked at him and looked, and then bit his hands and beat his casts until the nurse came. Between his tears Luigi tried to tell the nurse of trouble, great trouble and hunger.

On the way home, Paul paused in front of the police station. He went up the steps, opened the door, and as he went in he heard a live loud voice laughing. He stopped. He had heard that voice before . . . the wop

the wop (yes! that was it!) . . . *The wop is out in the courtyard . . . under the wrappin' paper!!!*

He ran out into the street and toward home until his side stabbed him.

Bong bong bong bong bong bong belled Saint Prisca above him. He crept into the huge church. Candles were lit on the altar. Saints stood poised magnificently, beautifully, on their niches in the shadowed wall. Fluted gray marble pillars rose up high-high and disappeared in the ceiling that led to Paradise. Behind him, above the balcony, the organ was a pyramid of golden reeds. And up front was Christ nailed fast on thick crossed timber, His live blood pouring against His naked white athletic body.

Here in the church of worship I kneel, my Lord. You have taken dear father away for your own need . . . can you not send him back, O Lord? We love him—we are hungry—we need him. . . . Pleasepleaseplease, dear Jesus, may I not go home and find him seated with the children, and mama placing the hot food and macaroni on the table, and laughter, laughter of all our family, my Lord God and Creator of the earth and skies and all the living? It would be simple for you and I know you want us to be happy and we will adore you and sing your praises every-every minute. . . . Wouldn't it be glorious, O Lord, to bring father right here right now and I'll take him by the hand and up the stairs and knock on the door and then when mama opens the door I'll say mama here's papa—O Lord, don't you see how wonderful—?

A form came slowly and majestically from behind the altar. Through his wet eyes he beheld it approach, and his heart wanted to burst. His fingers tightened into each other and his lips dried. He wanted to go to the form. It came nearer, stopped, and then reached up with a candle-snuffer.

Paul walked out into the aisle, wet his fingers with holy water from the marble bowl, signed the cross, and went wearily down the stone steps.

He sat down on the bottom step and dropped his head on his knees.

The bell of Saint Prisca aloft rang eight.

Tell him I suggested . . . I make donations there . . .

A tall gaunt woman with a sack slung over her shoulders came swiftly along the street. She sighted Paul and stopped.

"Son of Geremio . . . ?"

Paul raised his head.

"Yes, it is you!"

"Dame Katarina . . ."

"Little son, how stung and pale you are. What do you upon church steps?"

"I came to the church to ask . . ."

"Something of Dio?"

"To ask Him to bring back father."

Katarina drew a red bandanna from her dress, blew her nose, made a quick pass at her eyes, put it away, and remained silent for a minute.

"You have not eaten."

"There is nothing at home."

Katarina drew a round loaf of bread from her sack, and from a little soiled bag tied about her neck and hidden between her breasts she took out its contents.

"Take this, O little son. It is all that an old gypsy woman possesses, but would to Dio she could bring this sack full with pure gold to you."

Paul said, "Please, perhaps I do not have to take it from you."

"And why not, boy?"

"I am going to see Father John."

"And the priest will give?"

"When I tell him our need he will help us."

Katarina muttered and then said, "I will wait for you."

Paul got up and walked slowly around the corner to the rectory. He rang the bell and stepped back. The door opened and an old-old face appeared through the half-opened door.

"What do you want?"

"I want to see Father John."

"He is at supper."

"I must see him."

"What about?"

"It's—Oh, I can only tell him."

"Does he expect you?"

"No, but I know he will see me."

"He is at supper. And then he has many duties."

"I cannot leave until I see him."

The door was closing.

"You will have to come back some other time . . .

Next week perhaps, when he is not too busy."

Paul put his hand in the doorway.

"Oh, if you only knew how serious it is . . . !"

The old man hesitated.

"Is some Catholic dying . . . from this parish?"

"No. Father died under a building. We are eight and mother. We need help. We will suffer . . ."

"This is a *church!*"

" . . . That is why I must see Father John."

"You are too young to come here."

"I do not understand."

"Let your mother come . . . next week when the Father is not too busy."

The door was closing.

"I must see him . . ."

"Not tonight!" said the old man.

From behind Paul a voice burst out in furious scathing Italian. The old man tried quickly to close the door but Katarina's long arm pushed the door and sent it wide. The old man doddered. She shook a violent finger in his face and yelled, "Whattsa matta you! Whattsa matta you bastia! Animale vecchia, catch Padre John subito!"

The old man fearfully followed her instruction.

"Antique rotted son of a whore! His decayed stomach is full!"

The old man returned and told Paul to come in.
"G-go, little son. I'll await you," said Katarina.

High severe chambers through tall heavy doors stout walls warmth quiet thick everlasting wood trim smooth crackless plaster lacquered floors soft dark red rugs solid chairs and broad tables church shadow lighting rectory smell of woodwork candle incense and clean clean cleanliness . . . are there ever babies' voices and songs and joy and cries of anguish and tightening stomachs are there—?

"Well . . . why do you insist upon seeing me?"

"Pardon me, Father, but you were suggested—"

And through the great door from which he had come out with napkin around neck of rich black cassock of his round body was a long table reaching away beautifully lit with slim candles throwing warm glow on shiny porcelain plates containing baked potatoes and cuts of brown dripping lamb and fresh peas and platters of hot food cool food hard food soft food . . .

"What?"

Then pink hands placed a wide and high shortcake with big perfect strawberries staining the pure white whipped cream.

"Who suggested what?"

The live red blood pouring from the spike pierced wounds against the naked white flesh.

"Well—why don't you speak?"

Paul began, and spoke with burning weariness.

"Ah—yes, yes," said Father John. "But tell me, what can I do?"

Mother could sit at the head of that wonderful table and hand to Annina and Lucia and Giorgio and Joseph and Adela and Johnny and Geremino the beautiful food and no cold could come through these walls—

"Has your mother applied at the Welfare?"

"They say my father wasn't a citizen."

"No?"

"... No."

body + blood / Christ

"Your mother is entitled to workmen's compensation."

"That's what they say. We got a letter from them."

"Good. So?"

"But it will be a long time before the case comes."

"Has your mother tried to get up a collection among the neighbors?"

But you, *you* have food on that long table, wonderful food and clean white hands picking it and voices speaking low. Who is eating that wonderful food?

Paul could not answer and for a minute they were silent.

"Father . . ."

"Yes?"

"Could you please help us?"

"... How . . .?"

"We need—"

"I have nothing to do with the Charities. There is a board of trustees who confer and pass on every expenditure. Do you understand?"

"... Yes . . ."

Silence.

"... You have a nice little overcoat. Keep you warm?"

"... Yes . . ."

"That's good."

Silence.

A stomach trickles hollowly.

And thin wrists getting thinner.

Then a head in the doorway and a respectful voice:
"Dessert on the table, Father."

Without turning, Father John said, "Cut a good portion of the cake, wrap it nicely and bring it here."

"Yes, Father."

"Do the children like strawberry shortcake?"

"... Yes . . ."

A soft package into his hands from a shiny round face.

"... Thank you . . ."

"God bless you."

Out through tall doors and strong walls.

Will they ever protect me and mine?

The old man closed the street door, surely, firmly.

"So soon, little son?"

"... Yes ..."

"And?"

"... He has no power in Charities. We are Charities. But he was glad that my overcoat keeps me warm ..."

"Blood of the Virgin, did he expect that your little life should go naked!"

"And to me he gave a rich-rich cake ..."

"Man of God?—Man of God? ... bursting gut and sausage-in-mouth!"

She took his hand and put into it the money from the bag.

"We will pray for you, Dame Katarina."

"Pray not for me. Pray for the strength you now need."

"Dame Katarina, tell me, please, to whom shall we turn? What shall I do?"

Said she in strings of plaintive song, "Dear little son, we are the unfortunates under the skies of God. . . . There are none to help—but many to take from us. From the sweat of our blood comes the bread in mouth. Good night, little son, straight-straight your spine with hands into the heavens, and the poor carpenter Christ build strong the bread of your arms."

The kitchen was dark. Paul placed the bread, cake and money on the table, and tiptoed through the flat. The dining room was empty-still, in the bedroom the children were heaped in one bed sleeping the fraught sleep of hunger. In the bed of Geremio and Annunziata in the following room little Johnny slept, one hand clutching empty bottle and one arm above the head of Geremino, and at the parlor window in the April moon's ray sat Annunziata. She was whispering, her eyes half-closed and her right hand extended toward the moon: "In the home of Geremio the air has become hunger. In the home of Geremio stomachs have be-

come wounds. In the home of Geremio senses have become famished mouths. In the home of Geremio hearts have become swollen vessels and eyes ceaseless falls. . . . In the home of Geremio the love of Geremio has become rising mountains."

Mother . . . mother forever.

Annunziata swayed and chanted: "But thine and mine shall not want. My soul shall consume hunger; and my body, their wall against suffering. On hands and knees shall I glean the earth for their food."

She became silent and remained staring up into the moon with unseeing eyes. Paul fell quietly in the corner. The room swooped up, sideways, and then down into darkness.

On the twelfth stroke of Saint Prisca Paul opened his eyes. Annunziata was at the window, still-staring at the moon. He arose jerkily and went to her. He touched her shoulder lightly.

"Geremio!"

He caught her.

"Mamamamamamama—it's me it's me Paul ..."

She held to him with vibrating tautness.

"It's me it's me oh mama it's me!"

Suddenly the veil fell away, reality whirled into focus, and she clasped him, weeping: "Paul little Paul the son of his father Paul Paul ..."

He aided her to bed.

"Sleep mama—do not worry—sleep mama sleep ..."

He removed his clothes and crept in among the five sleeping children. Under cover the sweetish steam of close child-bodies brought him comfort. He arranged his position to fit the gentle tangle of stockinged limbs, snuggled his thin hands between his legs and sighed.

Paul shivered awake. He tried to find a dry spot, but Joie hugging his back had wet his underwear and stockings thoroughly. He lay awake, trying to hold the wet underwear away from his chilled flesh . . . thinking and thinking.