

Mothers

by Luisa Brenta

"I don't see why her husband puts up with her," she said. "She is definitely not a good mother, everybody can see that. I hear she is also not a good cook, and when you know the first thing about men you know that a man's heart is reached through the stomach. No idea why he puts up with her."

She paused, adjusting her wide butt on the bench she was sharing with two more female butts; all three butts waiting for their children to come out of the school building.

Mothers who'd not arrived in time to find a place on the benches, stood leaning against the stone buildings that had been lining the square since the Second Crusade. The buildings were turning red in the slanting afternoon light, and the Roman pebbles on the square ground were turning bluish in return.

"Not a good mother and not a good cook," she repeated, shaking her head. "And it shows in the children: miserably thin, poor things. No substance in their meals, no flesh on their bones. Wonder why Headmaster Paladini insists on calling them athletic? Muscles they have, all right, she lets them run around and mix in all those dangerous sports. Have you seen those knees? Scratches and dirt, every day. No wonder she has to force them into the shower every evening ... Yes, every single evening of the week! I have it from their own neighbor - lives window to window with them. So bad for their poor skin. Too much soap and water."

A pensive pause for the abused children. Three chins nodding deprecation.

"And it is not that she doesn't know how to say no — you know, for too much love, as it may happen with your boys. It's easier to find the strength to keep the girls in line. No, no mother's tenderness: she shows no sign of that ... Do you know that she has them make their own bed? No, not the girl: the boys too! Yes, the boys. She humiliates them. The next thing you know, she will have taught them to cook and to use the washing machine. Mark my words, the minute

they turn eighteen, and they don't need her, they will be out of her house. And that, will teach her."

Three pairs of pursed lips. Severe eyebrows, meditating upon the inevitability of divine justice.

Children finally began pouring out of the school building in chiming waves. She stretched her neck in smiling anticipation, and waved.

One boy, probably ten years old, came running up to her; she stood up and stepped forward to meet him. The boy threw his backpack on the ground and said, "Pick it up, I'm busy", already turning back towards the next children hopping out of the building.

He stopped, however, when he realized his mother had not moved. He looked at her, lips curling.

"Pick it up, you bitch," he said.

She bent, and picked it up.

