

Sample translation from

Charles Lewinsky

His Son

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translated by Ruth Martin, March 2022

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“Climb onto the horse behind me,” said the herald, “and we’ll ride to the king’s court together.”

Old fairy tale

The gravediggers worked slowly. When bread is in short supply, you have to eke out the last bites.

“Just the one body today,” said the old one. “That’s all the sickness is giving us now.”

“The pestilence is coming to an end,” said the young one.

“Let’s hope not,” said the old one.

The dead man was lying on his back. Eyes open. Someone who has woken up in the wrong place. He looked incongruous in St Ouen, where plenty of people had nothing, and many even less. All the other bodies had been half-starved. Not well nourished like the man they were digging a hole for here in the loamy ground. The wrong body for a pauper’s grave. A man with food doesn’t die alone. A laden table soon attracts company.

The fact that his body had been found in the street didn’t prove the opposite, either. Nor that he had been naked. People had helped themselves from him. That was only sensible. Silks and satins aren’t going to make a dead man well again.

“People like him,” the old gravedigger said, “are usually delivered in coffins.”

“He takes up less space naked,” said the young one.

“True enough,” said the old one.

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The handles of the shovels cold in their hands. Winter was creeping into the town just as the cholera had crept in. Only freezing to death took longer.

A nip of rotgut would have warmed them up now, but they'd drunk the last of it the day before. They had no more tobacco, either. There was no money until the grave had been filled in.

“Do we need to wait for the priest?” the young one asked.

He got no answer. Hadn't expected one, either. A graveside prayer cost a franc. Two kilos of bread. The dead man had no money, unless it was hidden between his arse cheeks.

As was their custom, they leaned on their shovels and invented a life for him before hauling him over to the grave. Whoever came up with the better story got to lift the body under the arms. The loser had to take the legs.

“You start,” said the old one. “I went first yesterday.”

“And then it was my turn,” said the young one, “and then you again and me again and you again and me again.”

“Six bodies,” said the old one. “That was a good day.”

“It's not midday yet,” said the young one.

The little bell rang out from the chapel.

“You see,” said the young one, “there's another.”

“Not for us,” said the old one. “Bell-ringing costs money, too.”

The white clouds of their breath rose vertically into the sky. At least there was no wind.

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“I’m actually a pastry maker, you know,” said the old one.

“And I’m actually Napoleon,” said the young one. “Come on, start.”

“Forty years old.”

“More.”

“It’s deceptive,” said the old one. “The pestilence ages people’s faces. Your turn.”

“Married. Two children.”

“And dies alone?”

“The sickness carried them off before him.”

When the old man laughed, it made him cough. He hawked up yellow phlegm. “One point to you.”

“Your turn.”

“Cloth merchant. Takes breakfast in bed and dines at the Procope.”

“What brings a man like that to St. Ouen?”

“The brothels are cheaper here.”

The young one tapped the body with the toe of his boot. “He’s only got two fingers on his right hand. Must have perjured himself.”

“If that made your fingers fall off,” the old one said, “the streets would be littered with them.”

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It began to snow, and then their game was no fun any more. They dropped the dead man into the hole. Filled it in without having decided what kind of life he might have led.

The woman screamed.

“Don’t let that put you off, gentlemen,” said Professor Moscati.

Like a sow at the butcher’s.

“A doctor must never allow himself to be distracted,” said Professor Moscati.

“Never get distracted,” the new student noted.

His pencil fell to the floor. Someone had shoved him aside. The people who stood at the front were the ones the professor noticed.

With the woman’s every scream, the curtain rippled in front of her face.

“The curtain is important,” he had been taught. “Even on the birthing stool, a woman’s natural feminine modesty should not be violated.”

Mulieris pudor.

“You and you!” the professor said. The two students he had selected stepped forward. One of them with his raised arm bent, as if he were about to ask the professor to dance. But he was just the coat rack for Moscati’s frock coat. The other student’s outstretched hand awaited his signet ring.

A good thing he didn’t pick me, thought the new student. I wouldn’t have known what was expected.

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“The most important sense for an accoucheur?” Moscati asked. Those students who had attended a birth before chorused: “the sense of touch.”

When the professor put his hand into the woman’s vagina, she began to scream again.

The midwife took a step closer to the birthing stool. Then retreated again. When the professor was teaching, she wasn’t to interfere.

Moscati’s eyes were closed. “Interesting,” he said.

The new student imagined the professor’s fingers moving inside the woman. I don’t know if I could do that, he thought.

“You!” Moscati called another student over to him with a jerk of his head. The one who had wanted to stand in the front row.

“Please.” As if he were holding a door open for him.

Now the student had his hand inside the birthing woman.

“What do you find?”

“It’s difficult, Herr Professor.”

“If it were not, we would have left the case to the midwife. Out!”

The new student had been advised to bring a large handkerchief to this lecture. Now he knew why. If the professor called on you, you would need it for your hands afterwards.

Three more students had their turn. None came up with an answer that Moscati wanted to hear. Meanwhile, the woman was crying out more faintly.

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“The baby’s body has twisted round to face the os sacrum. Which of you is confident he can turn the unborn child so that it may be born head first?”

The students, even the experienced ones, avoided his gaze.

“I’m glad none of you spoke up. The best that can be achieved is a breech birth. And it needs to progress quickly. Why?”

The midwife, whom no one had expected to speak up, knew the answer. “Because the umbilical cord can be trapped between the unborn head and the pelvic wall.”

“What a shame that women can’t become doctors,” said Moscati. “You seem to be the only thinking person in this auditorium.”

The woman on the birthing stool tried to say something. But the professor was in full flow now, and would not be interrupted.

“There is a second reason that a breech birth requires a deal of urgency. A half-born child can sometimes start breathing in the pelvic cavity, and inhale vaginal mucus and blood, which can lead to death *per suffocationem*.”

I need to take notes, the new student thought. But his pencil had vanished.

“Pay close attention!” Moscati rolled his sleeve up even further. His arm – the new student could not have imagined such a thing – disappeared into the screaming woman to above the elbow.

“The child is still alive,” the professor said. “I can feel the umbilical cord pulsing.”

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It was a good thing that everyone was now pressing forward. It meant the new student could lean unobtrusively against the wall and take some deep breaths. He only opened his eyes again when he heard the applause.

The child was alive.

As Professor Moscati dried his hands, he bowed like an actor.

She was simply too good, thought the mother superior. Allowed people to talk her into things, even though she knew it would be nothing but trouble.

This young woman standing in front of her...

This girl...

“Remind me of your name?”

“Innocentia, Reverend Mother.”

They should send her back to the village for that name alone. Not yet seventeen years old, and a mother already. Without the sacrament of marriage, needless to say. But: Innocentia. No point asking about the father. “It might be the stable boy,” she would say. “Or the pedlar with the lovely brown eyes. I had no money for the dark red ribbon,” she would say, “and I so longed to have it.”
Virginity thrown away like a fingernail clipping.

The child stillborn. *Deo gratias*. There were too many of them.

“Show me your breasts,” said the mother superior.

She would never grow accustomed to the smell of unwashed bodies. There were wells in the village. Water cost nothing.

Unsuitable. The other points – scabies, scrofula and so on – she didn’t even need to check. A glance sufficed.

You can powder away smallpox scars, thought the mother superior. Comb your hair over a bald patch. But breasts are what they are.

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Honest. Perhaps that was why it was a sin to expose them. Over the years she had learned to read their shapes, the way a cattle trader learns to read udders. Good milk, bad milk. These ones were slack. Too small. Nipples that seemed to be hiding. They wouldn't be worth milking.

The breastfeeding Mother of God in the old painting, thought the mother superior – *Maria lactans* – had breasts that were painted all wrong. And the way she was holding the baby... no newborn would feed like that.

The applicant was about to pull up her shirt. A look was enough to make her lower her arms. At least she had learned obedience.

The mother superior was too good, and let people to talk her into things.

Giuseppa had recommended the girl. From the same village. "You would be doing a good deed," she had said. For whom? Not for the baby, who would starve suckling at such breasts.

Giuseppa – now, she was a good wetnurse. Stupid as a stick of wood and so ugly that it made you wonder how she kept finding someone to make her pregnant. But here she was for the third time now, and her children thrived. Her own and the others.

Every other job, you can learn, thought the mother superior. Seamstress. Cook. Milkmaid. But you must be born to be a wetnurse.

And to be a nun, she added. Her own thoughts made her smile.

The young woman smiled shyly back at her. Bad teeth, which also spoke against her. Giuseppa had a set of teeth like a horse.

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“You may get dressed. Wait outside. I need to discuss it.”

There was nothing she needed to discuss.

No one told her what to do here at the Martinitt, and certainly not this Austrian privy councillor. Scarcely a word of Italian, and still they had sent him to Milan. Ah well, he wasn't really making a nuisance of himself. You just had to let him believe he had the final say. When he'd wanted to hang the picture of the old empress in the dormitory, she had disagreed, just so that she could then let him win the argument. Maria Theresa was right for an orphanage. Sixteen children. It wasn't a nice story, that business in France with Marie Antoinette.

The mother superior had more than fifty children in her care. One more or less made no difference when it came to the older ones. You just made the portions a little smaller. But the babies had to be breastfed. And there was another arriving today, so the privy councillor's message informed her. With no warning. From one day to the next.

“Costs paid in advance,” he had said. “For the whole eighteen years.” No disagreement had been possible.

“You will find a way,” he had said. As if wetnurses grew on trees.

Giuseppa, Chiara, Emilia.

Innocentia?

They would have to change her name. Maria Magdalena, perhaps. A sinner's name for a sinner.

A wetnurse with empty breasts.

On the other hand...

“Louis Chabos,” the note said. A French brat. His mother had marked him out for the orphanage even before he was born. Or his father had.

Paid in advance for eighteen years. If a child like that were to die, it wouldn't do the orphanage any harm. There was that, at least.

Forgive us our trespasses, thought the mother superior. One had to see the overall picture; that was her responsibility. If you want to win a battle, you cannot mourn every soldier.

“Just this once,” she would say. “Out of Christian charity. But for heaven's sake, do have a wash!”

The tallest and strongest boys in each age group were called the Giuseppini. No one in the orphanage recalled how this name had come about. The most senior of these boys was named Leandro. He was a head taller than the others, and so he got to be in charge.

Today, he had decided that after lunch, there was to be a battle. French against Austrians. He himself would lead the French. And with that, the outcome of the battle was decided. No one wanted to be an Austrian. But the Giuseppini made sure there were enough opponents for them to beat up.

Louis Chabos, the smallest of the six-year-olds, was assigned to the Austrians. They were given a five-minute head start to entrench themselves. It was hard to find a hiding place that not everyone knew about. The grounds of the Martinitt were small. If you were caught outside them, a nun would take you to the mother superior, and you'd have to lie across the chair.

They pulled him out from behind the woodpile by the legs. To their disappointment, he didn't defend himself. But at least they could take him captive and bring him to Leandro, who had his headquarters on an empty barrel. A general has to have an overview of the battlefield.

"Why aren't you fighting?" said Leandro.

Louis said: "It isn't fair that I have to be an Austrian. I'm French."

"You are what I say you are," said Leandro.

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“In real life, I mean.” When you have to look up at someone from below, it takes even more courage to answer back.

“In real life, you’re a frog.”

When Napoleon makes a joke, his soldiers laugh.

“My name is Chabos,” said Louis. “It’s a French name.”

“Oh, I *am* sorry,” said Leandro. His soldiers recognised that tone. Knew that they would soon have even more to laugh about.

“Of course, that changes everything,” said Leandro. Sweet as sugar. “Go on then, say something in French.”

“I can’t.”

“You don’t speak French?” Leandro asked. With exaggerated surprise. “Not a single word?”

Louis shook his head.

“Then you’re not a proper Frenchman. And a false Frenchman on the battlefield can be only one thing. Can’t he?”

“A frog?” Louis asked in a thin voice. The boys who were holding him fast laughed again, but Leandro hushed them with a wave of his hand. The general decides when his soldiers should be merry.

“You’re a spy,” said Leandro. “And spies have to be punished.”

He had introduced the custom that the victorious general got to name the battle he had won. This one was to be called Marengo, that had been his plan. But the battle hadn’t been glorious enough for such a fine name.

Until now.

“You and you,” Leandro said to the pair who had brought Louis to him, “you get a medal for your vigilance.” He pinned the medals that didn’t exist to the uniforms they weren’t wearing.

“Search him for weapons,” he commanded them.

The soldiers were thorough in their work and didn’t understand why the general was dissatisfied with them. Louis’ pockets really were empty.

“Spies are cunning,” said Bonaparte. “Obviously his weapons are invisible.”

This time they found a pistol, a rifle and a bomb.

“I knew it,” said Leandro. He had his soldiers form an infantry square. He knew these military expressions, or invented them as they were needed. The Austrians were allowed to line up with them, as well. A victorious commander can afford to be generous.

He didn’t hit Louis himself. He left that to the younger Giuseppini.

“Ten blows,” he said. “That’s the right number for a spy.”

After the fourth, Louis started to cry, and they had to start counting again from one.

Dottore Mauro was a teacher and he explained the rules of grammar to them. But first and foremost he was an author. Had written many books. If you asked him about them, he would forget what he had been meaning to teach and start telling stories. About how the other writers had conspired against him. And that was the only reason his works were not better known. About how he had once had a book printed at his own expense, but no one had bought it. The conspiracy was behind that, too.

While he was telling these stories, you could be thinking about other things or chatting amongst yourselves. Only Louis Chabos listened attentively. He was the only one who noticed that on one occasion, Dottore Mauro said he'd written six books, and a few weeks later it was eight. He must work very hard, Louis thought.

If you wanted to keep Mauro from teaching, you could ask him to read one of his stories aloud. He was convinced that they would be more use to the orphans than spelling or the genealogy of the Sforza. If you expressed particular gratitude after one of these stories, he would read you another.

One was about an orphan boy who had been given a very raw deal in life. First his father died, then his mother, he had no other relatives, and there was no orphanage in the village where he lived. "You're lucky you got to come here to the Martinitt," said Mauro.

The orphan boy was hungry; he slept on hard stones and had given up all hope. But then one day a herald came riding by; he had been sent by the king to look for a little boy with a birthmark in the

shape of a star on his chest. The orphan boy had just such a birthmark. And it turned out that in reality, he was the king's son. Some gypsies had stolen him from his cradle years before. The herald sat the boy behind him on his horse and rode back to the castle with him. There he was received with great delight, married a beautiful princess and later took the throne to become king himself.

“What can we learn from this?” Dottore Mauro asked. You did not have to answer these questions. He liked to explain the moral of his stories himself.

“We can never know what heaven has in store for us,” he said.

“That is the deeper meaning of my story. The Lord moves in mysterious ways. He can raise up even the lowliest among us, if it pleases Him. His herald can come to you any day, too. Perhaps there is a king's son sitting with us in this very room, and we just don't know it.”

It was important not to laugh when he said these things. Otherwise he would ask tricky grammatical questions, and whack your fingers with a ruler.

“Any one of you could be this king's son,” said Dottore Mauro.

“Maybe...” Just as the herald in the story had done, he let his eyes roam over the boys. Then he smiled and said: “Maybe even our little Louis Chabos.”

Now the boys could laugh. Not at the story, but at the idea that Louis Chabos might be a king's son. That he would marry a princess and sit on a throne.

Louis laughed with them. That seemed the safest thing to do.

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After the lesson, Leandro bowed low before little Louis. All the others bent their backs along with him.

“If I might beg your majesty for a favour,” said Leandro, “please, sir, show us your birthmark.”

“I don’t have one,” said Louis.

“Are we not noble enough to see it?” Leandro asked.

“I really don’t have a birthmark.”

“We’ll need to check for ourselves,” said Leandro.

His fellow pupils all checked that there was no star-shaped birthmark on Louis’ chest. They also pulled his trousers down, in case the sign of his true parentage had slipped to another part of him.

“That sort of thing can happen, you know,” said Leandro.

But there was no birthmark, not on Louis’ belly and not on his backside. Leandro even stuck a pencil between his buttocks to push them apart, just to make absolutely sure.

“It’s always possible,” he said.

When Sister Constantia arrived for the next lesson, Louis Chabos was lying stark naked on the teacher’s desk. They had no idea why he had taken his clothes off, his fellow pupils told her.

For this tasteless prank he was sent to the mother superior and had to lie across her chair.

On your twelfth birthday, you were sent to the room everyone was afraid of, because boys usually only entered it for punishment. You put on your best trousers for the occasion, if you had best trousers. Scrubbed your hands with a pumice stone. Then you stood before the mother superior and she would inform you what trade you would take up. “You are not a child any more,” was always the first thing she said. In the orphanage, they called this date the “not-a-child-any-more day”.

“You are not a child any more,” she said to Louis Chabos.

Before a boy’s twelfth birthday, his friends would place bets. To win an apple or the Sunday dessert. “I’m sure you’re going to be this,” or “you’re going to be that,” they would say. No one had bet on Louis. For that, you had to have friends.

The Giuseppini and the other big, strong boys became bricklayers or carpenters. Jobs for men who drank wine and spat in front of strangers’ feet on the street. If you were clever with your hands, you learned to work a needle and thread. Jacopo, who always came last in races, now worked in the kitchen. He was known as “the barrel” because he was the only one who had managed to grow fat despite the meagre orphanage food.

“I have thought especially hard about your future,” said the mother superior. She said that to everyone. She didn’t realise that word of this habit had spread around the orphanage as well.

“Thank you,” said Louis. He had learned that he couldn’t go wrong with this response.

A little voice like an eight-year-old, the mother superior thought. Is he really twelve already?

But the papers were very clear. Chabos, Louis. Sixteenth of December 1794. Time passes too quickly, she thought. Wasn't sure if she had said that out loud. Cleared her throat just in case.

The boy flinched. Jumpy, thought the mother superior. Fearful. Even the way he's standing. As if he wants to duck away from the world.

"Every person," she said, "has some God-given talent in life. And so do you."

"Thank you," said Louis.

"Some people are strong, others clever. You are..." She had never noticed any special aptitude in little Chabos. But it would have been unchristian to disappoint a boy whom she was now setting on a path through life. "You are so wonderfully modest," she said.

"Thank you," said Louis.

"Modesty is a rare virtue. And so..."

She had managed to think of a job for all the others in time. Had imagined the boy holding a blacksmith's hammer. Or a carter's whip. It hadn't usually taken a great deal of consideration. Special talents were rare. She had overlooked this Louis. There was too much she had to think about.

I'm getting old, she thought. Pushed the thought away.

Little Chabos...

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She hadn't expected him to survive beyond his first birthday. That wetnurse... What was her name again? That Maria Magdalena... Innocentia... Blue milk, you could tell just by looking at her. As unhealthy as her character. And then she had disappeared overnight. Flitted with a Sicilian who had called the dances at the Sankt Bartolomeo fair. Dancing, my God. On the feast day of an apostle. A martyr. There shouldn't have been any fair allowed on such days, that had always been her view. Ran off, just like that. But the boy would have stayed sickly either way.

“And so...” she said a second time.

The money for his board paid in advance for eighteen years, his papers said. By an unnamed benefactor.

Louis Chabos... A French name. Back then, no one could have imagined that one day the French would be in Milan... Turning the orphanage into a hospital for soldiers. But not touching the institution itself, at least. And in fact it was very useful to be in the middle of the city now...

I used to be able to concentrate better, she thought.

Pull yourself together, she thought. Little Louis needs a job.

“And so...” said the mother superior.

If you repeat a sentence three times, a preacher had once taught her, your listeners won't notice you are only playing for thinking time.

It wasn't entirely her fault if she kept getting distracted. It was the boy's fault. You could forget him while he was still standing in front of you. Made himself smaller than he already was. As if he were trying to become invisible.

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Afterwards, she couldn't have said why she thought of the
marchese just then.

The oldest man Louis Chabos had ever seen. Skin like cracked leather. His sparse hair discoloured and yellowish. The backs of his hands covered in dark brown spots. But he stood straight-backed. Like a soldier. As if a soldier was what he had once been.

“How old are you?” the marchese asked him.

“Twelve,” said Louis Chabos.

“Speak up!” said the marchese. “To do otherwise is impolite. Take note of that. Again: how old are you?”

“Twelve.”

“My Lord Marchese,” said the marchese. He banged the end of his walking cane on the floor. You could tell he was an impatient man. The stick was of black wood. The knob silver. Like the cross that the mother superior wore around her neck.

“I am twelve years old, My Lord Marchese. Today.”

“It’s your birthday?”

“I’m not a child any more.”

The marchese made a sound that might have been a laugh. “The head nun has lost no time,” he said. “When I wish for something, she fulfils that wish. Tell me why!”

“I don’t know, My Lord Marchese.”

“Do you know what a will is?”

“Not really, My Lord Marchese.”

“If, on your way back to the Martinitt today, you are run over by a coach, and killed, who will get your toys?”

“I don’t have any toys,” said Louis Chabos.

“I used to have a whole room full of them,” said the marchese. “I had everything. Now all that’s left is this palazzo. Not in the best condition. I took a piece of paper and wrote on it: ‘After my death, the orphanage is to receive my property.’ That is what you call a will. You can change it at any time. And so the mother superior fulfils my every wish. Do you understand?”

“Not completely, My Lord Marchese.”

“You have a lot to learn. I might find it diverting to teach you.” When the old man nodded, he looked like a pecking bird. “Let’s start at the beginning: what are you good at?”

“Nothing,” said Louis Chabos.

“Well, that is useful,” said the marchese. “A blank sheet is easier to write on. Fetch me a book!”

There were a great many books in the large bookcase.

“Any one will do.”

Keen to show his eagerness to serve, Louis chose a particularly large volume.

“There. On the table.”

Dust rose from the book as he laid it down.

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“Ah, there’s your first job,” the marchese said. “To clean each individual book.” He flipped open the book’s cover. Pointed to two words that were printed in large letters. “Can you read that?”

“IMAGO MUNDI,” Louis spelled out.

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know, My Lord Marchese.”

“The image of the world. Maps of foreign lands. Do you know what the globe is?”

“No, My Lord Marchese.”

“No one does. They all just think they do. But no one can see further than the next church tower. The next mountain. You set off, and when you arrive, there is just another church tower. Another mountain.” The marchese had closed his eyes. As if he were talking to himself. “Eventually,” he said, “eventually you arrive back where you started from. The same city. The same palazzo. The same room. You take from the shelves the books that you have always taken from the shelves, and you still find the same wisdom in them – only the books have grown heavier. Because you yourself have grown weaker. You open them and think: there wasn’t so much dust here before. That is the only thing that changes. The globe is merely a promise. Do you understand what I am trying to tell you?”

“No, My Lord Marchese.”

“Good,” said the marchese. “I don’t understand it myself.” He opened his eyes and slammed the book shut with such force that it

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sounded like a gunshot. “Do you know why the mother superior has sent you to me?”

“Because I am to learn a trade.”

“The mother superior visits me every few months,” the marchese said, “to make sure I haven’t changed my will. Last time, we spoke about how I can no longer afford servants. No coachman and no housekeeper. I have only this woman who comes every afternoon and cooks for me. Do you know now which trade I shall teach you, Louis Chabos?”