

MILLE GORI
THE GIRLS FROM STAR VALLEY
and the old letters

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South-east of the Milky Way, far from the motorway, between two mountains in an area of forest and flower-filled fields, lies a small valley. This place is known as Star Valley and it is by all accounts the place in the world where you can see the most shooting stars in the sky at the same time.

In the valley there are families, as there are in all the other towns around the world, and there is a school, a kindergarden, a grocery store, a football pitch and a pet store. And then there is an observatory called Stella Nova.

Stella Nova means “new star”, and the place is named after the star that the famous astronomer, Tycho Brahe, discovered in 1572 in the constellation of Cassiopeia. On top of the actual building, you will find one of the world’s largest star telescopes. People have been looking through it at stars and planets for hundreds of years and, in this way, they have found out how our solar system works. They have also discovered that our big, splendid Earth is actually only a small dot in the vastness of the universe. Our universe consists of planets, moons, stars and galaxies. There are billions of solar systems in our galaxy and

one of them is our very own. There are eight planets in our solar system and Earth, the one we call our world, is one of them. And *as far as we know*, Earth is the only planet where there is life.

Star Valley is said to be the place in the world where most stars have been found in the sky. Some people even claim that all the most talented stargazers throughout time have at some point visited Star Valley.

There is an old myth saying that all shooting stars land in Star Valley after their long journey across the sky and, if you are lucky, you may be able to find one. If you do, a special wish will come true, but only if you put your arms around the shooting star while you wish and never say it out loud.

People therefore also believe that those who live in Star Valley must in some way or another be great-great-great-great-great-grandchildren of a star. And it is said that if you are the child of a star, the moon will always show you the way back to Star Valley, even if you were to get lost in the dark.

CHAPTER 1

There is dust. Even the slightest movement creates small clouds of dust that, like little grey mice, swirl around on the creaking floor and just as quickly disappear into a corner again. Birds can be heard singing through the roof tiles and in a few places the sun penetrates the leaky roof and lands like small stripes on the floor in front of the girls.

"I've found a treasure trove," yells Nete, so loudly that Nola gets a shock. One of her legs slips and she falls backwards onto her bum from the unstable stool she had put in place to reach a dusty doll.

"Ow! For Pete's sake! Why do you have to shout so loud?"

Nola doesn't get to say anything else before the doll she was trying to reach hits her right on the head. It hurts, but when the cloud of dust from the doll has settled and the girls can see each other again, they both break out in loud, almost identical, laughter, and suddenly the dark attic space seems less scary.

Nete and Nola are twins, and even though on paper it looks like there is a year between them, it is in fact only a matter of a few minutes. They came into the world on a starry night almost eight years ago. Nete was born on the last day of the year, at 23.56 precisely, four minutes to midnight. Nola, on the other hand, was born on the first day of the new year, at 00.04 precisely, four minutes past midnight.

As at birth, Nete is the faster of the two. She rarely thinks before she speaks and has never turned down a challenge, which her collection of old plaster casts is good evidence of. And then she's as cunning as a fox. Nola, on the other hand, is thoughtful. She is careful and slow – extremely slow if you ask Nete. She is gentle and loving and, unlike Nete, has a patience that has taught her both to stand on her hands and to play the piano.

"What's this treasure trove you've found," grins Nola, brushing the dust off her nose.

There is rather little light in the attic, but with the help of the sunrays streaming through the room's only window and the small stripes of light on the floor, Nola can just about make out Nete standing in the furthest corner next to a large, old suitcase.

"I don't know yet, but I think this looks like a treasure chest," says Nete with a smile.

"I think it looks more like a suitcase," mumbles Nola as she gets closer.

The large suitcase, like everything else in the attic, is covered in dust. It is closed with two large metal hinges and, through the dust, you can make out a myriad of stickers and old stamps.

“What if it’s full of gold coins and large diamonds the same colour as our eyes?” exclaims Nete dreamily and blinks her eyes in a ray of sunshine to remind Nola of their green colour.

Their mother says that they got the emerald green eyes from their grandfather, which Nola has always found incredibly sad – fancy that he has had to do without his eyes up in the sky in order for them to be able to see down here on Earth. And how did he actually have four eyes that he could just, like, give away when everyone else only has two? But Mum doesn’t think that Granddad misses his eyes; she says that inheriting something isn’t the same as losing something. That explanation doesn’t make any difference to Nola – she still thinks it is a pity, but imagines that Granddad has got four stars as eyes instead, and she is sure he is sitting somewhere up there blinking down at them.

“I hope it’s full of shooting stars, so we can wish for a lot of things, both green diamonds, a new swing in the garden – and Mum could have her wish for peace in the world fulfilled,” continues Nola.

As if they had the same thought at the same time, both girls quickly reach out for each their metal hinge. They push and press, but it still doesn’t help a bit – the lid is as if glued on. The girls are just about to try again when Nola grabs Nete’s hand.

“Shush, someone’s coming.”

The large front door opens. Both girls sit completely still in the attic. No one needs to remind them again that the old house at the end of Moon Road is a forbidden area. Their mother has told them ten thousand times, and perhaps it is exactly the mystery and the prohibition surrounding the house that attracts the girls, as if they were equipped with magnets.

The now faded, purple house with the green shutters has been empty for as long as the girls can remember. Grass, dandelions and bramble have long since taken over the garden; only the narrow, stone-paved path up to the front door is still accessible. Only now, following the mayor’s desire for urban renewal, has it been put up for sale.

The girls can hear the salesman saying the same thing he has already said to the first hundred potential buyers who have been to look at the house.

“The previous owner died almost 10 years ago, so the house needs some TLC, but the location is fantastic.”

The girls look at each other and start counting down. Exactly one minute and twenty seconds later, the front door closes and another sale has gone down the drain. No one wants to buy the house; it is too big a task, and even though the salesman says the location is fantastic, the girls know as well as the potential buyers that he is lying.

“That was a new record,” exclaims Nola. “At least those who looked last week reached the first floor before leaving.”

The house has two floors, a basement and an attic. It’s not until now that the girls have investigated the attic. They spent many months at first exploring the ground floor and the first floor. No one has been interested in the house until now, and the previous owner clearly had no family to come and empty the house after her death, so everything has been left as it was when it was abandoned, except for the water damage in the basement, the broken windows in the living room and the two pigeons, which have moved into the chandelier above the dining table. The years have left their mark and the dust has made its entrance, but that doesn’t bother the girls. They think the place is magical and adventurous, both with and without the cobwebs and the fast-growing hollyhocks in the door frame.

The house exudes history. In the living room especially, you can still sense that the previous owner was a woman with a sense for details – with small knick-knacks and the fine composition of pastel colours. The now dusty furniture is covered with colourful floral prints, and the peeling, pink wall at the end of the living room is filled with gilded frames containing now faded black-and-white photographs from a lifetime. The girls haven’t yet gone close enough to be able to see the motifs in the faded pictures, as over time the frames have become a family collective and habitat for spiders which have been allowed to grow so large that Nete has no doubt at all that the spiders would win in close combat if it were to come to that.

The wardrobe has been the girls’ favourite place. Hanger after hanger is hung with dresses and robes covered in sparkling stones and sequins, and although both the dresses and the shoes in the room are several sizes too large, the girls have tried everything on at least a hundred times.

Silence has settled over the house again, and just as before, both girls synchronously reach out without a word for the hinges on the large suitcase.

“I’ll count to three, then we press in and push up at the same time,” Nete commands in a whisper. “One, two, three.”

The girls struggle and wrestle, but the suitcase remains closed.

“What a mean pirate to leave a treasure trove and glue the lid on,” grumbles Nete, slowly letting her back slide wearily down the suitcase, until her bum hits the floor.

“I don’t think it’s glued; I think it’s locked,” continues Nola with more patience.

“Then my vote is that we go home and get the extra key. Mum says it fits all doors.”

Nete almost flies up and is already heading for the stairs, when Nola calmly answers, rolling her eyes to the sky, “Yes, all the doors in OUR house, you dingbat.”

Nete’s slide with her back down the suitcase and her sudden movement to stand up has removed all the dust in a long strip from the lid and all the way down to the floor on the side of the suitcase, which now reveals both its true dark blue colour and stickers, but also a bit of handwritten text.

“There’s something written on the suitcase,” exclaims Nola with joy in her voice, as if she had found the treasure itself.

The text on the old suitcase has worn out after many years in the attic, and after Nete’s back has been like an eraser on it, the top layer of the thin pencil line has now gone, making it even more indistinct to read.

“*The stories and enemies in this suitcase are ridden...*” Nete reads, looking at Nola and exclaiming: “Whoa! This is getting dangerous. His enemies are inside.”

“I don’t think that’s what it says,” replies Nola, pushing Nete away.

“*The stories and memories in this suitcase are hidden in the hope that one day they will find their way to my beloved daughter,*” reads Nola, concentrating for all her worth.

“I knew it – it *is* a treasure trove,” rejoices Nete, slapping both hands on the lid of the suitcase in pure excitement, making a huge cloud of dust rise and fill almost the entire room with a grey, gritty layer of air.

Without being able to see more than a metre in front of them and with their hands in front of their mouths and eyes, both girls hear a sound – a delicate little click, almost like the sound of a seat belt being released. Like at a magic show, where the magician always disappears or transforms things hidden by a large cloud of smoke, the same thing has happened now. Hidden behind a cloud of dust, the suitcase’s two metal hinges have magically sprung open after Nete’s blows. In pure happiness and eagerness to finally be able to get their hands on the newly discovered treasure trove, Nete is the first to jump forward and rip the lid up.

“It’s the worst treasure trove in the world,” she sighs, displeased when she has briefly looked at the contents of the suitcase. “It’s just full of paper and old cloth,” she continues, slamming the lid shut again before Nola even has time to look.

As with so many times previously, Nola looks at things more adventurously and opens the suitcase again with careful hands.

"Maybe it's a *hidden* treasure, or maybe there's a treasure map hiding somewhere down there," she smiles, studying the contents of the suitcase with excitement in her voice.

The suitcase does indeed contain some simple pieces of clothing, a teddy bear and a pile of black-and-white photographs that have become yellower with age and in which it is almost impossible to see what is represented. On top are some old letters. They are tied together in small, tidy piles with silk ribbon. All the stamps and envelopes are different; the only thing they have in common is the red stamp on the front: "*Return to sender*". After only a year of English in school, Nola decides that it means "sent home". She grabs the letter on top of the pile and begins to read it out loud.

Dear Luna

I hope one day you will forgive me. I did it out of love. In order for you to understand who I am and why I did as I did, I need to tell my story from the beginning.

I never knew my father, and my mother died when I was born. So the only "mother" I have ever had is Maria. My Maria. She was my mother's sister and, like my mother, she was a world-renowned circus artiste. She raised me and taught me to be a travelling artiste. She herself stopped travelling with the circus when I became old enough to travel on my own. During those years in the circus until I gave birth to you, dear Luna, I didn't see her, but we wrote letters to each other. You will find many of the old letters I sent to her in this suitcase. They tell my story.

Along with the circus, I travelled the world hoping that one day I would find my place. The only memory I have of my father is a necklace with a small, black stone and Maria telling me that I was born in a pink house overlooking the sea. She has told me that I came into the world when the moon was highest in the sky and the stars were hanging so close to the Earth that my mother caught one of them. Just like the night you came into the world.

You came into the world in a cloud of love and chaos. I fell in love with your father the first time I saw him. He was handsome and clever and worked with lions. He came from an artiste family, just like myself, and we understood each other, your father and I. Unfortunately, fate would have it that shortly before I met your father, I had been forced to marry the terrible circus director from the circus I had been travelling around with. He had been in love with me for a long time and threatened that my life as a circus artiste would end forever if I didn't say yes to his offer of marriage. It was never my own wish, but I didn't feel

I had any other choice. The meeting with your father was therefore doomed to be impossible right from the start.

But we were in love, and on a hot summer night when everyone was asleep, we ran away together, hand in hand, your father and I. I got pregnant and for the first time in my life I was happy. But the past caught up with us, and shortly after you came into the world, the circus director found us and demanded that I return to his circus immediately.

I don't remember everything from that evening, which suddenly turned into shouting, screaming and chaos. But I never saw your father again and I was forced to go back to the circus.

I was threatened into giving you away the next morning, and from that day on, it felt like I was missing a piece of my heart. It all happened so fast and my happiness turned into misery. I did the best I could, in the short time I had, to find you the best family.

And that's how our story together ends. I had to leave you wrapped in a blanket on the steps in front of the house belonging to those people you call Mum and Dad today. I can well understand it if you don't have any desire to ever see me again, but you should know that I love you and not a day has gone by when I haven't thought of you.

I have finally found my home; happiness smiled on me one night and the moon showed me to Star Valley. I've seen most of the world, but only when I got to this valley did I suddenly understand it all. I'm waiting here, waiting for my greatest wish to come true. To see you.

But my time is short and my health isn't what it was, so dear Luna, you should know that you were a wanted child. If fate doesn't want us to meet, do not despair, my child. I've just gone ahead and flown up into the sky on my invisible wings and become a star. Every time you look up, I will shine for you and do my best to be the guiding star I could never be for you on this Earth.

This suitcase has travelled with me around the world, and in it you will find letters and memories and the only picture I ever had of your father and me, just a few weeks before you came into the world.

My name is Leona, named after my great-grandmother. I am your mother and I love you to the moon and back.

"Wow, it sounds almost like a fairy tale, just without the ending of living happily ever after. Do you think it's true?" exclaims Nete, almost before Nola has read the last word in the letter.

“Yes,” answers Nola convincingly and continues: “I think this suitcase belonged to a real circus princess.”