

# To the Heights

*A Novel Based on the Life of  
Saint Pier Giorgio Frassati*

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# A Rose in Return

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Antonio cupped his two hands together, locking them with his knuckles.

“Place your foot here, Paolo, and I’ll lift you up.”

“How will you get out with no one to lift *you* up?” the younger boy asked.

“I’m tall enough to reach the ledge and pull myself up. I’ll be right behind you.”

“Are you sure we should do this? We could get in trouble.”

“We convinced Mother Vanzetti we were sick with our coughing. You heard her; she told us to stay in bed and not get out for the rest of the day, so that we don’t get the others sick. She won’t come down to check on us, I promise. And anyway, it’s worth the risk. Think of all the times he came to visit us. Now, we’ll repay him with a visit.”

“But he has died. How will he know?”

“Trust me, Paolo, he’ll know we’re there.”

Paolo glanced up at the window. It led out of the basement of the Provincial Institute for Children and came out at the curb of Corso Giovanni Lanza. He heard

the swooshing of cars driving by.

“Is it locked?”

“No, just flip the latch and it will pop open. You already asked this. Stop with all your reasons to not do this.”

Paolo took a deep breath and placed his bare foot inside Antonio’s hands. His older friend lifted and balanced him before the window, long enough for him to flip the latch. He pushed it open and squeezed his body through the narrow, rectangular window, climbing out onto the bustling street. A moment later, Paolo saw Antonio’s hands clasp the edge of the windowsill. He grunted as he struggled to pull himself up, scratching his feet against the inside wall to gain leverage. When Antonio had joined Paolo on the street, they smiled and snuck off around the corner of the block.

The closer they got to the Church of La Crocetta, the thicker the crowd grew. They appeared unassumingly from each alley that formed the gridded blocks of the city, gathering like a flock of birds from the wooded forests for their winter migration. The church acted as a magnet, drawing in the crowds from all over Turin.

Normally, two barefooted orphans, dressed in rags and a week removed from a bath, might draw the ire of those passing by. But this crowd was different—it was filled with the poor, the lonely, the sick, the degenerate. They were the broken of the city, the castaways of the gutter, all gathering to take witness to the procession without concern of two orphans joining them.

The boys stopped at the edge of the crowd a hundred yards from the church.

“Come on,” Antonio said, grabbing Paolo’s hand, “we can get closer.”

“Wait. . . .”

Paolo ripped his hand away and ran across the street.

“Paolo! Where are you going? Paolo!”

Antonio watched his young friend slither through the sea of people to a flower vendor across the street. Paolo slipped up to the right side of the wooden cart, waiting for the merchant’s attention to be drawn in the other direction. When the man’s eyes slid away, distracted by a young, brunette woman, Paolo plucked a red rose from a bouquet and sprinted back across the street.

“He’d bring us flowers when he visited; I’d like to give him a rose in return.”

Antonio nodded and smiled, then grabbed Paolo’s hand and together they snaked their way through the crowd. They fell to all fours and crawled across the concrete and in between the legs of unknowing adults. After a few minutes, they arrived at the edge of a group of policemen holding back the throngs of people. Beyond them sat the church, with its dark brick bell tower rising up against the summer sky.

“What now?” Paolo asked.

“Now, we wait. The procession should be arriving soon. I heard a man say they had to come down Via Marco Polo because the crowd following the casket numbered too many for the other roads.”

Paolo nodded and glanced at the people surrounding them. They were all giants, hovering two feet above him. Normally he might be intimidated by such an assembly

of adults, but an unexplainable peace hung over the busy streets and quelled his fears. There was a common sadness that united them all and brought a calming presence to each person. A woman to his right cried into the shoulder of her husband. A man to his left also had eyes glistening wet with tears.

It was a strange feeling, the boy thought, to be among so many people but somehow feel connected to them all, a connection brought to them through one young man, a man who had visited him, Antonio, and all the other orphans dozens of times over the last several years. A smile came to Paolo as he recalled his dark-haired friend and all the times he had played games with the children.

“So many people,” he remarked to Antonio, “and they’re all so sad. Did they know him like we did?”

Antonio looked in all directions, surveying the faces from below. He nodded. “I’m sure they did, or they wouldn’t be here.”

“How did he know them all so well?”

“I don’t know, Paolo. He always made me feel like I was the only person in the world he wanted to speak with.”

“I felt the same.”

“I suppose he did this for all these people, too.”

“But I want to know. I want to know how he did this, so I can be like him.”

“I’d like to know, too. But I think one day we will, Paolo. One day we’ll *all* know his story.”

A murmur rose from within the crowd like a wave rippling in the sea. Heads turned and peered down the street. A procession of men in dark suits with a brown casket

hovering atop their shoulders came into view on the horizon's edge.

“Get your rose ready,” Antonio said, putting his arm around Paolo. “Here comes Pier Giorgio.”

## 2

# A Simple Gift

18 YEARS EARLIER

Pier Giorgio sat at his desk drawing a picture, his short legs dangling above the floor. His head remained steady, perched and still as if turned to stone, but his eyes darted up and down as he surveyed in the distance the bell tower of the Church of La Crocetta.

It rose up in clear view from his bedroom window, the white clock and the bells above it, all framed by the tower made of a dark and rich-colored brick. He tried in vain to duplicate what his eyes saw across the block to the paper resting on his desk, but nothing met with his approval. He crumpled up his latest effort and hurled it toward the garbage pail in the corner of the room, which sat overflowing with dozens of such balls of paper.

“I’ll never be able to draw it,” he yelled at himself.

In the hollows of his despair, for no reason he could fathom, he thought of his grandmother, Linda Ametis. Perhaps, he wondered, she found her way into the recesses of his juvenile thoughts because she was such an avid visitor to The Church of La Crocetta on her visits with the family. She had traveled up from her town of Alassio on

the Mediterranean. Pier Giorgio had been to visit her last summer and each day they would go searching for wildflowers growing in the fields behind her villa. He recalled how much she had enjoyed this.

“I need a break,” he admitted.

He ran downstairs and found his grandmother in the family’s living room. She sat reading a book in the light of a window overlooking the Piazza d’Armi.

“Grandmother Ametis, come outside with me to pick flowers.”

“Oh, dear boy,” she said, placing her book in her lap and caressing his cherub face. Her wrinkled hands felt rough against his smooth cheeks. “You’re so sweet, but I’m tired today. Perhaps you may go in search of flowers without me and bring them back so I can see.”

Pier Giorgio thought for a moment before smiling and kissing her cheek. “I’ll bring you a bouquet!”

He sprinted out of the house, leaving the sound of his grandmother’s laughter behind and entering the streets of his hometown. Turin sat nestled at the base of the Alps in Northern Italy, some 400 miles from Rome. It was a majestic city with a romantic skyline and a picturesque expanse of snow-capped mountains surrounding it. Cathedrals, castles, villas, and other architectural gems dating back several centuries filled each block, as common as lamps in a house and just as overlooked if one did not stop to appreciate the splendor.

Knowing his parents would not let their six-year old son venture far, Pier Giorgio scanned the nearby area of Crocetta. He plucked and gathered flowers from a bed

surrounding a fountain, filling his hands like a bride on her wedding day.

On his way back home he turned a corner too quickly, running directly into a woman who, coincidentally enough, also held a bouquet of flowers. He fell to the ground as she stumbled back. Both of them dropped everything they held.

“Oh my, where are you going in such a hurry, little one?”

She crouched down to help him up.

“I’m sorry, Signora,” he replied, dusting himself off. “I was running home to give my grandmother these flowers.”

“What a nice boy you are! Well, let’s pick these up so you can get home to her.”

The two of them began to gather the flowers sprawled on the sidewalk. Pier Giorgio glanced up at her black dress and the dark veil blanketing her hair.

“Where were you going with all these flowers, Sister?”

“Oh, I’m no Sister. I am a simple woman going to place a bouquet in the chapel at La Crocetta. I have just come from the nursery. Well, alright then,” she said, seeing that they had both collected all their flowers, “run home to your grandmother.”

She moved around Pier Giorgio but after several steps he called after her. “Sister?”

She turned. “I told you, boy, I’m not a nun.”

“Sister, won’t you give one of these to Jesus for me? My grandmother loves him; I don’t think she’ll mind.”

He separated one of his daffodils and held it out to her. She smiled and came back to him, taking it from his hand.

“I’ll be sure to deliver it to him.”

“Thank you, Sister!”

She chuckled and rubbed his head. “You don’t listen so well, but I think one day you’ll see that Jesus will make you a saint.”

Pier Giorgio shrugged before turning and running down the street, not stopping until he had laid his flowers in the lap of his beloved grandmother.