

# **Tito**

The Little Tenor

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## The Big Festival

Tito adored Lecce. How could anyone not? The beginning of spring was a wonderful time of year. The scent of pine trees growing near the turquoise Adriatic Sea signaled the end of winter. Flowers painted the countryside orange, purple, and yellow. Suddenly, *Salento* was alive and warm. Scattered clouds brushed the blue sky. Everything in *primavera*<sup>10</sup> led to the onset of summer.

The peak of heat always fell on *Festa di Sant'Oronzo*<sup>11</sup>, a celebration of Lecce's patron saint. *Sant'Oronzo*'s statue stood tall on top of a Roman column in the center of town. Every year, Tito looked forward to August 26th. There was no place he'd rather be than in *Piazza Sant'Oronzo*<sup>12</sup> with everyone he knew, welcoming the arrival of their favorite saint.

This year, like many before it, featured a lively marching band accompanying the procession. The musicians united with the cheering crowd and everyone paraded around the whole city together. Tito tirelessly followed the entire route, arriving at *Piazza Duomo*<sup>13</sup>. Here, everyone asked for their own personal miracles. To Tito's eyes, there were many strange looking characters.

While holding Antonietta's hand, he gestured at the funny people and asked, "Mamma, who is he? ... who is she?"

She said sharply, "Stop pointing. It's rude!"

Tall men wore long robes, their faces covered. Everyone told Tito not to be afraid, but deep down, he knew they were ghosts. There were policemen with crazy hats, mounted on horses decorated with colorful

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<sup>10</sup>"Springtime" in Italian.

<sup>11</sup>A festival in Lecce celebrated officially since 1658. It is common for small towns and cities in southern Italy to celebrate their patron saints with a festival in the summer. *Sant'Oronzo* is known as *Saint Orontius of Lecce* in English.

<sup>12</sup>The main *piazza* (town square) of Lecce.

<sup>13</sup>The *piazza* of Lecce's cathedral, built in 1144 AD.

feather plumes. He noticed lots of sad, lonely looking women. He had seen them before, hanging around the streets near his house. During the parade, these women walked barefoot on the stone street, begging for forgiveness.

Tito was happy to people watch, but soon, something else caught his attention. The irresistible smell of cotton candy filled the air. Packs of children and their parents crowded around, mesmerized: near the cotton candy maker, wizened, expert hands prepared *copeta*<sup>14</sup>. The mustached man shaped and folded the caramelised concoction of sugar and almonds with hypnotizing movements of his metallic knife.

The best part of the night was that the sky was crystal clear. Miraculously, it happened every single year. The stars were glowing, and Tito counted them one by one. On top of the world, he saw a giant, silver moon. Back in the street though, it was hot, with an explosion of color. The electric *luminarie*<sup>15</sup> reflected vibrant hues on the the sweaty skin of the moving crowd, which strolled to *Piazza Sant'Oronzio* for the final concert.

Although the *piazza* was huge, they were packed like sardines. Complete chaos! To Tito, it was a vast ocean of legs, and he struggled to see anything. He shouted, “Papa! I didn't come here to watch people's butts! Lift me up!” Luigi laughed, and hoisted Tito onto his shoulders. The ocean of legs transformed into a field of hair. Everyone's eyes were focused on the huge, gazebo-like *cassa armonica*<sup>16</sup>.

The musicians, handsome in their shiny uniforms, were getting ready to play. As soon as the conductor stepped on the stage, there was total silence. The level of concentration was so high, that the moment the baton started to move, a rain of notes fell on the crowd. From his perch on the shoulder tower, Tito saw the effect music had on people. Time stood still. Everyone's jaws dropped in awe. Even the statue of *Sant'Oronzio* looked pleased. For the first time, Tito felt his heart beating in sync with the music. The *piazza* breathed in unison.

“What kind of music is this?” Tito asked.

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<sup>14</sup> Similar to almond brittle, *copeta* is simply made and has Arabic origins. It can be found at nearly every kind of celebration in Lecce, from Christmas to Easter.

<sup>15</sup> Intricate, tall structures made of thousands of colored light bulbs, exhibited at night during big celebrations.

<sup>16</sup> A “soundbox” – a temporary structure made to amplify the sounds of a band or orchestra during special occasions.

“This is opera, son!” his father explained.

“I like opera!” exclaimed the boy. He moved his arms in big waves, imitating the conductor throughout the concert.

As soon as the music ended, Tito heard someone say, “Maestro, you were great. You didn't miss a single note!”

Tito looked behind his perch and saw an old man with a long white beard smiling up at him. The man handed him two coins as a reward. Tito thanked him and bowed from his father's shoulders. He slid down and ran toward Antonietta, yelling, “Mamma, we're rich!”

On the other side of the *piazza*, paper balloons soared into the sky, lighting the night with their candles. Looking at the trail of lanterns, Tito felt inspired. No one knew it yet, but soon he would be taking his own flight toward the stars.

