

RIA SANTOS

Housewife - 25 years old

You're twenty-five, and not one year of your life has been easy so far. Your slanderers don't understand: They think you're the perfect little wife, only interested in keeping her wealthy husband close, proud to be married to a military officer, and so on.

You loved Giovanni, you really did. How you came to doubt your feelings is another story entirely. You loved him even though he's twenty years older than you, without ever expecting anything in return. You loved him because he was polite and elegant and you grew up in the poorest neighbourhood in Santo Domingo, admiring the polished, well-mannered tourists who came to visit your city.

It's a lie that people like you only care about putting food in their belly, it's a lie that you're all thieves and whores: Your mother sold groceries and your brothers worked by the day as longshoremen. They tried hard to raise you with their values, it was you that failed to uphold them.

You were barely thirteen when that young golden-haired stranger offered to buy you the dress you so loved in exchange for a night with you. You don't even remember his name, he was just a travelling New Yorker. He made you feel like a queen. You slept with him and he got you pregnant. And so, Diego was born.

You weren't mature enough to take care of him, but your mother raised him like she had done with you: Diego became your little brother. You were never his mother.

When you turned eighteen you found a job as an entertainer in a holiday resort. The pay was a Godsend and making a difference to your family filled you with joy. It was there that you met Giovanni, who was vacationing alone. He charmed you with his courteous ways, you fell in love with him and he proposed right away, asking you to follow him to Italy. You accepted.

Someone might blame you for leaving your son to move abroad, but to tell the truth Italy is a much better platform to help him: You send money home so that he can have a better life. But your husband doesn't know. To Giovanni, Diego is just your little brother.

Ever since you came here your life has changed radically, but you didn't find the paradise you thought would be waiting there. Your husband is an army officer and it took little time to understand what that means: Endless business trips and month-long stretches of loneliness in a city you still feel daunted by. At least you made friends with Camilla: Just like you, she married recently, and she's as much a fish out of water as you are. You may not be her equal in terms of education, but the two of you have good chemistry and you feel like you have a lot to learn from her.

About two years ago, Giovanni was offered a relocation to a base in Bari, far to the south: Three years there, they told him, and he would return to Florence with a promotion. You begged him to refuse: You didn't care about his paycheck, you just wanted your man to be with you. You were so tired of being alone. But he didn't listen, and in that instant something broke between you. You'd left everything behind for him, but Giovanni isn't willing to abandon his ambitions for your sake.

In that moment of confusion, Attilio came into your life. You met him at a residents' council meeting, he was there as an attorney for the man who lives on the last floor. You were worried that night: Someone had rear-ended you in the afternoon and the other driver had refused to exchange contact information. Attilio noticed and offered to help once you explained the situation. He got your insurance to cover the accident with a well-placed letter, you invited him to dinner in thanks, and you ended up talking late into the night. That was the first of many encounters, the milestones in an affair that lasted over three months. Nobody has ever made you feel at home like he did, and he even seemed to look at you in admiration, as if the same difficult past that makes Camilla pity you made you look stronger in his eyes. You felt on equal footing with someone, so you ended up opening yourself completely to him. You even told him about Diego.

Then Giovanni called you to tell you he'd got leave to spend Christmas with you. Guilt pushed you to put an end to your affair with Attilio, to try and mend the broken bond between you and your husband. So you got pregnant with Luca.

Luca, the meaning of your life, the creature your entire world revolves around, the one who makes you feel proud, complete, finally a mother. When you learnt you were expecting a boy, you took it as a sign that God had forgiven you, as a second chance to prove yourself a good parent. Luca is nine months old now, and everything you do is meant to provide him with a perfect life. You are so fulfilled by your role as a mother that you can't help constantly talking about him, recounting every single detail of his life and asking for advice on how to best raise him; you chat about it with Rosa, who has an older daughter, but mostly you consult Camilla, because you trust her completely, even though she has no children of her own. Maternity has made you apprehensive: Every risk to your baby scares you, you've become obsessed with hygiene and you spend your time comparing different brands of food and diapers.

During meetings

These are social gatherings, but you never feel very welcome. Everyone there seems to be bound by relationships that exclude you.

You often talk about the baby and look for complicity from other women. You're very anal regarding hygiene, which is why you put up a petition to have Alice's feline colony moved away from the courtyard. You even wrote to the administrator and you hope that he finally accepts to bring your complaints to the table instead of constantly glossing over the issue.

Another awful thing happened recently, and you've already informed Avellini: Someone keyed your car! You suspect it might have been one of the other residents.

Relationships

Luciano Avellini: The building manager. For all he tries to be completely unbiased, it's clear that it's not the case: He has his favourites and it shows.

Alice Gabbrielli: You can't stand that somebody with a comfortable house, a nice job and a thousand opportunities you never had could live such a maladjusted life. Her garden is a disaster, always dirty and messy, and her only purpose in life seems to be feeding the cat colony in the courtyard. You dislike touching animals, maybe because the slums you spent your childhood in were riddled with strays. During your pregnancy you had many a quarrel with Alice because you feared her cats would give you toxoplasmosis, and now you'd very much like to avoid your son learning to walk around dirty tin cans and beasts that like to scratch.

Vincenzo Salemi: He's the husband of your friend Camilla, an interior designer.

Camilla Lanzi: A cultured and elegant doctor, dedicated to her mission of saving human lives. She's the kind of woman you would have liked to grow into. You usually turn to her for help or advice, but lately she always says she has no time to chat. She's obviously making up excuses not to spend time around you. You really don't understand what her problem is and you wonder whether you've somehow offended her without realising it.

Gioele Zacchei: An illustrator in his forties, working for a publishing house.

Rosa Mistretta: Gioele's wife and mother to a wonderful eight-year-old girl. More than once she has given you sound advice, but she looks annoyed whenever you talk to her about Luca.

Giada Fadda: She's the same age as you, but you couldn't be more different. She made friends with everyone as soon as she moved in last year. She doesn't hide her homosexuality. She's very confident.

Ria Santos: (Your turn to speak)

Dario Ristori: A businessman in his forties, owner of a long-lived Florentine soap company.

Attilio Daddioli: He's the same age as you, and you became friends, then lovers. Leaving him was hard, but your affair is a thing of the past. You don't want to destroy your marriage, not now, not with a son caught in the middle. Nor do you want people to stick you with the horrible name tourists call women in your country: whore. But it's obvious that Attilio feels differently, you see it in the way he looks at you. He's still attracted to you. In these eighteen months he's repeatedly tried to approach you, but you've always avoided him. Sometimes you're afraid that he might tell your husband about your affair, or about Diego, whether in jealousy or by mistake.