

## 29. THE *MUNACIELLO* AND THE *BELLA 'MBRIANA*

The *munaciello* (in Neapolitan this means “little monk”) is the **esoteric person best known, most feared and most often named by the Neapolitans**: a bizarre spirit who always behaves in an unpredictable way and who is the source of infinite urban legends and popular sayings. His disrespectful behaviour is often accompanied by benevolent “bequests” of money; but nobody must be told what has happened, otherwise he will set himself against the beneficiary. It is not rare for him to behave lasciviously towards pretty young women.

The Neapolitans have two versions of the origins of the *munaciello*. Initially, the figure was associated with the Underground Naples and the workers who operated the water supply system, the so-called **pozzari** from “pozzo” meaning “well”. It was easy for them to gain access to the houses using the shafts which served for lowering the buckets down. The *pozzari-munacielli* played tricks in houses when the owners of the wells did not pay them for their services. This is a version that was probably invented by popular fantasy, to make the *munaciello* quite “good-natured”.

There is also the esoteric theory, which transforms the *munaciello* into a **demonic presence dressed as a friar**. He would always try and buy souls, paying either small or large amounts of money. This version is associated with something that happened in 1445 concerning an **ill-matched love affair** between two young people: **Catarinella Frezza**, daughter of a rich cloth merchant, and **Stefano Mariconda**, an apprentice. Their love ended in tragedy. Stefano was assassinated where the two lovers usually met in secret, while Catarinella was locked away in a convent where she brought a malformed baby into the world. The nuns of the convent adopted the baby, dressing it from a tender age in monk’s clothes, with a hood to hide his deformity. In the streets of Naples he was given the nickname *munaciello*. The child died in a mysterious manner. **Magic powers** were soon attributed to him and he was associated with the darker side of the human soul, with the hidden demon who is always ready to grab hold of us.

The other important figure in Neapolitan esotericism is the *bella 'Mbriana*.

A romantic Neapolitan legend tells of a **princess** who had lost her reason because of an unhappy love affair and who wandered about the alleyways of the city like a shadow. To protect her, the king, her father, gave anonymous gifts to recompense those houses where the poor unhappy girl was given succour. This is how the legend of fortune connected to this mysterious female presence came about. In fact, in the popular imagination of Naples the *bella 'Mbriana* is the **spirit of the house**: she dwells permanently in a place which she has chosen to protect. Having her in your house is a sign of well-being and health.

It is difficult to describe her appearance because she only appears for a brief instant, next to a curtain moved by the wind or in a reflection in a window. Neapolitans imagine her as a **young woman with a sweet and gentle face**, as a clear and bright figure. *'Mbriana* (which also corresponds to *Meriana* or *'Mmeriana*) derives from Latin and means **Meridian**, the brightest hour of the day. As proof of people’s affection for this mysterious figure, Imbriani, which comes from *'Mbriana*, is a very common surname in Naples.

Legend has it that the *belle 'Mbriana* is also **capricious**, besides being very powerful, almost like a goddess: she brings luck to those who love her and takes revenge on those who offend the house she has put under her protection. Old Neapolitans advise people never to complain about their house being too small or dark, nor to discuss moving house, while actually inside the house. Much better to talk about these things once you are outside, otherwise the *bella 'Mbriana* might hear and bring all her rage to bear on you.

What is more, the mysterious figure loves order and cleanliness, and for this reason it is best to try not to neglect the chores so as not to irritate her. Once there was the custom of laying an extra place at the table with a **free seat** so that she could come in, sit down and

rest.

The **gecko** is connected to the figure of the *Mbriana*. On summer evenings, this small animal, which is similar to a lizard, hunts insects near lamps; because of its connection with the *Mbriana*, Neapolitans believe that the gecko **brings good luck** and are careful not to chase it out or disturb it.