The Ascent

By Carmela Cattuti

Excerpt:

Alice came to a fork in the road.

‘Which road do I take?’ she asked.

‘Where do you want to go?’ responded the Cheshire Cat.

‘I don’t know,’ Alice answered.

‘Then,’ said the Cat, ‘it doesn’t matter.’

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

PROLOGUE

Nelsonville, NY-1930

Angela stood in the kitchen of her fifteen room Queen Anne Victorian home on Morning Glory Avenue. It had been twenty-two years since she had experienced the 1908 earthquake in Messina, Sicily. Her sister, aunt, and grandmother had perished in the disaster. At the time of the earthquake Angela had been an orphan; both parents had died in their early twenties. Angela and her brother, Antonio, were sent to live with their grandmother, while her younger sister, Maria, was sent to live with an aunt. The earthquake had finished her family and now she was standing in a big house without a family to fill it. A few years after she had emigrated from Sicily, Angela had fallen ill with a high fever. Her uterus had ruptured, and the doctors had to remove it, ending her dream of having children.

Angela moved to the dining room and surveyed the dining room table as if it were an artist’s canvas. The white linen tablecloth made the room feel fresh and hopeful. An empty crystal bowl with white candlesticks on either side stood in the center of the table like place holders, waiting for the next gathering to occur. She walked to the buffet and gazed at a photograph of her sister-in-law, Speranza; a tall thin young woman with sunken cheeks peered out from underneath a 1920s style hat and dress. A holy card of the Blessed Mother leaned on the side of the framed photograph. Angela had placed it there so that Speranza was protected by Mary. She had made the ensemble for Speranza’s engagement party ten years ago. When Angela came to America in 1913, Speranza was nine years old and in need of guidance. Angela had lost her sister, so she set her intentions on caring for Speranza, in turn, Speranza helped her learn English.

A few months ago, Speranza suddenly died from a heart ailment. It was a blow that would stay with Angela until she passed from this life. Angela removed the card and leaned it on a nearby crystal bowl and picked up the photograph. Next to Speranza was her husband Salvatore. He had a vacant stare that communicated to the viewer that he was either occupied elsewhere, or he hid who he was. Angela still had Speranza’s three children to care for, but they were not her blood. Angela returned the photograph and holy card back to its original place. Franco’s chair was to the left of the buffet. Angela had made the chair cover with a rose motif material. Franco’s body had made an impression on the worn cushions a ghost of his form that Angela sometimes mistook for Franco. Pipes encrusted with tobacco dangling from a pipe holder like small sculptures sat on a table next to the chair. The room reeked of stale tobacco.

Angela turned and admired the black marble fireplace and two sets of sliding oak French doors. One set lead to her sitting room and the other opened to a spacious hallway with a winding staircase. She gazed at the tapestry of Vatican City that hung over the fireplace; St. Peter’s Basilica stood in the center like a fortress. Franco had purchased it on their 1929 trip to Sicily. They had returned to Messina hoping to find out what had happened to Angela’s sister Maria. Unfortunately, there was no documentation about her death or survival, so Angela returned to New York without any closure about her sister’s fate. Every time she looked at the tapestry, she was reminded about the nebulous part of her life, and the lingering sense that her sister existed in a space between life and death. This is God’s version of purgatory for me, thought Angela. She was not allowed the heaven she thought would befall her once she came to America.

Angela opened the French door to her sitting room. A couch with billowing cushions sat in front of another marble fireplace. Sewing baskets, dress patterns, and cloth remnants were neatly stacked on a worktable. The house had been built for a physician in 1888. There was a large oak cabinet at the end of the room where he had kept medical supplies. Angela now stored material, thread, and knitting needles. She liked that it had been a healing space that served the community. Maintaining good health was a priority in Angela’s life. She made sure her food was fresh and walked every day regardless of the weather. Angela especially liked the walk to St. Mary’s school which sat on top of a hill over-looking the Hudson River.

Next to the sitting room was Franco and Angela’s bedroom. It too had French doors that opened into a light filled room. Over the top of the bed was a half-moon shaped stained glass window and when the light spread its rays through the window Angela felt it was a kiss from the sun. Green, red, and blue rays engulfed the room, giving it a feeling of connection with heaven itself. A third dark marble fireplace, with decorative interlacing gold spirals, stood next to the vanity like an anchor for the light. A multi-tiered wrought iron candle stand stood in front of the dark fireplace. When Angela survived her illness many years ago, Franco had prayed to the Blessed Mother to heal his young wife. This was on a Friday, the next day her fever broke, and she was sitting up in bed when Franco came to visit. Every Friday, Angela lit candles to Mary in appreciation for the miracle.

Angela moved into the spacious hallway. Two large stained-glass windows lined the winding staircase. Bright light penetrated the multi-colored stained glass, casting a rainbow of color on the steps and floor. Under the front window sat her sewing machine. A full-length mirror hung on the wall to the right; a small platform waited in anticipation of the next customer.

Across from the staircase the largest fireplace of them all greeted anyone descending the stairs. It was the same color and design as her bedroom fireplace, but the spirals were intertwined with circles creating a rhythm that reminded Angela of music. Antique gold clocks lined the mantle with figurines depicting eighteenth century dress; ladies with ornate fans shielding their lips and nose, men with white wigs and handkerchiefs dangling from one hand. During the holidays a roaring fire was lit and the aroma of oak and cedar filled the downstairs rooms.

She stood at the bottom of the staircase with her hand on the railing. The rooms upstairs were vacant. There were not enough people to fill them. They had bought the house with the expectation that Speranza and her family might one day live with them. There was another kitchen and bathroom on the second floor; an apartment that waited for occupants that might come one day. After Speranza’s death, Franco had wanted to rent the rooms for extra income, but Angela opposed it.

“Someone will come if we leave the rooms empty,” Angela told Franco.

“No one will come,” Franco said. “We need to ask our friends if they know of a family who needs a place to stay. The extra money will come in handy.”

“Speranza’s children will want to stay with us,” Angela said. “Besides, why have strangers live in our home?”

Since his stroke, Franco did not have patience with children. He favored his nephew, Nunzio, Speranza’s first child. Nunzio was vociferous and more than disruptive at times. Angela tried to tame him, but Franco delighted in Nunzio’s boisterous behavior. When Nunzio played with toy guns, Franco taught him how to shoot. He was amused by his nephew, but Angela felt Nunzio’s behavior, while amusing at age six would be offensive as a teenager, and dangerous in adulthood. If Nunzio lived with her, he would have to change. The two younger children were sweet and needed a mother. Their father was often out-of-work and Angela felt he relinquished his obligation as a parent to his sister Paolina. His sister had catered to Salvatore his entire life. He relied on her to cook his meals, wash his clothes, and clean his house. Salvatore rarely interacted with his children and relied on others to care for them.

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