The Benevolence of new Ideas

By Carmela Cattuti

Excerpt:

Preface

THE TRANSITION

Angela sat by her husband’s hospital bed and waited for the end to come. She wondered how she should move forward in her life after Franco took his last breath. He had married and brought her from Sicily in 1913 and now, years later, he lay dying from a stroke. In life he constantly expressed his opinion, regardless of popular sentiment, and now his voice was gone; his shallow breathing was the last functioning system. He had had several strokes over the years, this was the one that would take his life. Angela had sat with many of her family members and friends during the past decades as they transitioned into the next world: her mother-in-law, sister-in-law, and older Italian immigrants who left their homeland and never saw the land of their birth again.

Franco’s chest rose slowly and fell abruptly, as if his lungs were attempting to perform their function but the soul who had inhabited the body had already vacated and was waiting for his lungs to stop so he could complete the process and move on. When Franco executed his final breath, Angela anxiously awaited his next inhale—but his chest was still. He had gone.

Angela had cared for Franco during his long illness, and now she was free. The relief she felt made her cringe. How could she so easily feel relief when Franco had suffered? She grieved but was thankful there would be no more concerns about leaving him home alone, or trips to the doctor, or Franco insisting he could perform a task when he couldn’t. He had emigrated from Sicily at age twelve 12 in the early 20th century full of energy and promise. Now, in 1968, Angela looked back and felt he had been successful in fulfilling that promise. Franco had brought Angela, at age eighteen, from the convent orphanage in Palermo, where she had lived since the 1908 earthquake, to a new life in Nelsonville, New York, about forty -five minutes north of Manhattan. It was not the life she thought she would have in America, but what she had created in America she never would have had the opportunity to experience had she stayed in Sicily.

Angela kissed Franco several times on both cheeks and on the lips. The doctors had said it was a matter of time until he would pass away. She could see death hovering and begin to slowly drape his body from his head to his feet as if giving Angela time to say good-bye.

“*Adio mio caro*,” whispered Angela. “*Grazie di tutto*.” Tears rolled down her face onto Franco’s cheek and mouth. His eyes were open and fixed, as if peering into the world beyond. She put her hands on the sides of his face and with her thumbs closed his eyes. A nurse stepped into the room.

“He’s gone,” said Angela.

Angela gathered her pocketbook and scarf, went to the door, and stepped over the threshold. The nurse had covered Franco’s body with a sheet as if to close a chapter on a life. The 1960s were ending, and so was Angela’s former life and attitudes.

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