

Angel of God

ROSANNA BATTIGELLI

L'auteure réfléchit sur la mort inattendue de sa soeur à l'âge de 17 ans et depuis qu'elle est adulte avec des enfants à elle, elle est maintenant prête à en faire son deuil.

Death embraced our family with an unexpected swirl of its dark cape on a dismal April day in 1975. At 15 years of age, I arrived home from high school as usual, wondering why there were so many parked cars near our house. I went around to the back entrance, and was surprised to see my home full of people. They were all friends I recognized, *pae-sani*, who lived in the same predominantly Italian neighborhood. But they were not smiling. Grim faces turned to look at me. I scanned the kitchen and further into the living room, searching for my mother or father. In the several seconds it took me to do so, came the sudden realization that someone was crying, sobbing—deep, tortured gasps that I had never heard before. My eyes found and focused on a shaking figure hunched over in the living room chair—my mother. At that moment, she lifted her hands away from her face and saw me.

“A fighia mia; sin da jù a nostra Pina,” she sobbed in our Calabrian dialect, reaching for me. (Our Pina has gone away.)

I was stunned; I didn't know what she meant. Where had my older sis-

ter Pina gone? Why wasn't she still in the hospital?

A week earlier, my worried parents had brought Pina—short for Giuseppina—to see the doctor. “Stomach flu” was his diagnosis. They brought her back home, expecting the symptoms to eventually pass. Severe cramps a few days later, however, propelled them to take Pina to the hospital emergency. Her appendix had ruptured, they were told, and she needed immediate surgery. A day or so after, I accompanied my parents to the hospital, where Pina was recovering.

That was just yesterday, I thought in confusion. Then my mother repeated her words and the stark truth hit me. Pina was dead. That was the reason all these people were here; they were trying to console a woman who had lost a daughter for no reason that could ever make sense.

I held my mother's hand, helpless, as she told me that “the poison” had gotten into Pina's blood. Peritonitis consumed her delicate body at 17 years of age. All within a span of one week.

My father, always a strong, hard-working figure, seemed a broken man, his body sagging with silent grief, his face etched with tears. The stark scene that remains in my mind is the total despair and pain on my mother's face as she wept, *“Pina mia, o Pina mia. Ti pighiaru pur' a*

tia.” (They took you, too.) *“Che dolore, che dolore.”* (Oh, ... such pain.) My mother's older sister, Anna Rosa, had died when she was 18.

I remember someone trying to give my mother some food that evening, telling her she had to eat to be strong, but she refused. From the disjointed cries around me, I understood that a friend, Teresa, Pina's sponsor at Confirmation, was going to be responsible for getting a burial dress for Pina.

“What a tragedy!” I heard someone whisper.

“It was God's will,” a close elderly friend of the family murmured repeatedly in an effort to console my mother, who, hours later, was still in the same chair, her eyes red and swollen, her pain no less numbed.

The rest of the evening is a blur, except for the memory that my younger brothers, who were picked up directly after school, did not come home at all; they stayed with my aunt and uncle and cousins that night. I was asked if I wanted to join them.

“Ti spagni u stai sula?” came the query in our dialect about whether I was afraid to sleep in my bedroom alone—the room I had always shared with Pina. I didn't understand why I should feel afraid. I stayed there that night and for the nights to come, although sometimes I slept in my mother's bed when my

father was working night shift at the smelter. On those nights, my mother couldn't sleep alone.

The small neighborhood where we lived was shocked by the news, as well as the Catholic high school in which Pina had been in grade eleven, and I in grade ten. At the funeral home, hordes of people came to express their condolences to my family. I recall the two adjoining

synchronicity with the black undulations on the other side. As each article of clothing underwent its funereal metamorphosis, and was subsequently wrung out and hung to dry on a clothesline in the basement, I wondered if Canadian families went through this ritual, or just went out and bought black clothing for the mourning period. I expected it would be the latter, if they did

more kindness....

I recall that the television set was turned off for an entire year. There would be no singing or laughing in our home, my mother told us sorrowfully. The radio was eventually turned on, but only for the news or weather report. At times I thought life was very harsh, although I didn't have any previous experience with which to compare it. The customs

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rooms streaming with people, young and old. My parents wept inconsolably as they sat by Pina's coffin. She looked like a pretty, life-sized porcelain doll.

"*Un angelo di Dio,*" someone murmured nearby. (An angel of God.) I remember placing a rose by her pale, lifeless hands in which a rosary had been entwined.

The day of the funeral was dark, bleak, and rainy.

"I hope this is not one of those typical Italian funerals, with all that wailing and crying," commented a girl in Pina's class. Her home-room class, along with several teachers, had come to the funeral Mass.

What cold, insensitive words, I thought, as I followed my grieving parents up the aisle. Surely crying was not an act exclusive to Italians. Fortunately, there were kind, supportive friends to ease the sting, although for some time I could not look at that girl at school without feeling a twinge of bitterness.

The day after the funeral, my mother's cousin came over and filled the kitchen sink with what I discovered was black dye. As the dark mixture swallowed my mother's previously light-coloured clothes, the rain pelting the window above the sink seemed to be in complete

have such a custom. I could understand that my mother, who had often used her refined sewing skills in clothing herself and her family, with the aim of saving money, wasn't about to start spending money for new clothes for herself. From the time that the clothes were ready, my mother wore black to mark her grief, as was the custom she grew up with.

The one-year period of *lutto* or mourning in our household was a long one—at least I thought so at the time, with the limited understanding of an adolescent. Only much later, when blessed with children of my own, could I fathom the meaning of such a loss. I could understand how devastated my mother and father must have felt, how painful it must have been to carry on the responsibility of raising their three other children.

I no longer had a sister. The pink room we had shared was now mine. I remember quiet moments, strange moments. Like helping to pack away some of her belongings, her clothes. I recall finding a letter that filled me with anguish; it was a letter to Pina from a male admirer that I had hidden from her in adolescent insensitivity. How I wished I could have taken that moment back, shown

of mourning in Canada were foreign to me; up until that time I had never attended a funeral, or visited a funeral home.

I felt lonely; I didn't have many friends over during the grieving period. I don't remember sharing my feelings about my home life to anyone. Perhaps I felt different, vulnerable to what people who didn't share my culture would say or think. I was sad that I couldn't attend school dances or other social activities. Meals were solemn, with little talk. I longed for the time when things could be normal, and I could laugh again at home without feeling guilty.

Both my parents turned to devout prayer and solace in the Church to help them cope with the tragedy, and both eventually smiled and then laughed again. I recall cheering inwardly when I heard that first laugh, a sign that my parents could allow themselves to be happy again. My brothers Pasquale and Cosimo, who were 14 and 12 respectively, sat in front of the television for hours when it was turned on for the first time after its one-year moratorium. I joined them, with a sense of relief that life would continue normally once again.

As the years passed, I realized that

Pina's death had made my mother even more protective of me. I was not allowed to participate in many social activities. I had friends in the neighbourhood, but rarely ventured far from home. I did not want to add to my mother's worries, after all she had been through, losing a daughter. Occasionally, I resented the restrictions. I saw myself as being different from other Canadians. As an immigrant born in Italy, I was sometimes embarrassed that my parents weren't more like Canadian parents, who seemed more permissive, and less protective of their daughters. In retrospect, I can appreciate their fears, their concerns, their expectations.

I have come to realize that everyone mourns in his or her way, in his or her time. I mourned my sister's death 16 years after it happened. When I was 15, I experienced the gamut of emotions at the time of Pina's death and afterwards, but not until I was coming to terms with another loss in my life did I truly feel the loss of my sister, and contemplate what we never shared or would share as siblings.

My thoughts, emotions, hopes, and fears bombarded me as I mourned the end of my marriage in 1990, and tried to make the pieces of my life fit together. Some pieces didn't fit. Some were lost. *I was lost.*

I looked at my two innocent sleeping children at night, and knew I had to be strong. For them. For me. Somehow, my mind turned to Pina, who hadn't been in my thoughts for some time, and the dam that had been building up inside of me over the years finally burst. I felt the loss of Pina acutely, and I experienced such anguish at being unable to communicate to her my pain that I wrote her a letter, expressing all my feelings, my regrets, my love.

Dear Pina,

I'm all stressed out and I wish you were here to help me in these trying times. I'm sorry we never got the chance to work out our adolescent immaturity

and develop a strong sisterly bond. Life is such a struggle at times. I know a lot of people are far worse off than me, but I can't help feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. My spirit is low and I'm impatient and short-tempered. I burst into tears at the slightest provocation. I'm worried because there's a heaviness in my chest and I feel that stress is taking over my life. All the demands of work, the kids, and the divorce are taking their toll on me.

It's go, go, go all the time, and I think I have come to the point where I've got to make changes or I will become sick. I just want peace to return to my life, and I want my kids to have an emotionally healthy childhood, in spite of the divorce.

You know, Pina, once when Sarah was a baby, her sleeping face seemed to be a vision of you. Maybe I had seen that expression on one of your baby pictures ... I don't know. Could it be possible that there is a part of you in Sarah? I know one thing: she's artistic, like you were. Maybe what you and I never had as sisters, I'm supposed to have with Sarah....

I'm sorry if I ever hurt your feelings. I miss what we could have had. I know you would have been my friend. My only consolation is that you're in a better place, close to God.

Dear Pina, pray for all of us—me, my children Sarah and Jordan, our mother, father, brothers—that we can come to peace in our lives. I will say this prayer for you: Eternal rest grant upon Pina, oh Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon her. May she rest in peace. Amen.

I never told you, but I love you.

Rosanna

November 28, 1991

When I completed the letter, I was spent emotionally, but at peace. I had finally mourned my sister. And from that moment, I felt her angel wings embracing me, giving me the strength I needed to carry on

Rosanna Battigelli was born in Italy and emigrated to Canada in 1963. She is an award-winning teacher and

writer living in Sudbury, Ontario. She has won four Best Practice Awards from the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association. In 2006, she was awarded an Ontario Arts Council Writers' Works-in-Progress Grant for her second novel. Her stories have appeared in Canadian anthologies, including Mamma Mia! Good Italian Girls Talk Back (ECW Press, 2004).

APRIL BULMER

Psalm 69 for the Goddess

My heart is a fragile
shade of moon.
Yours a dandelion
broken and bloomed.

I gather
on a woman's month
among the native birch,
plant my seeds
with prayer:
Mother God, please
another heart,
a sun to light
my womb.
For it is a dark galaxy
turning there.
The organs
like constellations,
the waters
a shallow blue.

April Bulmer has published eight books of poetry. She has four university degrees in the area of creative writing and religious studies. She received her Honours B.A. from York University in 1986. She has earned many awards for her writing including first prize for excerpts from a native m.s. called ROUGE from the Canadian Authors Association. April lives in Cambridge, Ontario.