

Courage

She was boiling little pasta, like butterflies flying in water, and mixed in some stock and parmesan for her niece. The smell of childhood and home permeated through the air while a key rattled the lock of the front door.

“Eccoci!, Here we are!” her parents walked into the flat, cold air wafting from their coats.

Grandma came to kiss the child, while grandpa sat down and lit a cigarette.

“Make sure the smoke doesn’t reach the child- or me” she said, waving the warm murky air which had started to mix with the nutty steam of the soup.

“What do you mean *you*?”

“I’m pregnant.”

“Oh, my dear.” grandma’s cheeks lifted and her eyes lit up with joy, grandpa’s own lips could be seen twitching briefly into an upwards curve.

“Let me cook you something nice! I will not get to spoil you so much when you will be American!” grandma began shuffling through the kitchen, her soft curves banging against each pot and pan.

“He can be a doctor here. Why does he need to go to America?” Grandpa said, his back to the table, the cigarette still burning.

“Ah, that is all talk, he will not go to America,” she replied.

“They’re blue, the fingers are blue” she heard the group of sterile doctors say, huddling around the baby.

“I want to see her, why can’t I see her?!” she cried out loud.

“It’s alright”, her husband squeezed her hand but his face betrayed concern. The doctor approached them.

“Your baby is not getting the oxygen she needs, so she had to go into an incubator immediately and we will have to run tests to understand what’s wrong.

“Wrong?” her eyes went perfectly wide and rotund, her beautiful mouth absently parted, and her entire face was paralysed in fear.

“The baby needs to eat to be big enough for her surgery, but she won’t eat, how can I get her to eat??” she burst into tears.

“Now, now. There’s always a way!” Rubens said. Grandma was ‘Rubens’ now, as her ample size had become more so; giving way to perfectly sculpted wrists that pinched inward from a rather large arm and small yet supple hands, which, according to her son-in-law, resembled the hands of Ruben’s cherubs. In her angelic state, Rubens flew atop the kitchen table and began a little dance, hitting a wooden spoon against a pan, singing and laughter merging into one. Finally, baby, distracted, smiled and she swiftly slipped a spoonful of cut up spaghetti into her mouth.

“Pagliacci! You are like clowns at a circus for that baby!” grandpa observed amusedly, a cigarette dying out between his fingers.

“Don’t break down on me now my child, or I will start crying too”.

She looked at her mother’s face. Joy and laughter had always come so natural to her, but now Ruben’s face was made to wear sorrow. Mother and daughter both trying to resist the twitches that came with tears. Baby sat nearby, an angry scar running down her bloated belly still red with tenderness. Her father had sewn the incision after the surgery. He had said “if she is made to wear this scar forever, he would make it the best-looking a scar could be”. A great irony, having a husband cardiologist and a child with a heart malformation.

Rubens had been vomiting blood for hours. Grandpa for once, was not smoking. “I can’t do this without you ma.” “Forza- courage, my child”, she felt her mom squeeze her hand one last time, before the cherub grip went soft.

“Why is the tombstone above grandma’s grave empty?” baby was three and clever.

“That is where my body will be when I die” replied grandpa. Baby went silent.

“How will I visit grandma when I’m in America?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll visit her and sit on our favourite rock and talk to her, and let her know what you have to say when you call me on the phone” grandpa always had an answer for baby. The cemetery overlooked the town on the opposite cliff. The pine trees, mixed with sounds of symphonic locusts, gave an air of serenity to death. Smoke from grandpa’s cigarette rose up like a grey, conflicted soul.

“Okay, you are grandpa’s strong little soldier, you hear?” baby nodded, distracted by the excitement of boarding an airplane. She hugged her father, feeling guilty knowing he would be left alone now.

“Would you like to see the cockpit?” an air hostess smiled at baby.

“Wow! This is so cool! One day I will be a pilot too” baby exclaimed. She thought of her child growing up to be a pilot, flying with no boundaries.

America was a flat, alien land. The hotel room didn’t have a kitchen so when baby woke up jet-lagged at 2am, requesting lemon sole, she had gone out and bought a camping burner and some white packaged fish she believed resembled the fish.

She parked outside the school playground. She could see baby running around the playset frantically. She grabbed baby by the shoulders to make her stop.

“What’s wrong tesoro?”

“Mi scappa la pipì! I really need to pee but don’t know where the bathroom is and the teacher didn’t understand me when I asked! ” urgent tears fell down baby’s face.

“Mom I got an A in math today!”

“Say it in Italian, love”.

The child’s English was now better than her mother-tongue.

“When does papà get home?” she asked.

“He is working late again tonight, do you want to watch tv with me?” They sat on the second-hand couch, made of what felt like barbed-wire, various shades of brown, and smelled of cat urine. The child snuggled up to her, enthralled by the satellite tv. She wondered if it would cost too much to call home, then she remembered nobody would be awake there.

“I guess it’s just you and me” she whispered to baby, “Forza”.