My Uncle Angelo

By John Calabro

The conversation changes from French to a Sicilian I find difficult to understand; the language of a hometown dialect I refuse to speak. The big car continues to weave in and out of traffic.

The man whose half-face and half-moustache I see in the rear-view mirror is my uncle Angelo. His thinning hair is greased back, trying to hide a small bald spot. He picked us up from the airport and was now driving us to his house, where we would be staying for the next while.

The car zigzags, spewing foul fumes that seep into the car. Finally after a long voyage I did not ask for, feeling sick, I call my mother, "*Maman*." I don't understand why I always need to call her twice before she responds. "*Maman*!"

"*Quoi*?" She turns to me all irritated. "I am going to throw up, tell him to stop the car," I say. "*Him*, is your uncle, show respect. You'll be fine. He can't stop now. Be quiet!" She doesn't want to impose on him; he is doing us a big favour. Uncle Angelo is our sponsor to Canada and will provide us with a place to live. It doesn't help that my baby sister starts to cry and I am quickly blamed for waking her up with my whining. "*Papa*, I am going to throw up," I plead!

The two of them discuss my plight and use the Sicilian words for weak, for sissy, and even bring back an old story of how I almost died at birth, as if that had anything to do with my being nauseous right now. "*Ava, Angelo, fammi su piacere, fermate*," my father exhorts his brother to stop.

"*Figlio di butane*." Uncle swears, calling me, or the car that has just cut him off, a son of a bitch. He applies the brakes and the long American car suddenly stops and jerks everyone forward. Already queasy, I don't have time to brace myself and the front seat smacks my forehead.

Leaving the door ajar, hand over my mouth, I bolt away from the car, and rush to the concrete barrier of a city bridge. I climb on a small ledge and throw-up over the metal guardrail and into a precipice. I look down, resist the impulse to follow my vomit, and question what I am doing here. I don't want to be in America and would like to go back to France. I curse everyone! In particular, I curse my uncle Angelo for having convinced my father to come to Toronto. I stay put, leaning over, off-balance, annoying those waiting for me. My uncle honks impatiently and I return to the backseat.

We live in a flat, upstairs, in Uncle Angelo's house, on Boon Avenue, near St. Clair and Dufferin. My father gets a job working with his brother Angelo for *Miller Paving*. The company is a non-union shop, but the bosses treat my father well and they are paid almost as much as the syndicated workers. He likes the money, makes more than he ever made in France, and doesn't mind coming home smelling of dirty sweat and asphalt fumes. His face and arms are scorched by the heat and smeared with specks of black tar.

It is a small trade-off. He jokes that the other commuters leave him plenty of room on the crowded bus, and although he is sure that they are making fun of him, he appreciates the space. He is happier. Canada is good to him, he keeps repeating. Seeing him in a good mood, I argue for more freedom but he says that I am still too young. He says that one can't be too careful, especially in a new country and that there are dangers everywhere. He insists that I stay on my Uncle Angelo's porch. I reluctantly obey. I hate this restriction of his, but in a strange way it also feels good to be worried about.

He tells us about his work. He explains that Uncle Angelo walks behind the big tandem truck that dumps asphalt into small piles of black tar, which he and others then rake vigorously from side to side. He is careful not to get burned. He says that he stands a bit behind and wears wooden planks attached to his shoes, a form of square snowshoes made of plywood, which he uses to pat down the rough tar that accumulates against the curb. Those shoes are awkward to walk in and sometimes, when he tries too hard, he almost trips forward.

He wants to impress his boss and is often off-balance as he shuffles from left to right creating rough, flat tracks that will later be smoothed over by a heavy, slow-moving roller driven by cousin Calogero. He also uses a long broom-handled stick with a small, metal square base to temper the uneven patches of asphalt that gather against sewer grates. He calls it "*lu smacker"*, a word he had heard the English boss use to refer to his smacking down activity.

"*La chaleur, te fait mal*?" I ask him, wondering about the effect of all the hot asphalt. He says that when the heat from above and below gets too unbearable he thinks of his paycheck and calculates his take-home pay. Some of the overtime is paid in cash, a supplement he particularly enjoys and drops on the centrepiece of our dining room table with pride. He tells us all those things and more, over Sunday *ragu*. He is a changed man. Wealthier, he becomes ebullient; he talks more, and makes my mother happy.

He explains that there is a long hooked lever that controls the pouring that lets out small amounts of blacktop on the cement base. Just enough to be manageable. The round knob at the end of the lever fits into pre-determined grooves and adjusts the rear gate of the big dump truck. Once the tarmac hits the ground the workers hurry to spread it while still hot and malleable. A hydraulic pump lifts the back of the truck, forcing the hot asphalt against the gate while the truck moves slowly forward. Once empty, it leaves, and another one takes its place. He is so proud of his new job.

It happened on a Wednesday.

The coffee truck had just left and the morning break being over, the workers were back on the job. It was then that something went wrong with the lever. A malfunction; a wear-and-tear problem that should have been harmless. "Get out of the way!" shouted Calogero from his high seat on the steamroller, able to see the accident before it happened. "*Attenzione*!" The workers echo his shouts, "Watch out!"

Their warnings were too late, the rusty lever having violently snapped back the gate of the dump truck was forced wide open by the weight of five tons of sliding tar. The first small pile knocked over my father who had wandered too close and whose back was turned away from the big tandem. His unwieldy wooden shoes propelled him forward off-balance and his 'smacker' flew off his hands, knocking down the closest worker who happened to be Uncle Angelo. Uncle had been raking beside him and was now thrown askew, pushed closer to the danger, falling flat on his back. As he scrambled to get up, gravity pushed a second, bigger, load of burning asphalt on him, bonding him to the road and burying him alive.

Picks and shovels in the hands of frenzied workers descended on that heap of smouldering acridity, but to no avail. The more they pulled, the more my uncle, already disfigured, screamed in agony until his voice gave out, his heart succumbing to shock. Other labourers forcibly restrained my father. As he fought them off, they tried to shield his eyes from the scene, knowing it was too late.

The boss, wearing his clean white safety helmet, explained to the owner of *Miller Paving*, a short, round man with dark rimmed glasses, that it was an accident. The Italian man with the moustache was too close to his co-worker, who happened to be his brother. The accident was really the sibling's fault. They repeat the words, "Unfortunate tragedy."

The English inspector agreed with *Miller Paving* that the malfunction would not have caused such dire consequences had the brother stood a few more feet away and not turned his back to the dump truck, as he had been instructed when first trained for the job.

"No one was responsible and we are all sorry," the Ministry of Labour said in the letter they write to Uncle Angelo's wife. A neighbour translates it for her. Again, the word 'tragedy' is used. The company sends the mourning family $100 and a wreath of flowers.

Calogero and the work-gang came to our house, re-telling the story so often that I can now recite it word for word. My father sits on the sofa nursing his burns that heal too quickly. He says nothing, the others speak of rebellion, of strike or of a slowdown, but they do nothing. When he gets better, my father returns to work for *Miller Paving* because he has no choice and because the company sponsored his work permit. Feeling sorry, *Miller Paving* allows him to come back and chooses not to discipline him. On the job, he keeps an eye out for those fully loaded dump trucks and never turns his back on them.

At home, he returns to the melancholy that gripped him in France. He stops talking and goes back to ignoring me. My mother has another daughter, which is all she needs to make her happy.

And just like that, things change again, become normal; more like it was in Paris. My uncle's death liberates me from parental shackles and returns me to a familiar freedom. I discover streetcars, and go looking for the bridge where I threw-up the day my uncle Angelo drove us from the airport to this new world that had suddenly become very much like the old world. I often wonder if a curse can really kill someone's uncle.