

The Tree in the Piazza

It was not as if Sal could blame that old black and white photograph. The one with him, smiling, looking happy, sitting on a bulging oversized root of a misshapen tree trunk. His parents had not remembered who took that photo or where exactly it had been taken, except that it was in Palermo, the summer before they immigrated to Canada. In itself, it was a cute photograph of him as an eleven year old, wearing a white shirt tucked into a pair of black shorts. Laura had liked the photo, one of the few she had seen of her husband as a child, and as such, she had recently framed it, putting it on display in their Toronto living room. And yet, it might just have been that black and white photo that had triggered in him a desire he had not felt for almost fifty years, a longing to go back.

He popped the question.

“Laura, more and more I have been thinking about a Sicilian vacation, what do you think, are you in?”

It took her by surprise. Laura wasn't thinking about vacations, it was spring in Canada, the weather was getting better, summer was just around the corner and she liked her summers in Toronto. She loved walking in the parks, sitting at cafés, and besides she was in the middle of researching the birth and historical roots of Toronto, a project she had taken up in her retirement.

“I am not sure I want to go to Italy this summer.”

“Why not?”

“As you can see, I am quite busy with my research. To tell you the truth, I would rather travel across Canada, really discover it in depth. If I had a choice and if I wanted to travel... the East Coast, or the West Coast would be my preferences, or the North, or the Prairies, Quebec is always fascinating...”

“Laura, you are kidding me, you have just given me a map of Canada.”

“Good, then you get it. I would rather see and experience the rest of Canada.”

The conversation was not going in the direction that he wanted it to go. The more he insisted, the more she resisted.

“Please, come with me...I would like to see Palermo again, it's been too long.”

She looked at him incredulously.

“Palermo, really? Do you even have any relatives that you know in Sicily?”

“Some cousins, but it's not about visiting relatives, I want to...”

He wasn't ready to tell her about what he was experiencing, he wasn't sure himself as to what it was. All he knew was that since coming to Canada he had an uneasy love-hate relationship with both his native and his adopted country, but somehow this was changing.

“I don’t understand. Are you becoming nostalgic, after all those years when you had wanted nothing to do with Italy and especially Sicily? Didn’t you say that your Italian government abandoned you and your parents, that they forcibly, through neglecting the south, uprooted all of you and chased you all away? Forcing your parents in an unwanted diaspora, turning them into economic refugees. And now you want to go back, for what?”

He knew she was right, he had said all those things, many times, and he still believed in what he had said. Was it wrong to feel differently now?

“Just for a small visit.”

She knew of her husband’s inner turmoil, but she had to be honest with him.

“Sal, I don’t have your angst, or nostalgia, *I* was not uprooted. I don’t have your trauma. Canada is my country, period, I was born here. My parents were Italian, not me. I love it here. Do I like a plate of spaghetti? Yes. Do I like espresso? Yes. Do I cheer for the Italians during the World Cup? Yes. But on that note if there was a Canadian team in the World Cup, I would cheer for them. Do I like Italian culture? Yes, of course. But, do I think that I am Canadian, first and foremost? Yes. What is going on with you? I thought you agreed with me.”

He did, but unlike her, he still felt like a malcontented guest here in Canada.

“Laura, I am not asking you to move there, it’s just a small vacation. Please Laura, it’s important to me.”

It was said in a soft, plaintive, almost tearful request.

“Then my dear husband go by yourself, if you are so keen on going, I won’t stop you.”

It wasn’t meant to be, but it felt like a slap in the face. They had never travelled apart. He took it as a personal rejection, almost as a denial or disapproval of what he was feeling.

“Forget about it.”

He turned on the television set and mindlessly stared at the screen. Laura furtively looked at her husband. She loved him, and was not so insensitive as to not see the pain on Sal’s face. What she had said was true, but it hadn’t come out right.

The next morning, over coffee, staring at her depressed-looking husband, she blurted out, “Okay Sal, I’ll give you one week in Palermo. You plan it, take care of everything, and I’ll tag along. Is that good, are you happy now?”

He was. He hadn’t expected that. More than a week would have been better, but he wasn’t going to quibble.

And that is how they find themselves in a restaurant on *Via Vittorio Emanuele* on a beautiful summer day, on their second last day in Palermo. Sal excuses himself to go to the bathroom and Laura sits there drinking an Aperol Spritzer, reflecting on this short, but pleasant, Sicilian trip. Despite herself, she has to

admit that it has been a good vacation, a nice break, and that she was having fun. While waiting for Sal, she takes out her cellphone and checks her email, and then on a sudden whim Googles, “Things to see in Palermo” and clicks on a popular travel website.

It was interesting to see in retrospect that they had done most of the top ten tourist attractions, such as the *Pallazzo dei Normanni*, the *Cattedrale di Palermo*, the *Ballaro* and *Vucciria* outdoor markets, the *Quattro Canti* corner, and of course *Teatro Massimo* near their Bed and Breakfast. They had been to the eerie *Catacombe dei Cappuccini* and the beautiful *Cattedrale* and *Chiostro di Monreale* where they were pleasantly surprised by the beautiful view of the city from the rooftop. Sal, had been the perfect guide and although most of these sites were targeted to tourists, Laura had really enjoyed seeing and reading about the history of Palermo and of Sicily in general, something she hadn’t known very much about.

As she scrolls down to less popular attractions, she suddenly stops and gasps at number twenty-eight of the top thirty most popular sites in Palermo. There is no doubt, she knows immediately that this is it.

“Are you ready to go, Laura?”

Startled, she puts her phone away, contemplates telling him, but decides against it. Laura has another idea and buys herself some time by telling Sal that she needs to use the facilities while he settles the bill.

Sal takes that opportunity to reflect on these last few days. He is happy to be back in Sicily, even as a tourist. Unlike Laura, who was enjoying sightseeing, his contentment was more general, more of a persistent and pervasive feeling. He was happy here. More than he had ever imagined he could be. Even the worse of the city, the graffiti, the traffic jams, the insane driving and parking habits of locals, the crumbling sidewalks and the ubiquitous overflowing garbage bins, did not dampen this feeling. The good and the bad of this city had combined to embrace him. More than being a visitor, he felt at home here.

Laura comes back having made a decision.

“Sal, before we leave, I would like to go see the Marina. I checked it on my phone, it’s not too far from here, we just follow *Vittorio Emanuele* north and we get to it in no time. Do you want to go?”

“Sure, I am in.”

He is happy to see that she is taking the initiative, maybe she was also beginning to feel comfortable here.

Laura had marked the destination on her phone’s GPS while in the bathroom, and now cellphone in hand, she leads her husband along the designated route.

A few minutes later they turn right into *Piazza Marina*, and that is when Sal recognises the neighbourhood.

Suddenly, it all comes cascading back.

“No... No way...”

He has just spotted one of the two gigantic fig trees inside *Giardino Garibaldi*, the garden that overwhelms the Piazza.

“It can’t be...”

Leaving a smiling Laura on the sidewalk, Sal rushes through the small entrance, and runs towards a gargantuan tree in the middle of this green oasis.

Laura is quickly by his side.

“Yes Sal, it is...”

She nods, enjoying seeing her husband so genuinely happy.

The bulging tree root of that immense misshapen fig tree from the black and white photo is still here.

“Go ahead, sit on it, in the same place. I’ll take a few photos.”

Overcome with emotions, he follows his wife’s instructions and sits down, smiling incredulously, holding back tears.

He is now more certain than ever that this tree is a sign that this trip was meant to be. He had found it. Its roots, his roots had waited for him all those years to come back. He was truly home.

Laura reads the marker the province had placed at the base of the tree. She knew about these unique trees but she had never seen one, she knew them by the name of *Banyan* not as a *Ficus macrophylla*, but they were the same. She looks up and is truly amazed, this 150 year old tree was majestically and beautifully misshapen, and in a strange coincidence, had been planted around the same time that the city of Toronto was born; the very same historical period she was researching.

“Laura, *these* are my roots, see, you were meant to come with me, to help me find them.”

Laura isn’t so sure. It seems to her that Sal may be creating a distorted narrative fuelled by nostalgia.

She keeps noticing the way the branches dangle towards the ground, and suddenly realizes what this tree is all about. Sal is mistaken about its meaning. This fig tree is not meant to welcome him back like a prodigal child. It is the opposite, it is meant to make him understand something else.

“Sal, do you know what is so special about that tree, even more special than it being so old, so massive, and so odd looking, something even more special than the fact that it is the same one you sat under as an eleven year old?”

“No, tell me.”

“It was meant to foreshadow your destiny more than fifty years ago. That tree is you and me, in Canada, it’s about all the other immigrants that leave their homes and go to a foreign land. It’s a symbol for all immigration.”

Sal remembers how he has always seen his immigration, his displacement, as a type of parental kidnapping, he hadn’t wanted to leave Sicily, to leave all his friends. It had been an abrupt uprooting, and

that shouldn't have happened. Laura is mistaken. These tree roots, if anything, symbolize what he had been missing in Canada, why he needed to come back.

"Honey, I don't think you are right."

"Look Sal, the Banyan tree is the only tree with new roots that grow from the branches. See those branches, how they come down to the ground, they dig into the earth and mix with the bottom roots. This way new and old roots get blended, become unique. Much like the immigrants in Toronto."

"You are making this up."

"No, you can read about it, that's the amazing feature of the Banyan tree. People say that it appears to move because those branches create new thinner stalks and roots to the side of its original trunk. As if moving, as if migrating if you will."

She smiles.

He doesn't see that and shakes his head. She was creating a storyline to suit what she believed in, and to prove him wrong. She continues.

"We immigrants are like the Banyan tree because there in Canada, although uprooted from our own past, we are growing new roots through our children, in effect our children are those branches you see dangling down, ready to create rootlets. You see what I mean?"

He saw her argument, but it was all cerebral, it lacked heart, it didn't take into account what he was feeling.

"Laura, how is it that I feel more at home here than in Canada?"

She tried to be as gentle as possible.

"I know Sal, I am sorry about your pain, but you know that there is no coming back, you know that these roots, real or metaphorical, are not calling you back. Maybe they are telling you to finally let go. Or maybe, a fig tree is just a fig tree."

Sal shakes his head again.

After taking a few more photos, Sal and Laura walk out of *Giardino Garibaldi*, not saying much, neither sad nor happy, wondering how a tree in a Piazza can mean something so different.

It was perhaps best that they did not know that a Banyan tree, also called the *Strangler Fig*, is a tree whose seeds may grow into the crevices of another tree, sprouting and branching downwards to root, but in the process, out of a need to survive, sometimes this fig tree strangles and kills the original host.