

The death of Luigi's mother

It was only three days ago that his mother had still been alert enough to speak to him, in the brief moments that she was awake. She still had her sing-song Sicilian accent, even with her quiet whisper of a voice. Luigi had sat alone with her, holding her tiny hand, ignoring all the tubes in her arm, waiting for her to wake up, speak to him, and then watch her drift away again.

‘You are such a beautiful boy, Luigi,’ she whispered. ‘I’m so proud of you, so grateful that I had a son as strong and handsome as you. You will grow up to be a tall handsome man.’

‘I know, mama, I know, but you’ll still be here to see me.’

She had squeezed his hand and nodded silently. Then she would drift off to sleep for a few minutes, her hand relaxing in his, then her eyes would slowly open, and she would speak again. On that day, three days ago, he had sat there for hours jealously guarding time with his mother. It was such a rare pleasure to have her to himself. Normally one of the neighbours or an aunt or cousin from Sicily would be in the room, and there was no space or time for him to speak to her. The doctors said that she was critically ill now, but he still believed that she would get better, even when everyone else was ‘expecting the worst’. She had always taught him to be optimistic about life. She had almost settled for a single life in Sicily, then quite by chance had met his father at a dance when she was travelling to visit family in Brittany. Meeting Luigi’s father was the luckiest day of her life, she always said, because it meant that she had given birth to her beautiful boy, Luigi.

His mother was the soft, gentle influence in his life, but a woman that always encouraged Luigi to be his own person and do his own thing. She had been a solitary girl growing up, always very pretty but shy and reticent in the bustling noisy Sicilian family environment that she had grown up in. She was no fool and would argue on any issue with any living person, but always gently and with a smile, but never backing down if she believed that she was right. His father, on the other hand, was a tough man, very direct, but totally besotted with his mother. He had fallen for her when they first met, and never wavered one inch from knowing that this was the woman he would love for the rest of his life. Her illness was destroying him, and he had retreated to the bars of the docks, never drinking in the apartment, but rarely sober these days. They had an insurance policy which would pay out if she died, but Luigi was hanging on to her fighting off the cancer and being around for many years to come. He seemed to be the only optimist left in the whole family.

‘You can do anything you put your mind to, Luigi,’ his mother would say to him over and over again. ‘You are a clever boy, and with your brains and your charm, there is nothing that you can’t do. You work hard at school, and you will see. Opportunities will present themselves, and you must take them with both hands.’

Now, dozing on the bed in front of him, in his parents’ tiny bedroom, she was grimacing more with the pain, and Luigi wanted to go and fetch someone to help. However, this was the first time he had been alone with his mother in ages, and he didn’t want it to end, and he didn’t want to let go of her hand. She would come back to him in a few minutes.

‘You look after your father. He is a good man. He loves you very much, Luigi,’ she had told him over and over again. ‘No matter what he says, or what he does, always remember that.’

Luigi always said ‘Yes’ to all of these things, but he was ten years old and wasn’t really taking them in. They didn’t mean much to him then. He just wanted his mother to get better, but when she opened her eyes to speak, and cried out with the pain, he rushed into the next room to get someone to help with the painkillers. That was what she needed, and one of the cousins came in to adjust to morphine drip, but the drugs made her drift off, and then she was sleeping and not talking to him anymore. He kissed her hand and let his cousin guide him out of the room to get some food. With his

aunts and cousins there, all of them women, there was always food and drink available to anyone who visited or who stayed there. Luigi didn't know where they all were sleeping but reckoned there were about eight Sicilian women visiting at the moment, and they came and went from somewhere. He didn't know where.

His father was sleeping on the sofa, or on the floor beside his mother's bed, and Luigi was still in his bed in his own room.

That was three days ago, and Luigi hadn't been able to speak to his mother since then. She had only briefly been awake enough to speak, and that was to the doctor or possibly his father, but when Luigi had time with her, he just sat beside her, holding her hand, willing her to get better.

Today he had been called to the main office at school, and then driven home, and simply told that he needed to be at home now as his mother was getting worse. Luigi assumed that she was having a bad day, but she would survive and he still believed she would eventually get better. She had bad days and less bad days all the time.

When he walked into the apartment the Sicilian relatives were all sitting around their tiny dining table, and one of his Italian aunts jumped up and rushed to hug him.

'I'm so sorry, Luigi. She is beyond the pain now. She has gone.'

'What?' said Luigi pushing his aunt away.

'The doctor has just left. Your papa is in with her now. She went peacefully in her sleep, like an angel. She's gone now, Luigi.'

'No, no she's hasn't,' shouted Luigi. 'She hasn't! You're lying!'

Luigi had run into the bedroom where his father sat beside the pale figure of his mother, holding her hand, and crying like he had never seen him cry before. Luigi didn't want his father there. He wanted his mother back, and to have her hold him tight in her arms. He ran out of the apartment into the streets, and walked down to the old town and back, crying angrily at a deep and irreversible sense of loss, something he would never lose.

That was the last time Luigi had lost his temper, and steadily he retreated behind his smiling, cheeky persona, and dealt with the world at arm's length from then on. His father never properly accepted that life could go on in any meaningful way and drank himself to sleep most nights.