

ADDOLORATA
By Nadina LaSpina

When I was a child in Sicily, my mother carried me in her arms everywhere. She carried me from one room to another in our old house, out to the sun-drenched courtyard to look at the geraniums in the pots, even all the way up the steps to the roof terrace from where you could see the sea. And she carried me into the kitchen, which always smelled of tomato sauce, and to the bathroom whenever I had to go. " I have to pee, mamma." "O please, not again, my back is killing me, can't you hold it?"

After I turned five, my mother carried me every day across the street to the convent of the *Addolorata* where I went to school. At the door of the convent, she would hand me over to the nuns who would carry me to the classroom.

The convent took its name from a statue in its church: the statue of Mary *Addolorata* -- in Italian the word means "grieving" "sorrowful." It was a Sicilian version of Michelangelo's *Pieta*. Mary, the mother, dressed in black and purple silk, sorrow carved deeply into her painted face, held on her lap the dead Christ, red-stained slender limbs draped in lifeless abandonment.

Every Sunday my mother carried me into the church and, before Mass started, she would kneel with me in her arms in front of the *Addolorata* and light a candle. My arm tightly wrapped around my mother's neck, I was painfully aware of the gazes of the whole congregation.

Sometimes I thought my mother and the *Addolorata* were one and the same.

People seemed to have the same anguished look on their faces when they looked at my mother carrying me that they had when looking at the *Addolorata* holding her dead son.

"Oh, *che bella bambina!* What a pretty little girl! *Che peccato!* What a sin, what a shame!" the town women would say, looking up from their knitting and sewing, when my mother, with me in her arms, would go sit with them in the afternoon sun. The sorrow in their voices made me wish I were ugly. I didn't want my being pretty to make people sad.

"*Che croce!* What a cross you have to bear," the women would murmur, shaking their heads. Their sympathy usually made my mother's eyes fill with tears. But she never complained to them about me. She didn't tell them how heavy I was getting, or how her back was hurting.

My mother always accepted her suffering like a good Sicilian woman resigned to her destiny. After all, in Sicily, all women suffered. They believed that a woman's destiny was to suffer. I sat on my mother's lap listening to the women talking about their sufferings: the curse of menstruation, the toil of pregnancy and childbirth, the ravages to the body caused by pregnancy after pregnancy, the exhaustion of raising children, the

rigors of poverty... and some of them suffered their husbands - their brutishness, maybe their beatings. My mother, carrying in addition the cross of a crippled child, was the epitome of suffering womanhood. She was the living *Addolorata*.

The nuns at the convent did their best to teach me to embrace my own destiny. "Offer your suffering to the lord," Sister Angelica would say to me. One day, I rebelled: "But I want to be happy!" I blurted out. She started stroking me and kissing me. "Oh, my poor darling, how could you be happy? You can never be happy!" I don't know where the anger came from. "I can be happy!" I yelled and I struggled to free myself from the nun's ominous embrace.

When I told my mother what the nun had said, at first her eyes looked sad and I thought she was going to cry. But then she started laughing. "Of course you can be happy!" she said to me. "That nun is just a sourpuss, believe me, *gioia!*" "Joy" in Italian is used as a term of endearment, and that's what my mother called me. Then she started tickling me to make me laugh.

When we were alone, my mother laughed a lot. She laughed when the neighbor's cat brought her kittens to our house and I wanted to keep them all, and when the sparrows built a nest under the archway of our back door. She laughed when I spilled the inkbottle on my grandmother's good tablecloth and was so afraid she'd get mad at me.

Sometimes, even while she complained about my being heavy and about her aching back, my mother laughed. She laughed while we struggled up the steps to the roof terrace, and when we made it all the way up she would make believe she was dropping me and lay me down on the cement floor and, breathless, lay down beside me while we both laughed wildly. Every day she would exercise my legs as the doctor in Catania had taught her to do, and she would tickle my feet and make me laugh so hard I would choke.

She didn't seem at all like the *Addolorata* then.

When we were alone, my mother seemed happy. She always called me *gioia*. I couldn't understand how I could be both her "cross" and her "joy."

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