

CHAPTER 7

Dorme Bene, Bella Nonna



It is Italian *Tradizione* (Tradition) that the oldest granddaughter is sent to live with her widowed grandmother. So it was in Nonna's Southern Italian hometown of *Pedivigliano*. True to the Tradition, at six years of age Nonna moved in with her grandmother, a few steps down the narrow, dark, stone passage from her family's home. Nonna cherished living with her grandmother and proudly employed her role as grandmother's helper.

Nonna mentioned the Tradition repeatedly to me, her oldest granddaughter. I suppose Nonna believed the Tradition lived on through the 20th century and while desiring her oldest granddaughter to fulfill the Tradition, never wanted to pressure me. Nonna made an earnest attempt to understand the modern career-oriented, transient society. I did my best to fulfill Tradition's role. During school breaks and holidays I took up residence with Nonna. As her heart failure progressed I stayed with her most weekends.

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Nonna was a voracious reader. Biographies, romance novels, historical fiction, and magazines; she read what came her way via friends and family. She read in bed before falling asleep. An early riser, she remained in bed and read until the sun came up. When overnighting at Nonna's, I was always last to bed. I inevitably attempted one more project before sleep: washing the last dishes in Nonna's sink, folding the clothes in Nonna's clean clothes basket, or returning a phone call to siblings who knew I had checked into Nonna's *cassa* for the weekend.

Before turning in for the night, it was customary to poke my head around her bedroom door to determine whether she continued absorbed in a romance novel. If she was awake and reading, as she typically was, I lay on the bed, curled at her feet. We talked for awhile, but when she sensed I was dropping off to sleep, her foot worked its way under the bedcovers to gently nudge me. I treasured our bedtime conversation, never wanting it to cease. But I had worked to exhaustion during the week and then raced for hours through traffic to reach her home. I knew my body needed eight hours of uninterrupted sleep.

I conceded to her nudging signal to head for bed in grandpa's bedroom. "Okay, *Bella Nonna*." (Okay, Beautiful Grandmother.) She was my beautiful grandmother, and with affection I addressed her so. With mischievous smile and arm-sweeping dramatic bow I backed out of her bedroom, lavishly adding, "*Principessa*." (Princess.) Oh how I loved to hear the girlish giggle that erupted when I addressed her as *Principessa*. Continuing to back away I stared at my *Bella Nonna* surrounded in her favorite color—lavender painted walls, lavender bedspread, and the lavender flowers she grew, dried, tied with a satin lavender ribbon and placed at her bedside in the purple cut glass vase. With lavender hue soft on her smiling face, against the lavender fabric headboard, she always, *always*, had the last words "*Dorme bene*." (Sleep well.) I hear in my mind the loving way Nonna spoke the phrase to me. "***Door-may beh-nay Lee-za***," with an

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accent of one whose first language was Italian. “*Dorme bene, Leeza!*” in the cheery tone of the ever-pleasant grandmother. “*Dorme bene, Leeza.*” with the sweetness of maternal love that warmed every bit of my being.

During the last years of Nonna’s life, “*Dorme Bene*” took on a different meaning. It was the year 2000. The start of a new century. Nonna’s 90 years of life had spanned almost the entire previous century. We stood in her backyard. Against the wire fence bordering her yard laid Nonna’s garlic patch. Three feet deep and twelve feet in length, the tall, thin, antique-silvered dark-green stalks were densely packed. I bent over, grabbed a handful of stalks close to the roots and pulled. Pungent garlic odor immediately released and assaulted my nostrils. A few minutes earlier I had decided to help Nonna harvest her garlic crop. It involved pulling dozens of stalks until their prized, plump root bulbs loosed from the earth. This was not so good for my arthritic hands, wrists and elbows. My hands were already deformed into grotesque gnarls. My elbows were decrepit and, when inflamed, made it impossible to brush my teeth or hair, or lift an eating utensil to my mouth—basic every day activities not often thought of as involving elbow bending—but necessary to live. I was trying to take every precaution possible to avoid further elbow damage and thus avoid elbow joint replacements. I knew the garlic-pulling feat was a no-no. But with Nonna’s advancing congestive heart disease, joint inflammation seemed the lesser of two evils. She could barely bend over and upright herself without fainting from impaired blood flow. Whether she acknowledged her advancing congestive heart disease did not matter: the reality of its limitations was apparent. Nonna was downhearted at the inability to pull her own garlic.

“Wow, Nonna! You have a great garlic crop this year!” I gushed, trying to boost her spirits. “Yes. Yes, *Leeza*. It was warm and wet this past month...that really helped the plants to grow.” The warmth and humidity continued this autumn afternoon but the chilled breeze, scent of fallen leaves, and

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low angle of the orange-tinged sunlight across her back yard signaled that winter approached. Little did I know that this fading-sun, aromatic, end-of-season harvest would be the backdrop for conversation about the final season of Nonna's life.

I continued to bend and tug the bulbous treasure from its earthly hiding place. At least it had rained recently, making the earth fall away with more ease than usual. Nonna had gone ahead of me, snipping the seed-heads from the garlic stalks. Nonna was less than five feet in height and the garlic stalks having reached over two and a half feet in height, she needed not to bend at all to sever the seed-heads. She placed the decapitated heads in the old basket whose bowl and handle were made from woven willow branches. The willow branches, now grayed with age, reminded her of the baskets her father, Genaro, wove back in Italy. For that reason it was one of her favorite baskets, as she had mentioned on several occasions. The heads looked like an encased miniature bulb of garlic cloves. "Now...I save these and they are the seeds I plant for my garlic next year," Nonna explained as if I did not know the procedure that had taken place in her backyard for decades. She paused. She let the filled willow basket fall to the soft grass by my feet. Her sigh was telltale. Could she be wondering the same as me? *Will there be a garlic patch next year?* She leaned against the garden hoe/makeshift walking stick/makeshift support beam.

"You know, *Leeza*, when your grandfather and I first moved to this house, I used to walk to Mass every morning. After he would leave for work I walked to Jefferson Avenue and followed Jefferson to St. Lucy's Church. There was an old woman who walked along Jefferson to Mass every morning too. We ended up walking together many times. You know what that old lady told me she was going to Mass for? She told me she was going to Mass every day to pray for a good death." Nonna stopped talking.

I continued pulling garlic bulbs from their nestle in the rich earth. I was in listening mode and only murmured, "Oh my."

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“Yes, *Leeza*. She told me she was praying for a good death.” Again, she stopped, then restarted again in almost a whisper. “I thought she was gruesome. I mean I thought... this woman is really strange. *Leeza*, I thought she was really gruesome.” Nonna always pronounced the word gruesome in an exaggerated manner, befitting to its meaning, with a rolling “r” and a drawn-out “ew”, sounding similar to “grrrr-eeeww-some”.

“But now I know what she meant...I understand now what she meant about praying for a good death, *Leeza*.” Her voice dropped to a whisper again toward the end of the last sentence. We were not making eye contact. My eyes were focused on the stalks in hand and the many, many more yet to do—the rows seemed never to end. Her eyes were also focused on the pulling project. I said nothing again, wanting only to be present to listen. I mumbled “hmmmm” so she would know I was following her and as oddly as the story was unfolding, that it was okay to continue.

“I am praying for a good death...that my death may be peaceful. That I go to sleep and peacefully pass into heaven to be with grandpa...and my daughter...and my mother.”

I did not stop Nonna’s talk. It was part of her end-of-life process. I did not try to negate her feelings by saying, “Don’t be ridiculous, Nonna. You aren’t going to die soon.” Nonna had pondered her mortality. She was preparing for her transition from this life into the next. It is of paramount importance for people to complete relationships that have been interrupted, to make peace with themselves, to say “I love you!,” to make peace with their divine maker, to make peace with death. And I would help Nonna with her end-of-life process; to bring to fruition the vital messages:

“I forgive you.”

“Please forgive me.”

“I love you.”

“Thank you.”

“Goodbye.”

And I could start right now by listening as she sorted

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through the blend of love-of-life courageous determination to stay alive versus the courageous realistic contemplation of determination on how to live her final days: to accomplish before dying a peace with herself, with loved ones and with her Divine Maker; to accomplish in death to be with her loved ones already passed and to meet her Divine Maker.

Nonna had already started sorting through her worldly possessions. I had discovered names of family members written on small squares of masking tape adhered to the backs of heavier objects and the bottoms of tea cups, or snippets of scrap paper slipped into zipper-locked plastic bags holding hand embroidered hankies or doilies. As she got further along into her sorting process, or perhaps more aptly named “serenity process,” she reminded me of post-death possession designations such as, “Now don’t forget *Leeza*, this goes to your father...it was his grandfather’s and his grandfather adored him.” She gained deeper inner peace through acting on her desire for a good death; resolving critical aspects of her life the best she was able at the time, and giving treasured material objects to people it was meaningful for her to know would possess them.

Nonna also began directing us how to achieve her ideal good death:

“Nancy, this is the pink dress I want to be buried in and here is where you can find it. This is my special Rosary...the one I got when I was in Rome...make sure they put this one in my casket.”

“Paul, you are in charge of everything as soon as I go. Keep a copy of my will where you can find it so you can start with my wishes as soon as I die.”

“*Leeza*, I want to be able to breathe no matter what. Don’t let them put that no revive thing (do not resuscitate order) in my chart so they give me oxygen if I can’t breathe.”

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“Pasquale, you know I have to be laid out at Bagnasco Funeral Home. That is where your father was laid out. Of course I have to be laid out there too...”

To participate in each aspect of a loved one’s end-of-life transition, independently or collectively, is an honor. Whether it is in healing your relationship with that person, arranging good comfort care, or assisting in settling legal and financial affairs, each “piece” helps to achieve the other “peace” that leads to a good death.

I do not regret one minute I spent with Nonna. Bereft of the opportunity to tell my mom I loved her before she was unexpectedly killed, I knew the importance of saying goodbye, of having the “caring conversations” to fulfill the “Let’s forgive each other”...the “I Love You”...the “Thank you”...the “Goodbyes.” Our society has an obsession with youthfulness magnified by a fear of death. The fear causes many to shrink away from a person who is dying, but I truly believe there is no more honorable privilege than to help a person transition from this life to the next.

For all the pain and struggle of having to face two serious illnesses and the sudden loss of my mother and maternal grandmother before the age of twenty-five, there were beneficial aspects of those cruel lessons. The harshness of those situations forced me to stare my mortality and the mortality of the people with whom I loved the most, squarely in the eye. I was toe to toe with the grim reaper, staring into the faceless, cold, blackness beneath his hood. Acceptance of the possibility of my own death was much easier than even the thought of losing my mother and maternal grandmother.

My Italian grandfather died from pancreatic cancer in 1978. I was a seventeen year-old filled with teen drama and rebellion. My grandfather had a thick Italian accent, loud voice and passion for people, food and his homemade wine. His end-of-life story occurred in a time when the patient was not told he had a terminal illness. The patient would undergo an “exploratory” surgery. During the surgery parts

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of their organs and tissues would be removed. After the surgery the physician would enter the room, escort the spouse, son or daughter into a private room separate from the patient and tell the family they had diagnosed cancer, there were or were not any treatment options and the patient had an estimated number of months to live. The family would reenter the patient's room with eyes puffy and nose red from crying yet pretend that everything would be okay. Then the patient, seeing the devastated looks of his loved ones, in turn would pretend that he didn't know he was dying. And the charade would continue. In my grandfather's case, my big ears radar tuned into Nonna and my father speaking in hushed tones. The radar acuity "mistakenly overheard" the phrase "...his cancer." With teenage righteousness the size to match the big ears radar, I confronted Nonna and my father for the truth about whether grandpa had cancer. I, of course, was chastised for "deliberate overhearing." The chastisement was minor in comparison to the stern warning, "Don't tell Grandpa!" How odd. Here was a large, loud, strong Italian man, and no one would tell him he had cancer; no one would gently explain he would die soon. But this "Don't tell the patient the bad news" left the patient with no ability to make a decision on whether to or how to treat the cancer. Even more deleterious with this approach is the loss of ability to work through the relationships with oneself, with God, and with others. The charade robs a person of the caring conversations:

"I forgive you."

"Please forgive me."

"I love you."

"Thank you."

"Good-bye."

The crisp, sweet-smelling spring of 2003 was moving into the oppressive muggy feel of a Michigan summer. Even more oppressive was the news that Nonna was back in the hospital. The nasty fluid build-up of end stage heart and kidney disease was cycling more rapidly now. It seemed

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body out from kid-sized lower bunk. “The nursing home just called. Nonna passed away in the night.”

I shot out from the cubby-hole and stood upright, stomping my foot.

“No, no, no! I wanted to be there! I wanted you to be there! I wanted *someone* to be there...so she wouldn't die alone!”

Tremendous guilt pressed in. *How could you be so selfish as to seek sleep and abandon Nonna at the time of her death?* Tremendous self-disappointment brought a tightening to my chest.

Laura and Mike pulled me inside their warm embrace for a group hug.

“Lisa, you know Nonna. She never, *ever* wanted to bother us. This was her way...you *know* it.”

Laura was right. I could hear Nonna's voice in my mind, “Youse girls just go along...I don't want to bother youse girls...,” repeating the selfless phrases she had uttered on hundreds of occasions in the past. She had done it her way. For years she had prayed to pass peacefully in her sleep. The nurse said she checked around 3 a.m. and found our sweet Nonna, “sleeping more peacefully than she had at any time since she was admitted.” When she checked again around 5 a.m., Nonna had passed. Nonna fought with *coraggio* and *testadura* until the very end...then peacefully transitioned to the next life.

Nonna, you spent a lifetime creating for me a beautiful love story between a grandmother and grand-daughter. Now it is time for you to Dorme Bene, Bella Nonna. (Sleep well, my beautiful grandmother.)



It takes courage:

- To change the things you can.
- To accept with serenity the things you cannot change.
- To fight to the end.
- To go in peace.