

Lezione Due: Il Malocchio
(Lesson Two: The Evil Eye)

The Courage to Take
Charge of the Aspects of
Life You *Can* Control





CHAPTER 11

The Evil Eye



THROUGHOUT MY LIFE NONNA TOLD ME STORIES ABOUT SUPERSTITIOUS ITALIAN folk who inflicted vengeful curses. *Superstiziosi* (superstition) was believed along with and as solemnly as any religious doctrine in Nonna's southern Calabria region of Italy. Accordingly, Nonna told *Il Malocchio!* (The Evil Eye) stories with a serious tone and credulous face. In her tales the characters exacting evil were not *stregoni* (witches), rather they were spiteful or jealous townsfolk seeking revenge or conveying their displeasure.

As a little girl I sat with wide-eyed captivity for Nonna's tales of the cursed.

"It happened that an elderly mother thought *her* son should marry the town's most popular girl. This mother was outraged;

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instead of marrying *her* son, the girl had agreed to marry the first guy who proposed to her!” Nonna made the pronouncement in exaggerated urgent tone to signal commencement of a catastrophic legend.

Nonna’s eyes were fierce with imagined vengeance, her voice reaching a punitive pitch. “*Ohhhhh* ... this old lady was *aaaaaan*-gry. She was fit to be tied! So she set out to ‘fix’ the guy who had proposed in advance of her son’s proposal.”

My young-girl mind conjured a four-foot, stooped widow, squeezed in a heavy black cotton dress, despite the hot Calabrese sun, setting out on her vendetta pilgrimage. I recognized this particular oft told, Evil Eye story. *It was going to be bad for the impetuous fool-in-love guy* ... The prickling at the back of my neck signaled growing eeriness.

Nonna interrupted her jaw-clenched serious tone for a moment to interject her personal opinion with an air of righteous authority. “After all, everyone in the town knew *her* son had his eye on the girl first.”

As Nonna returned to her scary story-telling composure, my young imagination became fully engaged. In my mind I could see the old, vengeful Italian woman in black cotton, stocking-covered legs appearing from under the concealing folds of her heavy black skirt as she shuffled gradually along uneven stones that paved the narrow street. I heard the scuffle of tattered, bulky black leather shoes. Street dust, unsettled from the worn leather soles that had scraped against the arid stone road, filled in the cracks of the worn leather and filled the gap between the bulging, laced ties. The taupe powder gathered on the rolls of the heavy black cotton stockings as they bunched at her bloated ankles. She pauses. The old woman’s neck apparently fused to her stiffened hunched back, twists only slightly. With the stiff rotation of the head I see the braided bun of grey hair follow the movement. Her face turns toward the door of the unsuspecting victim. Suspense thickens. But it is the sight of her eyes that cause me to shudder—cold,

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deep, black that connotes evil. It was the penetrating black eyes that moved slowly toward the victim's house scanning for its prey. Once locked in to the malevolent-eyed sights there is no escape! The frightful black eyes cast an evil spell; further propelled by an undecipherable full-lipped utterance and right-hand gesticulation. The impetuous, fool-in-love guy is screwed.

I was terrified! I knew the narration was merely one of the "Old Country" tales, but the combination of Nonna's fierce storytelling and my lively imagination produced the feeling of some creepy-crawly, million-legged, hairy thing crawling up the back of my neck and into my ear to hatch its young-lings. *It's okay; it happened long ago; rid the creeps with a full-body shake-off.*

According to Nonna the curse-caster could place a curse that was short-lived but devastating. Or the curse-caster could place a curse to plague you for the rest of your life and continue on through your progeny. As I grew older, my curiosity was able to overcome the terrified mesmerism. Of course, I just wanted to know the good stuff.

"Nonna, really, just how contorted were his legs and arms after the Evil Eye got him? Was his body all contorted for the rest of his life?"

And with further maturity I was more intrigued to learn why a person was cursed than what gruesome tragedy happened to the cursed. I interrupted Nonna mid-story and asked, "Nonna, what could that guy possibly have done? I mean, what could he have done so horrendous to provoke such devastating ill wishes?"

As an adult, I seriously doubted the authenticity of *il malocchio* power. I admit my childhood-instilled terror induced a slight prickling around the black Italian forearm hairs. But I reasoned that in actuality the cause had a scientific explanation or coincidence, not an evil-doing spell.

As she was in her late 80s and had lived far from the superstition-abiding land of Italy for seventy years, I had no idea

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Nonna continued a fervent belief in curses, much less herself a caster of *il malocchio*.

I called Nonna one day and she answered in a panicky gasp. “Oh Leeza!”

O dear Lord; some relative has gone to heaven. I feared the worst from the breathless sound of her voice.

“I killed him. *O Madon'*, I killed him!” she cried.

It took me a minute to figure out what was going on because she was speaking rapidly, partly in Italian and partly in English, interjecting “*O Madon!*” with despairing moans throughout the mixed language sentences. Part of the delay in my comprehension of the situation was because the idea of my sweet Nonna actually killing any human was incomprehensible.

“*Il malocchio!*” she stammered at me impatiently as I was trying to pull the English translation from the right side of my brain. “The *curse*, *Leeza!*” she stammered emphatically, exasperated because I had not instantly understood.

I could see in my mind Nonna’s posture at that exact moment. She was sitting forward, her face was tight with fret and the hand that was not holding the phone to her ear was firmly grasping the padded arm of her velour lounge chair. Everyone in the family recognized Nonna’s panic pose.

“*Aspetto, Nonna,*” (“Wait, Nonna.”) I begged, thinking it best to halt her by addressing her in her native language.

Eventually I got her to slow down her speech enough to tell me the story, mostly in English although she continued to groan with guilt and invoke the name of the Blessed Virgin Mary after every few sentences.

As told, the man who lived directly behind Nonna placed fill-dirt in the low-lying areas of his backyard, spreading the recess-filling dirt flush against the fence they shared. It sounded like a good idea for residents of the small blue-collar backyards subject to Lake St. Clair’s high water table flooding. The problem with

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the neighbor's project was that the level of dirt he accomplished was higher than the ground level on Nonna's side of the fence. As a consequence, at the next heavy rain, water ran downward from the higher level of his yard and flooded the back of Nonna's yard. Perhaps the resulting mini-lake that was once Nonna's backyard could have been anticipated by a neighbor building up the ground level of his backyard. Regardless of the neighbor's intentions, Nonna was so upset with the man she placed a monstrous curse on him and his backyard.

The next evening the shrill siren and bright lights of an ambulance caught her attention. Through the backyard fence she saw the ambulance stop at his house. The neighbor's garage and the back of his house obscured most of her view of what was taking place at the neighbor's front door and parked ambulance. Nonna asked a neighbor lady friend to call a second lady friend who lived on the same street as the man to find out what happened. The lady friend reported back to Nonna that the man had been taken from his house by ambulance and had died! Nonna resolutely, and with full-blown guilt and remorse believed it was her backyard curse that had killed him.

"Leeza, I did not mean for *il malocchio* to kill him. I just wanted to give his backyard some little *afflitto* (affliction) for what he did to me; honest, Leeza." Her confession was weighted with overwhelming guilt.

I wanted to soothe Nonna's guilt by convincing her there was no power in *il malocchio*. The problem with debunking *il malocchio* was I did not want to eviscerate an evidently important tool she used to take charge of her life. I would be telling an elderly lady of limited physical and financial capabilities that the means she used to feel she had control over aspects of her life was non-effectual. It was a difficult dilemma to resolve.

The tale appears to be about a negative action taken and negative result achieved. But there is a positive moral to be derived.

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Nonna had reached far back to her Old County practices and illustrated an important lesson: “Take charge of what you can control and let go of the rest.”

As Nonna told the full story, she explained that heavy rains had pooled in a lower than ground level basin area between her backyard and the backyard of the neighbor behind her lot. A pond formed in both of their backyards, the back chain fence dividing the pool almost evenly. Nonna clarified that her initial plan was to build fill-dirt to the same level raised by the backyard neighbor. With both backyards at the same level, her backyard would not flood.

As Nonna had moved forward with her initial plan she realized that at 80-plus years old she could not shovel the one ton of topsoil needed to raise the level sufficiently. She had not wanted to bother her grandsons to shovel and haul dirt for hours nor could she afford to have someone place the dirt. So she had decided to take charge in a manner in which she was able. She had taken the long-handled hoe that served to steady her thin five-foot frame as she traversed the uneven brick and sod of her garden path. She had stood there in her backyard facing the back of the neighbor’s house, her hand around the hoe’s handle that rose above her head. With a determination akin to Moses, tall wooden staff in hand, preparing to part the Red Sea, Nonna spoke the words of the curse and sealed it with the hand gestures. With one final flick of the back of her hand, upward over her throat, under her chin and outward until her arm was extended, she flung *il malocchio* toward her enemy. And with the flinging of that curse Nonna had taken charge of her situation.

You may believe that you have no control over chronic illness in your life. You may feel that day after day you feel pain, your body deteriorates, and there is nothing you can do about it. When I think back to *il malocchio* I fervently disagree. I believe each person has within them the resources necessary to take charge of at least some part of their health, even if struggling with chronic

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illness. My frail 86-year-old Italian grandmother found a way, even if it may have been extreme, to believe she had taken charge of her flooded backyard situation. I do not mean to advocate for going out and flinging curses.

The point is there is always some aspect of a situation over which you have control. Ban the doubting thoughts, the anxious feelings, and all the internal and external distractions. Become still for a moment. Look beyond the illness and there you will discover manageable features of your health and your life. In that moment of stillness and discovery become aware of what stirs within you. Identify the resources that lay within, the resources you can take hold to manage those features of health and life. With both arms outstretched in beckoning gesture, call forth the resources and sound the call until it reverberates in every tissue within you. Apply the gathered resources full-heartedly as bravely and readily as possible, all the while letting the passersby and heavens hear the cry: *Coraggio!*

With courage it is possible to:

- Recognize there are elements of your illness and components of your health over which you have control.
- Acknowledge you have inner and external resources with which you can take charge of your health.
- Acknowledge you have inner and external resources with which you can take charge of your life.
- Apply your resources to take charge of your health.
- Apply your resources to take charge of your life.