

# Exhumed

BY BRUNA DI GIUSEPPE BERTONI

With flowers in my hand, I walked up the path leading to my grandmother's grave. As I stood in front of the headstone gazing at the inscription, I suddenly found I was reading a name I didn't know. When I looked at the oval picture frame, the photograph inside was not my grandmother. I was certain that where I stood, next to the mausoleum of the "Padacci" family, was the spot where we had laid my grandmother to rest. Her grave was the first on the right and only two other headstones were beside her. Next to the last grave there was a crypt with an angel on it. The weeping angel was something I wouldn't forget. This marble sculpture, larger than life, of an angel bringing his hands to his face, beautifully captured the essence of grieving for the dead.

"God, where is she?" I said out loud, "who has been put here in her place!" Is this what happens to those people whose family is not here to tend to the grave? I wondered whether they had sold the plot to someone else thinking that no one would be back to visit her. For a moment, I reflected. Doubting my memory and feeling uneasy, I began to look around. "Maybe this is not her grave," I murmured. Seven years is a long time to remember the exact location of a headstone.

I had driven on my own to this small village about one hour outside the city. I wanted to be alone to visit my *Nonna's* grave. I was convinced that in this spot was where she had been buried. There was no mistake.

I had dreamed of this moment since the last time I was here. We buried her in this cemetery seven years ago. When we received word of

her death, my mother and I flew from Toronto. We got here just in time for the funeral. I felt so much tenderness and compassion for my grandmother, who had spent so many years alone in this forgotten village. One by one her children left her to go to America. My mother was the last one to leave. The day we left, my grandmother was out of control. She wailed for hours, telling my mother that she wanted to die. Watching her was unbearable. Someone took her away just before we left for the train station. My mom had promised her that when we were settled in Canada, we would send for her. But, a few years later, she had a stroke and was bedridden until she died.

Nothing had changed in the tiny village. The old people were the only ones left; their children had all gone. The cemetery is smaller than a football field in size, surrounded by a high stone wall. The iron gates are always open, and the undertaker lives only five minutes away.

It was a voice from a distance that broke my contemplation: "*Signora*, you cannot get any water for your flowers until after four-o'clock," she called. "Peppino, the undertaker, went home for lunch and then he has a nap."

She continued walking toward me. She was dressed all in black, a shawl wrapped around her head and shoulders, protecting her from the cool breeze. Finally, she stood in front of me, looking old and frail. She must have been in her 90s. Her eyes were small and tiny, she had no teeth. She smiled, unable to keep her head from trembling. "Where are you from?" she asked.

I couldn't speak. I didn't answer.

My mind was in a race with my thoughts; and I really didn't want to talk to anyone.

She tugged at my arm. "Whose daughter are you?" she insisted.

I suddenly turned around and replied, "I'm sorry *Signora*. I came from Canada to visit my grandmother's grave, but she's not there anymore." I could hardly finish my sentence when I broke down and cried. I was cold and shivering. She took her shawl and gently placed it over my shoulders. We sat on the mausoleum steps while she rambled on about Peppino and how he runs the cemetery. She had a full head of white hair which had never been cut. It was twisted into a braid and pinned up onto the back of her head, keeping the hair neat and tidy.

Her trembling hand wiped tears from her eyes as she began to tell me about her son. "My son," she hesitated, "and my brother Giuseppe, left many years ago to go to America. When I see strangers in here, I come and look, hoping it's one of them, or

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someone from my family.”

While she continued with her story, the clock on the old tower struck four o'clock. The old woman stood up and caressed my face. “Wait, and I'll get Peppino. He'll show you where your grandmother is.”

She left me sitting there dumbfounded. As she vanished around the

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bend behind some monuments, I realized I still had her shawl. I figured she could get it back later. It was still chilly. I took the shawl and wrapped it closer to me and waited. I could still smell her musky scent from the shawl. I didn't even know her name. She seemed so lonely.

Peppino came a short while later, and when he saw me, he became agitated. “*Signora*,” he yelled, standing erect and serious. “I don't have the keys to the mausoleum. The office is closed now. You'll have to come back tomorrow!”

He realized how upset I was when I took a jump and stood right in front of him. “I don't want to visit the mausoleum *Signor* Peppino. I want to know where they put my grandmother!”

“Your grandmother?” he replied. “Yes, my grandmother. She was right here,” I said, pointing to the first grave. “Why was she moved, and by whose authority?” I asked with tears in my eyes. “Is this what happens to

dead people if they have no one left here to tend to their grave?”

Peppino took two steps back, as I got closer to him. “I was here the day we buried her,” I sobbed. “I was here seven years ago! Massari was her married name.”

I couldn't continue. I sank down near the wall of the mausoleum and cried uncontrollably.

Peppino didn't know what to say or do. He was afraid to even get too close. He tried from a distance to talk to me. “Please *Signora*, I've worked here for only five years. Yet, I think your *Nonna* was married to Anato?”

I lifted my head and stopped sobbing. Had I heard correctly? He knew my grandfather's name. “Did you say, Anato?” I mumbled. “*Sì*, yes, Anato was married to Maria Rosa Tebberno,” I replied with certainty.

I sighed and stood still to listen to him carefully. He continued, “By law, people are buried no more than ten years. There's not enough room for everyone.”

“So, where do you put them? I questioned him.

“In the ossuary over there.” He pointed to the crypt where the angel lay.

I was mortified. “Why didn't my mother tell me this.” I could never dream of anything like this happening back home. As we walked toward the crypt, Peppino explained the way they exhumed people. They put the bones in a little marble box and seal it forever. It is placed in the basement of this crypt in no specific order. “Nobody goes down there, except to place new boxes once a body is exhumed,” he explained. It sounded gruesome.

“Can I see inside?” I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders and said, “if you want. It's dark down there, though.” The dark wood door to the crypt was hand carved; as you enter, there's an altar with pictures of St. Rocco, patron saint of the village. Vases full of flowers and lit candles were everywhere.

The stairs leading to the dark basement were cracked and worn.

“I'll leave the door wide open so that we can see the stairs,” he told me as we made our way down. Peppino walked in front of me talking constantly, giving me the history of his family and telling me how proud he was of his job. I followed him keeping a distance. Once he reached the bottom of the stairs, I couldn't see him anymore. I stood still part way down until my eyes could get adjusted to the dark. Peppino stood in front of the door looking into this so-called ossuary.

“All you can see are tiny little boxes,” he explained, as I made my way down next to him. “All are on top of each other, marked with their name, the year they were born and the year they died.” I couldn't believe my eyes. This sepulchre was a dingy, dark room that smelled of mold. It seemed like a forgotten room where a long-ago child had played with blocks, piling one on top of another, and then left them untouched. “Do you think we could find my grandmother *Signor* Peppino?” I asked, knowing the answer already.

“It's virtually impossible, but she is down here *Signora*. They are all down here,” he replied.

Peppino knew how disappointed I was. I stormed out of the crypt making nasty remarks on the stupidity of their laws. Exhuming loved ones, putting their remains in a bone-urn and laying them in a mass grave. “I can't accept this!” I shook my head. “How can it be so complicated to stack those boxes in alphabetical order? Or even by the year they were born, or died?” I asked with anger.

I no longer paid attention to the bouquet of flowers I was holding as I was gesticulating—I had no place to put them, and they were wilting. Peppino kept his distance. When I finally stopped sobbing he spoke. “You can put your flowers inside the crypt, in the chapel on the altar. That's where everyone places them for those who have been exhumed.”

I nodded my head and asked for a candle.

"Five thousand lire, *Signora*," he quickly told me. Five thousand lire are the equivalent of about four dollars. "Sure," I said.

Thinking how much he would make on that 5,000 lire, I took the candle and lit it. In silence I cried, mourning my grandmother all over again, feeling guilty for her children leaving her, and facing the reality of life which is mortality. I wanted to leave, run, and never look back. I wanted to find a place somewhere and cry all by myself.

Peppino walked me to the car, and I reached for my purse and gave him the 5,000 lire. I touched my shoulders as I remembered the shawl the old lady gave me; I didn't have it anymore. "I must have dropped the shawl that the old lady gave me," I said to the Peppino, "the one that came to get you."

Puzzled, he replied, "*Signora*, no

one came to get me. I saw your car parked here and I knew someone was on the premises; besides, old people seldom come down here. It's too far from town."

I was too annoyed with him and exhausted to even try to explain to him about her. I asked him to please check the chapel, certain that I had left it there. "Please return it to her, I'm sure she'll be back later. And one more thing, thank her for me," I concluded, and drove off.

Those few hours were an ordeal. Driving back to the city, I paid little attention to making sense of the old lady. I didn't know her name. All I knew was that her son and a brother named Giuseppe left years before to go to America. I felt bad for not returning the shawl personally to her. The minute I reached the house, I called my mother in Toronto. It was seven o'clock in the evening and

in Toronto it was lunch time. When she answered the phone, I must have sounded like I was on drugs. Finally, I composed myself and tried to calmly explain what had happened. She too, was shocked and very upset. My mother had known about the exhumation but, over the years, she had completely blocked it out. Trying to make me feel better, she told me that she sends money to the nuns at the church every November 2nd for "the day of the dead."

Both of us were without words after that. She was too far away to be able to console me. Then, out of the blue, I asked, "Ma, *Nonna's* brother, your uncle that went to Pittsburgh years ago, what was his name?"

"Giuseppe," she replied.

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## RONNIE R. BROWN

### ... Perchance to Dream ...

*The hand, strong, manly, is touching her shoulder ... Since Dad's death the kids have noticed how she goes to bed early, sleeps late She feels the silk as it moves against her arm, feels his hand as it moves ... They have begun to worry, have started taking turns calling in the evening "to chat," dropping by unexpectedly for breakfast Forty years of marriage and yet she never felt like this, never wanted this way ... They are afraid that she has given up. The youngest girl, who has taken two courses in psychology, has warned them that this could be a symptom of ...*

*He is undoing the buttons, his hands so competent, so large, patient with the tiny round pearls Out on the line her corset moves with the wind, she has heard the neighbour's children laughing at it. No wonder, the bones hold it stiff, a headless, limbless thing, the exoskeleton of some prehistoric beast. Her own children have rarely seen her free of its grip, would be surprised by the soft rounding of her ... Hands cup her naked breasts, his lips kiss the nipples reverently (like a supplicant kissing a holy ring), his tongue ...*

*Her own fault, this fear, this lack of faith, when they were young she used to fool them, call them, come home early, sure one day she'd catch them in the act—of something. For her sex was a sin. A word that was never spoken, something done only in marriage, only ... Her thighs are parted now, anxious for his tongue to seek out another jewel as a duty, never for...*

*Somewhere a bell, the door, the phone, she isn't sure, doesn't care ... somewhere, somewhere ... Her back arches pleasure ringing, radiating, rocking her to ... sleep.*

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