

A Time of Loss

Laura's life had entered a period of apparent stability. She had found a significant niche for herself as an artist; she had loving relationship and a family. Life was apparently going well for her. She felt that she had made her peace. It is at times like this, however, that powerful events can intercede and lead to irrevocable change.

It happened on a spring morning, April the twenty-seventh, a Saturday. Laura would never forget even the smallest detail of that morning. She was busily stretching some canvas on a little portable workbench she had in the kitchen right below the large kitchen window. The sun was characteristically bright making the entire interior space come alive with sharpness and clarity. Audrey was sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee and reading the morning newspaper which had just been delivered. Michael was asleep upstairs in his room.

Audrey was speaking, "Laura," she began, "there is a story here about a new gallery that is opening up called Sunswept Galleries."

"Really!" Laura started to respond when the front doorbell rang. "I wonder who that could be?" she asked rhetorically as she stopped what she was doing and went to the door. When she opened it, a young man extended his hand, holding an envelope. "Telegram," he said.

Laura took the telegram and fumbled in her work apron pocket for change, handed it to him and thanked him. She opened it hurriedly, feeling inexplicably anxious. She read the contents:

Laura

Sad to notify. Matteo died 24 April. Deepest sympathy.

Angelina

She grew instantly pale and cried, "My God." She collapsed to her knees and her body slumped over on the kitchen floor.

Audrey ran to her side, "What's the matter?" she asked.

"Matteo is dead!" Laura shrieked.

Audrey did not know what to say. Instead, she knelt beside her, caressed her hair and held her. Laura's body shook uncontrollably. Suddenly, her mouth opened up, her lungs filled with air and a terrifying scream came out. Audrey actually felt her body pushed back by the power of that scream. She felt the emptiness Laura was feeling fill her. It made her entire body tremble as well.

Laura's emotions became numb succumbing to the utter coldness and despair that filled her. The world that so intrigued and enriched her, faded away into a blank canvas. Part of her was unreachable.

Michael was awakened by his mother's scream. It took him a few moments to realize where the piercing cry came from. He ran down the stairs. There he saw his mother and Audrey huddled together. His mother looked ghostly and frail like he never remembered seeing her. She had always seemed so strong to him like a great ship that could survive and thrive in any storm.

"Mom," he cried as he ran to her side and threw his arms around her. "What's the matter?" Laura heard his words but they sounded so distant. She could not make out their meaning. "Mom," he repeated, "what happened?"

"Matteo, Matteo," she said and that's all she could say. The resplendent shadow of grief had encircled her like a shroud. It was a formidable grief born of a great loss. Its hold was tenacious.

Audrey gently took his face in her hands and moved his head so that their eyes could meet. "Michael," she began, "your father is dead."

He looked at her and heard the words reverberate deep within his mind. He instantly recoiled from the thought. He grasped her forearms in his strong hands and

pushed her away from him. "No, he's not, you're lying." He turned his attention to his mother, "Mother, tell me Papa's not dead."

Recognizing her son's cry for help, Laura was drawn to the outside world, if only temporarily. She threw her arms around him and brought him to her. She wanted to absorb him totally within her. She would have put him back in her womb if she could. "Michael, Michael I'm sorry."

"No, no," he insisted, "you're both lying." He rose up and ran up to his room and slammed the door behind him. Laura lingered for awhile at the surface of her consciousness, but realizing she could not do much good there, quickly sank back into the comfort of her interior darkness.

"What am I going to do?" Laura asked. "The only man I ever truly loved is dead and I am responsible. I killed him, Audrey. I broke his heart and all he ever cared about was my own welfare. What am I going to do?"

Audrey knew that Laura was not expecting her to give her an answer to such questions. Instead, she tried her best to listen and comfort her. "I'm sure that you are not to blame, darling," Audrey said. Laura looked at her with a such a wild look of confusion in her eyes. Audrey felt more in that expression than could ever be communicated in any number of words.

Eventually, Audrey coaxed Laura into bed with her. She held her in her arms through the night. The next day, Audrey helped her lover make arrangements to fly her and her son to Paris. Laura decided that she needed to come out from under the weight of her grief at least long enough to take care of the details of Matteo's death as well as look after Michael.

"Don't worry," Audrey reassured her, "I'll keep everything together here. I don't want you to worry about any mundane details. Just take care of yourself and Michael. Promise to call me when you arrive so that I know you are safe."

"I promise," Laura answered not sounding terribly convincing. Michael had gotten by on even less sleep than his mother. His heart felt so broken and heavy that it would not allow the rest of the body to take its nourishment. He had become so withdrawn so quickly that it made Laura quite anxious about his state of mental health. She had pressured and cajoled him to come with her back to Paris. She realized that a period of denial was probably healthy, but she knew that he needed to look into the horrible face of that reality squarely on. Eventually, he relented.

Audrey wept bitterly as she saw Laura and her son disappear into the belly of the airplane. The mask of bravery that she had so admirably adorned fell off of her as soon as she had a moment to be alone with the pain she kept in her gut. It felt like a knurled and terrible hand had its iron grip around her throat and was pushing the air out of her like a balloon collapsing as a result of a tiny rupture.

Renewal

The flight to Paris was uneventful. Michael sat through it without uttering a word. He was so deep within his sorrow that he was inconsolable. Laura understood and let it be, although her heart ached for him. She knew that she would eventually feel the sharp edge of his anger. She tried not to let guilt overtake her. It was not easy. It was very difficult for her to suppress the desire to ease her own guilt by trying to assuage her son's feelings.

When they arrived at Orleans airport, it was raining. In spite of the dreariness, the city was as beautiful and alluring as she remembered it. While at the airport she immediately made some calls to her old comrades at the Institute. She was not sure where Matteo was to be buried, whether in Paris or his homeland. She finally managed to get through to the personnel director. He gave a number for her to call. The number was that of Matteo's sister, Angelina, who lived in the town of Marechiare, the place of Matteo's birth.

When she called, Angelina answered. She was barely able to understand Laura, but, of course, knew of her.

"Si, " she said, "Laura, of course, where are you?"

"I'm in Paris with my son Michael."

"You must come here right away!"

"Si," Laura answered, "Yes, we are on our way."

"Ciao"

She detected a strident tone in Anglina's voice. She certainly could understand the sister's animosity; she suspected that Angelina blamed her for his death. Laura was beginning to be overwhelmed by feelings of guilt and inadequacy that did not even begin

to touch her own grief. She recognized the emotional state of crisis she was in, and was determined not to be so hard on herself. Besides, she did not know what Angelina actually felt, but she would soon find out.

With Michael in hand, they flew from Paris to Naples. From there they took a bus to Marechiaro on the Gulf of Naples. They passed through sweeping views of the sea and the rugged coastline. Laura was struck by the beauty of the surroundings. Marvelous stone buildings seemed to literally come out of the bedrock.

With some help from a local postman, they found Angelina's apartment. Angelina happened to be working in the kitchen and was peering out the window that faced the street. When she saw the silhouetted figures of Laura and her son, she knew right away who they were purely from intuition. She immediately stopped what she was doing. She was not looking forward to this encounter and tried to steel herself. She walked to the front door, opened it and stood there with her hand held against her forehead above her eyes trying to shield herself from the sun. She was hoping that her English would be adequate.

"Laura," she called.

"Yes!" Laura answered.

Both women looked at each other intently. Angelina looked at Michael, and immediately saw her brother's unmistakable imprint on the boy's demeanor. She extended her arm and placed her hand tenderly on the boy's cheek, "Que faccio bello!" she exclaimed. She looked again at Laura and could not help but see the tenderness that was there and her bad feelings and apprehensions were somewhat mollified. Their arms encircled each other and held each other in embrace, in which they each kept a bit of distance from the other.

"I'm so sorry," Laura said in a way that indicated she couldn't hold the feelings in a moment longer. "Do you understand English, my Italian is very poor?"

"My English is all right, thanks to the tourists that come by and visit here.

“Tell me everything,” Laura insisted, “I need to know.”

“No, no, you and the boy must first rest, I insist! After that we will eat and talk.”

Laura looked at her son and saw the exhaustion in his face and knew that she was right.

“All right,” she said. Their hostess showed them to a small room on the upper level of the apartment.

When they were alone, they both went to bed. Michael crawled into his mother’s arms. “Mama I feel so sad!”

“I know, Michael, but rest your eyes for now,” she caressed his face with her hands as she said this. Feeling safe in his mother’s arms, he soon fell asleep. As she was lying there, she gazed around the room. It was simply furnished, and everything was bathed in a wondrous light that came through the window. Through that window, Laura could see the ocean as it collapsed into the horizon populated with voluminous clouds. She found this sight strangely comforting.

After Laura and her son had caught up on their sleep, they joined Angelina for a lovely pasta dinner full of all the flavor and delights associated with Italian cuisine. Although Laura felt awkward and a little reticent the same could not be said of Angelina.

She looked at Michael and said, “Michele I heard much about you. Your Papa talked to me about you. He was very proud. I see him in your eyes. Excuse my English, I am learning.”

Michael looked at her but did not know how to respond. Laura broke the silence, “How did he die?”

Angelina looked at her for a moment trying to gauge the woman’s feelings, “He was in his studio working when he felt dizzy. He gave no attention, which was usual for him. It did not go away, it got worse. He fell down. A friend found him and rushed him to hospital. He went into coma and in few hours was dead. They did not know what was wrong, a stroke maybe. I did not see him before he died.” At this point both Laura and Angelina were in tears. Michael became quite pale and left the table. He ran out of the

apartment. Laura was about to follow, when Angelina gestured to her to leave the boy alone.

“Where was he buried?” Laura asked with a sense of panic reverberating in her voice.

“He was cremated?”

“Cremated!” Laura almost shrieked.

“Matteo was not afraid of dying. He was very clear. He wanted his body cremated right away. He did not want funeral. He felt that earth was for the living.”

“Oh my God!” Laura exclaimed. She buried her head in her hands. Angelina came over to her and held her. “I know, I know,” she said.

“He left you and his son some things. Wait here I will get his will.”

As Laura sat there, she felt the awful weight and gravity of this reality pressing on her soul. She was face to face with the stark and unnerving consequences of her own behavior. There was no escape from the inevitable course of truth.

Angelina returned with the documents, sat down and handed them to Laura. It was in Italian and she looked perplexed. “Scusi,” Angelina said, “I will read it to you.”

“I leave to my dearest Laura the contents of my studio including all works finished and unfinished so that she might remember our love. To my sister Angelina, I leave my sculptures so that she might sell them and make some money for herself. To my son, I leave half of whatever outstanding assets I might have so that he might use this meager resource to further his own dreams and ambitions. The other half, I leave to my dear partner, Laura who has profoundly changed my life for the better.”

Laura began to weep once again. After a time, Angelina put the documents down. She continued, “Laura, at first I hated you for leaving my brother who loved you and his son so much. I saw you as a traitor and wished you dead. But now that I see you, I think I know why he felt the way he did. You have such a kind face. Your eyes are soft. I was expecting you to be hard and harsh. I don’t know why you left, but that is your business.

Don't blame yourself, my brother always had a terrible stubborn streak and was always very proud. He was concerned about your welfare and felt the happiest when he knew you were doing well. He had his work, his love and his memories. I will take care of the details for you."

"I'm so sorry," Laura said. This was about all she could say, her heart feeling so heavy. Laura appreciated Angelina's sense of loyalty to family and her obvious generosity. Angelina had a very expressive face and what she could not communicate in words, Laura felt and heard on a deeper level. Laura fell in love with her not unlike the way she fell in love with Matteo. How she missed him. At moments, she was certain that the pain she felt in her heart was so loud and raucous that it could be heard by all those around her. His loss produced a place of darkness in her that she knew could never be filled. It was a place, even her art could not intrude upon without great risk to herself. It was a place where deep incurable depressions can come from if great care is not exercised.

Angelina saw Laura's goodness and sense of clarity that well developed artists can achieve, an attribute that Matteo had described to her so many times. She was a little chagrined at her own obtuseness. Seeing the boy brought with it emotions of pride and pain. The fact that her brother's fine qualities were reflected in another life lessened the acute sense of her own loss.

Over the next few days, Michael's own resistance to the trip, his stubborn anger directed at his mother and his refusal to deal with his pregnant grief, also began to grow less intense. He began to soften and his own exquisitely good nature worked its miracle on him. There were probably many factors working here, time, a change of place and, the glorious Mediterranean sun. At Laura's urging, he would go off on his own and walk through the town and ingest the open sky and great blue sea stretching to the horizon like painted glass. He was looking through his father's eyes as well as his own.

One day it happened. He was sitting upon a rocky promontory. There was no one else there. His eyes were focused on a great ship that appeared as a tiny speck on the horizon. The sun was setting, abating the brightness. He could feel the spray from the water cool his face. Suddenly, a breach appeared in the wall he so meticulously created around his darker emotions. He cried like he never cried before. The pain imprisoned in the deepest part of himself was finally freed. At moments he was terrified that he would not be able to catch his breath, or that the extreme pain he felt would not subside. He felt that it would be an appropriate moment to die. Eventually, however, the last surge of anguish passed over him. Afterwards, he felt lighter than the air itself. Michael was himself once again. His body straightened and suddenly felt more fluid. His step became more buoyant. His face softened. His eyes could see again. More importantly, love poured into his heart, that same love that he had adeptly protected himself against. Now, he could let his father be present in him and no longer be a captive and prisoner of fear.

When he returned to his Aunt's house that day, both women knew that something good had happened to him. It made them both very happy. They spent many hours together, the three of them, talking about many things. Angelina described at length her life as a child with her brother and family.

“Matteo was older than me, three years. He was a good brother, not like others. He was sweet and sensitive and always kind to me. As children, we often played down by the water. Matteo loved to create sculptures from the sand, as you might think. I watched him fascinated by how he did it. Even strangers would stop and watch him as well. Some even gave us money.”

“Did he know then that he wanted to be an artist?” Laura asked.

“No, I don't think so. He just took it for granted. I really believe that he thought that his talent was nothing special. As a boy, he wanted to follow Papa and be a fisherman.”

“When did all that change?” Laura asked.

“Oh, he tried to be a fisherman for a living, but it gave him no time to do what he really loved. He would disappear for days at a time. He fought with Papa all the time. Eventually, my father gave up, and let him go. It was not easy for him to do that.

“Laura, what did you see in my brother, he was older than you? This is a question I’ve wanted to ask you. You don’t have to answer.”

Laura was not surprised at this question, but was not sure she understood the reasons herself. “I’m not sure I had any clear reasons why I fell in love with him, I just did. His age didn’t matter to me. There was just something about your brother I found irresistible. There were many things about him that I loved. I never met a man so accepting and vulnerable and feeling as him. I never met a man who listened to what I had to say, and yet did not judge me. I can honestly say that he was the finest human being I have ever known.”

“Then why did you leave him?” Angelina asked abruptly not able to control herself, for this was the question that had plagued her for so long. “Excuse me, but I just have to know?”

Laura was afraid that this question would come up. All the feelings of guilt and insecurity that she held such a tight reign on, suddenly broke free and she began to cry uncontrollably. “I don’t know, I don’t know, it’s complicated,” she said when she could begin to catch her breath.

Angelina could not help but feel Laura’s pain. She got up, sat down next to her and embraced her. “It’s all right,” she said. “You loved him very much.” Once Laura had calmed down, Angelina continued, “Thank you for being so honest with me about your feelings. I know how hard that is. I would have really been angry with you if you tried to tell me what you thought I wanted to hear. Believe me I would have seen through that. You artists are all complicated, my brother no exception!”

The women both laughed and embraced each other deeply, for a bond had formed between them. “You know,” Laura said, “I dreaded meeting you, but now I know I’m going to miss you.”

“I feel the same,” Angelina answered. “Life is strange. It can be so awful and yet so wonderful at the same time.”

After two weeks had passed and Laura knew that she had to get back home, she felt reluctant to go. It was a feeling that she would never have anticipated.

As she was getting ready to leave, she turned to Angelina and asked, “Angelina, do you have pictures of your family, of you and your brother and your parents that I might take back with me. It would be very important for me and Michael.

“Yes, yes of course,” Angelina answered, “I will get them.”

Angelina went with them to the bus station. The bus was there when they arrived. All three embraced each other. They formed a vivid circle of warmth and tenderness. From the bus window, Laura watched Angelina quickly disappearing and tried to memorize her dark soft features, brown flashing eyes, the lips and jaw line that reminded her of Matteo but mostly the depth of her kindness and generosity of her soul.

Laura and her son remained quiet and introspective during the ride to the airport and sleep overtook them on the plane as they returned home.