

CHAPTER 29

Taking Charge of Grief



GRANDFATHER (NONNO) GIGLIOTTI PASSED AWAY IN FALL OF 1978. NONNA was only 66 years old. Grandpa had been Nonna's life partner for almost 50 years. He was a loud, vibrant, social man. He loved life, people, food and music, and he loved his grandchildren more than anything else in the world.

Grandpa's larger-than-life personality left delightful and vivid images in my mind. I recall those images now, captured and memorialized from a young girl's perspective. Standing in his small living room; the audience of four grandchildren seated in a row on the couch facing him with anticipatory glee as he loudly, jovially, bellowed a rendition of the Julius La Rosa classic song, "*Eh Compari!*"

Coraggio

Eh compari, ci vo sunari. Chi si sona? U friscalettu.
E comu si sona u friscalettu?
U friscalette, tipiti tipiti tam.

(Hey, buddy! Let's make some music.
What'll I play?
The piccolo.)

I was uncertain what the Italian words meant but I guessed from the actions he made as he held his finger-flickering hands to the side of his animated face that he was imitating playing the *friscalettu* (piccolo). As the subject of the frivolous but catchy ditty moved from one musical instrument to the next, so did Grandpa's animations for the *saxofona*, *mandolinu*, *violinu*, *trumbetta*, and *trombona*, all the while Grandpa singing loudly in Italian, eyes fixed on us, his lips, cheeks and eyebrows dramatically accentuating his melodic tale for his grandkids. Paintings rattled against the wall, photo frames shivered on their surfaces as Grandpa attempted to rapidly shift his massive body weight from one foot to another in *tarantella* hopping fashion, his adoring miniature fans giggling and laughing until doubled over in their seated row. Oh Lord, we loved Grandpa. Oh Lord, he made us laugh.

Each Sunday Grandpa prominently sat at the head of his kitchen table, all four of us grandchildren mesmerized as he told noisy stories, accompanied by fist pounding, extravagant impersonations, and thunderous laughter. We barely noticed Nonna, quietly cooking or cleaning dishes behind us. Outside of family and a few neighbors, Nonna's social circle consisted of the people who Grandpa invited for a slain wildlife dinner or to sample from his basement wine cellar while Nonna silently prepared food or dutifully cleaned the remnants of entertaining.

Nonna and her two sisters never learned to drive. All three Rizzo daughters married Italian-born men with Old Country ideas of what was expected of women; driving was not one of

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the expectations. Nonna did not handle the household finances either nor had she her own source of income since she stopped working when she give birth to her second child 30 years prior.

Our family feared without Grandpa, Nonna would wither and die, as Nonna's life revolved around a vivacious man who was no longer physically present. Grieving the loss of one held dear is so vast, a tiny, meek, widow like Nonna could be swallowed into its unrelenting cold darkness. We could not imagine a way for her to conquer home ownership, develop her own identity, and survive.

But we should never have underestimated Nonna "*testadura*" Gigliotti. Soon after Grandpa died, Nonna prodded Uncle Matt, her sister Angelina's husband, to drive her to the closest bank. She courageously opened her own checking account and had someone teach her how to manage the checkbook, then asked us grandchildren to review the checkbook periodically to ensure she was doing okay. She solicited information about the city taxes on her home and how to pay them. She set up her own system of putting modest amounts of money from her Social Security check into a new savings account so she could pay the annual taxes. And at almost 70 years of age she got her first credit card!

With the long, isolating Michigan winter approaching we feared Nonna would slide into depression alone in her small home without Grandpa and his beloved backyard garden that consumed so much of their time from spring until fall. But there was no depression for Nonna. She found ways to occupy her mind and hands so that depression never had a chance. She left Grandpa's bed, chest and dresser in his bedroom and reconfigured a corner to be the sewing space she always wanted. She took old cardboard boxes and covered them with contact paper. Into the neatly covered boxes Nonna organized and stored all her sewing material and notions. She spent the rest of the winter planning the backyard garden.

Coraggio

While Grandpa was alive, every inch of their backyard garden was vegetables, fruit and flowers. Even the concrete slab patio on which we dined and gathered in the summer was thickly covered overhead with dense, fruit-swollen grape vines. It was daunting to believe that Nonna alone could maintain Grandpa's garden. But she was determined to make the garden and our Sunday gatherings Grandpa's legacy. She arrived at solutions by beginning with smaller pieces she knew she could handle. She searched through seed catalogs, staring out the kitchen window and contemplating the garden, now covered with snow, occasional patches of dead grass and brown fallen leaves. She let go of the desire for the vegetables that were the most burdensome to grow and instead bought low maintenance flowers that she had dreamed would fill her surroundings and her life with beauty. She could order the catalog seeds and bulbs and pay with her own check or credit card. All this she did by believing there was a solution and taking control.

As many Europeans have known, life is full of adversity and never ending change. Instead of complaining about it, she adapted and moved on. It took her the entire winter, but Nonna had searched for and found ways to take charge of her grief and her life. Instead of giving up on hope, she focused on all the things she could do before spring's arrival. As long as she was alive the idea of a garden was alive.

Nonna's positive focus led to the creation of a lush and prosperous garden. She had accomplished Grandpa's legacy of sweet-smelling, soothing, nourishing, green vegetation. And she would still have her son and grandchildren for Sunday dinner, often feeding us with the incredible harvest from her garden.

What I would give for a bowl of Nonna's Italian pole beans the vines of which Nonna had affectionately tied to six feet high poles with strips of soft cloth she had torn from old t-shirts or bed sheets. Under her loving care the one-inch wide green bean would merrily grow to eight inches in length. Fresh-picked and

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par-boiled, Nonna mixed the pot of tender beans with cloves she had pulled from the garlic patch by the chain-link fence that bordered the east side of her yard. Most people have no idea garlic fresh pulled from the ground is translucent, and upon slicing, beads and oozes the intense garlic essence for which it is beloved around the world. With beans still steaming from its hot bath, basil picked only moments before from densely leaved bushes were mixed with the beans and garlic. Traditionally boiled potatoes were added, but at times the magical medley was served unadulterated by potato. *Mmmm*. Pungent garlic and crisp basil essence fills the nostrils one second before the flavor bursts.

Nonna not only learned how to become independent after Grandpa's death, but in the process her harvests were as much a delight to the palate as they were a comfort for the soul.

I can still picture myself standing in the narrow space between two tall rows of Nonna's Italian pole beans. The vines have grown above my height so that I am enveloped in the dense, bright green, heart-shaped leaves. I feel the warmth of the sun penetrating the leaves, contributing to the green hue. I hear the buzz of flies and bees, yet in the background plays the memory of Grandpa's contented whistle of a peppy Italian cantata. I smell the sun-warmed, green vegetation and moist soil.

In this vibrant space surrounded by abundant life I am reminded of how Nonna took charge of her grief and kept Grandpa's spirit alive and I am reminded that I, too, can take charge in any challenge and turn it into a positive.

A few yards away from the imagined row of Italian pole beans is the spot where Nonna stood to cast her *il malocchio* curse and set the course for taking charge of the rain run-off flood in her life. And with her actions came for me *Lezione Due* (Lesson Two): a lesson on mustering courage to take charge of the aspects of life I can control.

You, too, have control over how you live your life, but it takes courage.

Coraggio

“Coraggio, Leeza.”

In challenging situations I try to step back, look at the bigger picture, and find an aspect that I can manage. It might be as minuscule a change as to tell myself to let go: “fo-getta ‘bout it”. I may not be able to change the situation, but I guarantee I will find a part of it I can.



With courage it is possible to:

- Transform grief into a loved one’s legacy.
- Thwart depression by finding purpose in your life and working daily to fulfill that purpose.