

When I think of my very first memories in life, what comes to mind are ephemeral, dream-like moments from my early childhood of Nonna Angela with Nonno Mario. My memory is a weak and feeble creature, but there still lives in my mind these powerful early images and sounds of Nonna. I remember Nonna's footsteps, a little shuffle as she opened the creaking *cantina* door to look for something delicious to feed us. I remember her voice calling us from the kitchen, singing and travelling through the home like a songbird. "*Vien' a' mangià, nonna.*" I still can see her, in her apron, smiling.

But what I remember most is Nonna in her garden. For those that knew her, they know Nonna was an incredibly gifted gardener. Fragrant fruit trees, gargantuan hanging zucchinis, lush tomatoes, dancing shadowy herbs, flowers of every kind, scent and colour - an effervescent grove that gives to soul and body. That gives to family. I can still see her, in the midst of nature's kingdom, the sun beaming on her face, in perfect joy.

Nonna had a full, immense life that started many, many years before we knew her. She was born in Cosenza, Italy on June 15, 1929, in the Apennine mountains, surrounded by a large and loving family with six siblings, and she lived there for the first three decades of her life. And it was there, where she grew up with Nonno Mario. In their youth, their sweet childhood friendship would blossom into a love story that would span continents, generations, and lifetimes. They began to plant the seeds of their Garden before many of us here were even on this earth.

I remember visiting Cosenza some years ago. My cousin took me to the exact spot where their village, *Vushca*, once stood. This word is part of the old language Nonna and Nonno spoke, the one I hear her voice in. *Vushca* means "the woods," and when I was there, I was able to see a

moment frozen in time, Nonna standing there with none of those new buildings, with the mountains and valleys and trees around her. In the Cosenza she knew, she was regal in nature's glow. I remember walking those winding, ancient roads through the hills and along the river, seeing churches and old stone houses that Nonna would have also walked by and seen in her past life. And whenever I met a relative, they would have the same gentle smile as Nonna upon seeing me, and their eyes would begin to glimmer with tears as they emotionally stammered and said, "*E la Nonna Angela, lei sta bene?*" I know the next time I'm there, I will see and feel her spirit everywhere, and my eyes will glimmer with theirs.

Thinking of Nonna in Cosenza, at this moment, makes me think of her long and patient journey to harvest this family - what her Garden meant. The home Nonna built with Nonno represents their two lived lives together, and the heritage bestowed on us, in which we live in one place but belong to more than one place and time. Outside your front door, peering beyond the veranda, the busy city, an unfamiliar modern land of change and opportunity. And in the backyard, the Garden, huge and abundant, in which time stood still, living life as they had always known those many years ago. A garden of memories, grown with the buds of love sown far, far away.

In the 1950s, Nonna made the decision to immigrate to join Nonno in Canada, as life became difficult in Italy after the trauma of war. And it was in Canada where she took her garden buds of Cosenza and cultivated her orchard of family - blossoming into a vast meadow of food, memory, home, spirituality, virtue, love and happiness. Where she raised two remarkable people, Mirella and Ozvaldo, my beautiful mother and zio, who inherited Nonna's capacity to love infinitely. Nonna's Garden is the symbol of cultivation of the love that she gifted us.

When I think of Nonna in her happiest state, it was the endearing moments with her grandchildren, and in her adoration of Nonno Mario. He left us years ago, when I was a child. I only have dream-like, faint moments of him. I sometimes feel his ghost when I'm with my Mom and Zio. Their little arched smiles, or the tiny twinkle of the eye when they share a moment of delight... I have often said, in my adulthood, that I feel some regret not having known Nonno as I became a self-actualizing, changing adult. I didn't have the values, the capacity for listening, the language, the desire for connection beyond what we know and see... This changed with age and time, and despite a full and beautiful life it was time that Nonno didn't have.

But what was missed in time with Nonno was plished by Nonna's presence with us on this Earth, as she continued to nurture and adore our family unconditionally for 20 more years after he had passed. A gift of time, immeasurable in scope. Adoring her six grandchildren as grown adults - Alexandra, Johnny, Mario, Angie, Mario, and Cassandra. Stayed with us long enough even to become a great-grandmother to little Sophia and Miguel this year. The unique and privileged joy of being an adult grandchild, which only a fortunate few can share.

And it was in my adult years, as these life cycles repeat their moments, when I got to know my nonna once more as we lived together again. I remember the Nonna of childhood in her classic, affectionate *nonna calabrese* personage - doing every possible act for us with kindness and care, beaming with pride from her grandchildren savouring her food, delighted by our every word and gesture.

But in adulthood, with shifting values and shared language, I got to know so many other sides to her. She was immensely deep in her generosity, humility, and devotion to all things in life - husband, children, grandchildren, God. She was sometimes a storyteller, and enjoyed company where she would recount her monumental life. I got to know her momentous spiritual nature. She was humble, mystical, and rooted. Her intuition was incredibly powerful and linked to the realm of spirit. She was immersed in her faith and spiritual journey, which manifested powerfully in her actions and selfless character. She demonstrated the values of her faith via her essence and way of life. Nonna was altruistic, virtuous, and peaceful. She was pure, and good. With adult life as a mirror to the world, Nonna's kindness just became so huge, and it is impossible to describe.

So, bearing the need for clarity, wisdom, and her loving company, I visited her garden of memories often. She stayed with us long, through years of suffering and many years without Nonno Mario, enough to keep her Garden nurtured and rooted for us. Nonna's Garden was the painting of her soul - rich, colourful, purposeful, nurturing, abundant, and life-giving. It was her role for almost a century on this Earth - to plant the seeds of life, of nurture and love, and to take care of it with gentleness and grace, to flourish into the garden we see here today.

With her passing to the next realm, it is now bestowed upon us, a duty to take care of what she has sown in this land, and gifted to us. We are now the caretakers of her fruits, her knowledge, her values, her wisdom, her virtue. Her immense love. Almost a century of work, sacrifice, and memory - for her honour, Nonna's garden is our duty.

And now, I just want to say some parting words to my Nonna.

Nonna, bella mia. Io so che ci senti, e io so che ti dispiace vedere tutto il nostro dolore per te in questo momento. Ti conosco, sei fatta così. Premurosa, tenera. Tu hai fatto davvero tanto in questi anni e decenni. Un secolo d'amore, sacrificio, nutrimento. E tutti noi ti ringraziamo dal profondo del cuore. Credo davvero che sei con noi, che sarai sempre con noi, e ti prometto che noi ti vedremo e ascolteremo quando verrai a trovarci. Adesso, dopo tanta sofferenza, puoi riposare. Tranquilla, in pace.

Grazie per tutto, davvero. Ci hai voluto tanto bene, e quanto ti vogliamo bene noi.

Bella mia. Adesso, sei in cielo quello che, per noi, sei sempre stata sulla terra - un angelo. Angela Nostra.

*Salutami Nonno. Ci vediamo, lo so.
Ti voglio tanto bene.*