

## The Letter

By F Forleo

Walking through the gates of the cemetery, I paused in the shade of the cypress trees, taking in the vastness and the many graves which occupied this foreign piece of land.

The relief from the harsh South African sun was brief. My guide pointed me in the direction of the grave ... the number was etched on my mind.

'I'll be waiting for you in the museum' he said, 'Take your time.'

I had travelled over 7000km to be here, and I kept asking myself, why?

Lucia, my wife, had sensed it. Women have a feel for such things. We men should learn to trust them more with those instincts. They seem to have an ability to sniff out the unsuspected, much like bloodhounds.

"Trouble" she said, as she handed me that manila envelope, almost three weeks ago.

"If I were you, I wouldn't open it... just throw it away. No return address, not a good sign! No knowing who sent it.... And it comes from Palermo, even worse!"

But my curiosity was stronger. If I'd done as she suggested, all she would've done was opened it herself without me knowing. As intuitive as she is, curiosity is my Lucia's weakness. Curiosity is a weakness of most Sicilians, I'm afraid to say, especially in the little town of Montelusa, where I come from. I was one of the lucky ones. Raising me in this small community, my mother had insisted on the importance of good schooling, so I rode my bike twelve kilometres each day to the bigger town in order to receive a better education. The local school? "Never!" said my mother.

I knew every pebble along that road, and every goat, and by the time I had graduated I'd

worn out no less than eight sets of bicycle tyres. And did I envy the children on my street! While they played, I was indoors reading my books. I could hear them calling to each other, but only once I was done with my studies, would my mother allow me out to play. “Those delinquents”, she called them.

As a retired schoolmaster I had spent my time reading of places such as this military cemetery, but never had I imagined that I would find myself here in Cullinan, South Africa. I read that one of the largest diamonds was discovered in this area. I prayed that I would stumble across one on this visit.

During the war, 100000 Italian POW’s were held captive here; the camp was known as Zonderwater; and that’s what brings me here.

I had read these chapters of history to Lucia, God bless her illiterate soul, and she’d listened with great interest. Every now and again, I heard her mutter, ‘Mamma Mia!’ and this made me eager to continue.

I finally found the grave of the man I never knew. My heart felt as if it had jumped into my throat; I fought back the emotion that overtook me. Just then, from nowhere, a starling came to rest on the headstone. This bird, in shimmering blue, cocked its head and sang to me.

That morning, when the envelope arrived, Lucia and I were sitting at our kitchen table. Our children, in their quest for a better life, had long since vacated the other two chairs at the table.

We both stared at this intrusion into our somewhat mundane lives as if it were a bomb

about to explode.

"Open it." I said.

"No, it's addressed to you, you open it."

I took the envelope and inspected it for the umpteenth time.

"It was posted eight days ago."

"That's a disgrace. Palermo isn't so far away."

"Not so far? Sicily is vast!" I replied.

"Poor service delivery, that's what it is. As I always say. Those politicians, they get fat while we suffer. Open it!"

I tore open the sticky flap. Out came another envelope. This one was old and stained with age. It had official markings. 'Zonderwater POW Camp, South Africa.' The address had been deleted.

"Look, Lucia, it comes from that place I read about to you. The concentration camp in South Africa! It's dated 1942..."

"Did you write to them?" Lucia asked.

"Lucia, please! What are you saying? That was a long time ago! I was little then."

Neatly folded papers slid out. From amongst them, a photo fell onto the table. Like a chameleon, Lucia snapped it up.

"Look, it's a picture of a soldier. Do you know this man?"

She flipped over the jagged-edged, sepia photo.

"What's this say?" she asked.

"It says Abyssinia, 1940."

"Where on earth is Abyssinia?"

“North Africa; it was the territory occupied by the Italians during World War II.”

The photograph showed a man in combat uniform; a rifle slung over his shoulder. He was standing at the open flap of a camouflaged tent. His features were strong, with sculptured cheekbones, but one’s gaze was drawn to the tenderness of his mouth, and the exhaustion in his eyes. Dark curls of hair protruded from his envelope cap.

I unfolded the official letter first; typed in perfect Italian. This too was stained with age.

Punctured holes dotted the paper, signs of a primitive typewriter.

“What’s it say?”

“It says that this man, Domenico Lucchese, was struck down by lightning in his tent during a severe storm at the concentration camp of Zonderwater, South Africa, on the 13<sup>th</sup> January 1942.”

“Do you know him?”

“No, never heard of him!”

The second letter was written in pencil, on an equally ancient piece of notepaper. It was dated the 13/01/42, the same day as the soldier’s death.

Once again I read it to myself, and once again Lucia did not allow me to finish before darting questions at me.

"I think I need to go and see my mother. Perhaps she can shed some light on this" was my reply.

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My mother’s house is within walking distance from mine, in the old part of Montelusa.

Each time I approach the neighbourhood that was once my sanctuary and my playground, my thoughts are always the same. How contented I was here! People once

sat outside their homes, washing hung up on lines stretching across the street. Children chased each other about, doors were always open, and cooking smells filled the air. My mother's home is now one of the last few. Almost all the rest have been renovated for commercial use. Geraniums in terracotta pots still frame the tall wooden doors, and soft lace curtains screen the windows of my mother's home.

I noticed the lace move slightly as I approached. Nothing goes unnoticed with my mother.

"At your usual post, I see" I remarked, as I bent down to kiss her grey head.

"Where else should I be? This is my life, I prefer to watch the goings-on out there, rather than that rubbish they show on TV. How are Lucia and the children? Why didn't she come with you?"

My mother had already noticed the manila envelope in my hand, and knew this was not just a social visit.

"Pull up a chair in front of me. What news do you bring? You know my heart's not what it used to be, so be gentle."

"Your heart's just fine, Ma. Look at this photograph."

I handed her the photo and she took a long, hard look at it. She raised her eyes and gazed out the window. The sun rays caught her beautiful aged face, caressing every line and highlighting her radiant hair, which was pulled back tightly back into a bun. "I last saw him... let me see... I don't remember, many years ago."

I left her to her thoughts, and got up to fetch a glass of water. On my return, I found her still deep in thought.

After what seemed like a very long time, she turned to me and smiled. Her eyes glowed.

“Who is he, Ma?”

“It was a long time ago....” I sensed then that what was to follow would change me as a man.

“When I was a young woman, I chose to dedicate my life to God. Back then it was looked upon favourably... a family with a child in the church commanded much respect. And as you know, respect in Sicily is a big word! But I didn’t do it for that. I had a calling, or so I believed.”

As she began recounting her tale, my mother was transported into the past. It was as if she was hypnotised.

“I’d been in the convent for a number of years, and had lost total contact with my family. And letters... even if I’d written, there was no one on your grandfather’s farm who could read them. I was grateful to the convent. There I learned to read and write; I prayed a lot too. I prayed for my mother who had to endure a ruthless man. I also prayed for my sister and brother; and for peace.

One night, I was reading by the light of my lantern. It was late. The convent was quiet, as everyone had long since retired to bed. I heard a soft rapping on my bedroom door. I slipped on my gown and opened my door, just enough to see Mother Superior hovering outside the door. She pushed it open, signalling to me that I should remain quiet. Closing the door behind her, she towered over me, holding my shoulders.

“There is a young girl outside the convent who says she’s your sister. She wants to see you. I think she may be in trouble.”

Silently we made our way through the corridors and out into the yard. Mother Superior passed me her lantern as she fiddled with the lock of the small tradesmen’s entrance.

A little way past the gate, huddled in a heap, a young girl lay with her back up against the convent wall. It was my sister. I bent down, and placed my hand on her damp forehead.

I shone the lantern so I could see her face, and her eyes met mine.

“I’m sorry”, she said.

She was in pain. We helped her to her feet, but she was weak. Only then did I see the large bulge beneath her shabby dress. Slowly we led her back into the convent. My sister turned to me and gasped, “I think the baby is coming.”

We made our way slowly to my room. Gently we helped her onto the bed. Her moans seemed to fill the quiet night. I placed my hand gently over her mouth in an attempt to muffle the sound.

Mother Superior broke the awkward silence, “I’m going to fetch hot water and towels”.

I was grateful to be alone with my sister.

“Who did this to you?”

“It’s not his fault.... we love each other!”

In between her pain and suffering, my sister told me of the events leading up to this sad situation. How our father had kicked her out of the house once he found out about her relationship with a farm worker’s son. I knew who he was from the time I was living at home. I remembered him well, a delightful, respectful young man who was older than her, perhaps closer to my age. He was being trained in the art of pruning and harvesting by his father. My sister told me that he had departed for the war in North Africa and he was not aware of her circumstances. She had not heard from him since, nor had his family.

“What of our father?” I asked.

Pulling a face at the mention of our father, she raised her hands, gesturing that it was all over. I did not need to hear more. I knew my father. I knew how the old Sicilian mind worked. She would've been banished from the house, as would the farm worker... driven off the land.

Mother Superior arrived with the necessary bits and pieces. My sister began to scream.

Mother Superior stuffed a napkin into her mouth, so as not to wake the entire village, let alone the convent. As the child began to appear, I urged my sister to push. This she did, and the dear brave girl gave birth to a beautiful baby boy. I held him in my arms and my kindly assistant covered us with a blanket to muffle his first cries of life. I was so taken by the baby that I was not fully aware of what was happening with my sister. I looked over and saw Mother Superior frantically trying to stop my sister from haemorrhaging. I panicked. There was really nothing either one of us could do. She needed proper medical help. With none around, my sister died that night.

I turned to Mother Superior in despair. "What shall we do?"

"Adoption", is all she could say.

"No!" I retorted.

"What option is there?"

"Can the baby not stay here?"

"Never! This is no orphanage. The child needs a family."

Mother Superior went down on her knees. She joined her hands and closed her eyes. Her lips moved quietly. She then looked up to the crucifix on my wall, seeking an answer.

I held on to my sister's child, never wanting to let go.

'Sister, help me' Mother Superior said, once she was on her feet again. She went over to

my cupboard and took out one of my habits.

I helped dress my sister in my clothes as best we could, neatly concealing her long hair under the veil. We covered her face with a handkerchief, and then pulled a blanket over her body.

I looked at my sister's body in disbelief. Was this a bad dream?

"Take the baby and run, Sister", Mother Superior said. "It's the only way. Take the boy and give him all your love."

"From that day on you became mine, Angelo, my little angel.

Your mother is buried at the convent. My name appears on her grave. And now we know.

Your father is buried in Africa. This is him in the photograph."

A long silence followed. Her piercing blue eyes penetrated my soul.

With a smile I said, "You are my mother, and I love you."

The African skies had suddenly filled with thundery clouds. My guide tapped me on the shoulder. "A storm is coming."

"Yes" I replied, "just like the one which killed my father in 1942. He was illiterate, you know. He was dictating a letter to my mother that night."

The starling flew away.

How long had I been at this grave?

From my satchel, I took out a smooth stone I'd picked up at my mother's grave at the convent. I placed it at the head of my father's grave.

I heard the starling calling, perched on top of the crucifix at the entrance to the cemetery.

I raised my hand in salute. Then I turned and began my journey home.

