

INTRODUCTION

Something marvelous had ended.

THE NEWS CAME TO ME early one morning in my Paris apartment. I was sleeping deeply and dreaming that I was floating in a cerulean sea. I was on a raft, basking under a blazing sun, one hand shading my eyes, one leg dangling in water that was cool and sparkled in the light. High above, an azure sky merged into the horizon while all around me was peace: no sound, no scent, just a breath of listless air that caressed my skin and ruffled the sea's surface. I felt sun-drunken and dissolute.

I raised my leg from the water, rolled onto my side and peered down through seawater clear as glass. Then I slipped serenely into an aquatic underworld. Down, down I went, through hues of teal and turquoise and lapis blue, my long hair fanning, tiny bubbles trailing in my wake. I gently fell through the sunlit depths before settling on a seagrass bed that swayed rhythmically on the ocean floor. A pure, intense peace pervaded my being.

Suddenly a noise disturbed my bliss, a shrill insistent jangling like the ringing of alarm bells. Spiraling upwards, I burst through the watery ceiling and extended an arm to silence the sound.

"*Oui*," I said groggily into the telephone. The clock radio on my bedside table glowed five a.m. in the dark. My sister's voice came to me from a long way off, travelling thousands of miles through cables strung across the same ocean floor I had just visited. She said four words that remain forever burned in my memory: Dad. Has. Left. Us.

Caught between dream and reality, my brain synapses sparking furiously, I struggled to process those words. Dad has left us. He's gone on a business trip, was my first thought. Wasn't there a trade show coming up? Yes, that was it, the big annual event – Graph Expo – for the printing and graphic arts industry. I recalled a telephone conversation I had had with my mother, just the week before. "Your father's off to Chicago next week," she had said.

Sitting up, I was now fully awake.

"Where did he go?" I said dumbly.

"He died," my sister said. "Of a heart attack."

And that's how it happens. One moment you're cavorting like a water baby in a sapphire sea and in the next, the bottom falls out of your world.

I remember sitting in a stupor, a changed person from the one who had gone to sleep the night before. I was conscious of a door closing, a light extinguished, a before and an after. A chill ran up my spine, and I shivered. I was certain of only one thing: my life would never be the same again.

I have no memory of buying an airline ticket or making my way to Charles de Gaulle airport. But I do remember, forty-eight hours later, sitting in a window seat on the flight to Toronto and the smiling flight attendant who handed me a copy of Canada's national newspaper. Numbed by grief and a Valium tablet, I read my father's obituary in its back pages.

There was no one to meet me at Toronto airport. As I waited at the baggage carousel, a wave of anxiety washed over me and filled me with dread. I needed air. I hauled my suitcase off the conveyor belt, crossed the arrivals lounge and headed out of the terminal. It was indecently sunny outside. I stood in the late spring air and inhaled the noxious fumes of jet fuel. Then I made my way to the taxi rank and, mentally steeling myself for whatever lay ahead, I climbed into a cab and went home.

My parents' condo was full of people. My mother, looking like a shipwreck survivor, sat dazed on the couch, a ring of consoling women friends around her. I crossed the living room and waited while the women shifted along to make a space for me beside her. She reached out and clasped my hand in hers. I leaned down and kissed her on both cheeks. We sat side by side, bereaved mother and daughter, too overcome with emotion to speak.

That evening there was a wake, too much alcohol and a hazy memory of standing out on the balcony howling with laughter as family friends and I swapped Dad stories. Maria, our Portuguese housekeeper, was troubled by our merriment. Devoutly Catholic and herself grief-stricken, she must have thought us profoundly disrespectful. But it was not out of disrespect that we drank and laughed; we did it to numb the pain and console ourselves in front of the giant chasm that gaped before us. No good would come of my father's passing; all of us, with the exception of one, understood this.

The death of my father, who I considered to be the moral compass and guiding star of our family, would irrevocably alter my circumstances and fling me on to a different path. His passing would trigger a sequence of events that would bring me more privations in the years to come: the death of my mother six years later, the stripping of all my protection, the permanent breakup of what was left of my family, and the loss of a golden world from which I would be forever exiled.

People and things can be taken from you; in a twinkling, happiness shattered. As I see it now, decades later, there were two fatalities in this story: the death of my father, and the death of my family.

They say that storytelling is a way to frame life's chaos, to find meaning in events that change the course of our lives. Everyone has at least one story to tell. This is mine.

Paris, 2022

BOOK ONE

La vérité est que la vie est délicieuse, horrible, charmante, affreuse, douce, amère, et qu'elle est tout.

The truth is that life is delicious, horrible, charming, frightful, sweet, bitter, and that it is everything.

Anatole France

The page is a unique kingdom, vast, mysterious and eccentrically indigenous. It's like a dance, you do some and it does some. To have the page open itself, to shed its skin and allow you to autopsy the living and the dead, is an inexplicable experience.

Kate Braverman

Italy

WHEN I WAS TWELVE, my father marched into my school principal's office and announced his intention to take me and my sister out of class for three weeks. We were going to Italy on an extended Easter vacation.

"My wife and I will be taking our daughters to Europe," he said imperiously, as if issuing an edict, "where they will learn more about art and history than they ever will in a classroom."

Quietly authoritarian and possessing a remarkable air of self-assurance, my father was known to stride into rooms and buildings as if he were an army general leading a brigade, the brigade being my mother, sister and I. My principal, a meekish man with splotch marks on his upper cheeks, was named Mr. Kilpatrick. The kids called him Killer for short, but nothing could've been further from the truth. Daunted by the self-possessed manner of the dapper Englishman standing before him, Killer acquiesced. And so it was that my sister and I were plucked from our placid suburban classrooms and flown to Italy to revel in the splendors of Milan, Florence, Rome and the Ligurian coastal towns of Portofino and Santa Margherita.

Europe felt different. There was an opulence, a sophistication in the air; a refinement in the aesthetics to which I instantly responded. Italy was theater where the most commonplace act became an event, a spectacle performed with flourish. We stayed in a pink hotel on the shores of the Gulf of Genoa in Santa Margherita, Liguria.

On our first morning there, I ordered orange juice at breakfast. A tall glass was placed on the tablecloth in front of me, filled to the brim with a violent blood-red frothy liquid. A hush descended as my family and I stared at it in apprehension. I felt slightly alarmed. It did not resemble the Florida frozen concentrate we drank back home. There was something alien, menacing even, about the supposed juice.

"Your orange juice, *signorina*," said the waiter. Four heads turned to him, uncertainty etched on our faces.

"*Arance sanguine!* Blood oranges!... from Sicily." he said, smiling right at me. "Freshly squeezed. *Buonissimo!*"

I lifted the glass to my lips and drank the nectar, then gasped at its deliciousness. A love affair with a country had begun, and with its mischievous dark-eyed boys as well. As we ate our meals in the glassed-in dining room, they'd scamper up from the beach and spy on us through the picture windows. Bolder and brasher than their Canadian counterparts (and

infinitely more beautiful), Italian boys operated through a body language sophisticated beyond their years. They were lithe, self-assured, nimble-footed like dancers. And the exuberance! They followed in a flock as my sister and I strolled the sidewalks greedily lapping our *gelati*, never had ice cream tasted so good. Pirouetting and prancing on the pavement, leapfrogging over one another's backs and skipping backwards in front of us, they were like annoying flies begging to be swatted. And yet, calling out to us in a tongue that we could barely comprehend, their voices high and clear, the words '*bellissima*', '*brava*' and '*bella ragazza*' floated like an aria in the sweet spring air.

I watched the older boys as they weaved skilfully through traffic on their Piaggio scooters. Some had girls sitting behind them. I wanted to be one of those girls, chic in sandals and Capri pants, long hair flowing freely in the wind. I decided that I would be Italian. Posterred around town were Alfa Romeo billboards promoting a spiffy sportscar with the same name as mine.

"From now on," I announced to my family, "I will answer only to the name, *Giulietta*." They ignored me.

Dad surprised us by speaking Italian. My sister and I were mystified as to where he had learned it. Mom told us that he had visited Italy once and, as the story goes, befriended a young Italian woman who looked like Sophia Loren. From then on, whenever I watched a Sophia Loren movie I thought of my father's girlfriend. Mom had a Lorenish quality about her, raven-haired and shapely with a generous, smiling mouth. She was an English version of a *bella donna*: a beautiful woman.