

by Nadina LaSpina



Mother and daughter at the Church of the Addolorata, 1955

When I was a child in Sicily, my mother carried me in her arms everywhere. She carried me from one room to another in our old house, out to the sun-drenched courtyard to look at the geraniums in the pots, even all the way up the steps to the roof terrace from where you could see the sea. And she carried me into the kitchen, which always smelled of tomato sauce, and to the bathroom whenever I had to go. "I have to pee, mamma." "Oh please, not again, my back is killing me, can't you hold it?"

After I turned five, my mother carried me every day across the street to the convent of the Addolorata where I went to school. There she handed me over to the nuns who carried me to the classroom.

The convent took its name from a statue in its church: the statue of Mary Addolorata — in Italian the word means "grieving," "sorrowful." It was a Sicilian version of Michelangelo's *Pieta*. Mary, the mother, dressed in black and purple silk, sorrow carved deeply into her painted face, held on her lap the dead Christ, red-stained slender limbs draped in lifeless abandonment.

Every Sunday my mother carried me into the church and, before Mass started, she would kneel with me in her arms in front of the Addolorata and light a candle. My arm tightly wrapped around my mother's neck, I was painfully aware of the gazes of the whole congregation.

Sometimes I thought my mother and the Addolorata were one and the same. People seemed to have the same anguished look on their faces when they looked at my mother carrying me that they had when looking at the Addolorata holding her dead son.

"Che bella bambina! What a pretty little girl! Che peccato! What a sin, what a shame!" the town women would say, looking up from their knitting and sewing, when my mother, with me in her arms, would go sit with them in the afternoon sun. The sorrow in their voices made me wish I were ugly. I didn't want my being pretty to make people sad.

"What a cross you have to bear," the women would murmur, shaking their heads."

"What a cross you have to bear," the women would murmur, shaking their heads. Their sympathy usually made my mother's eyes fill with tears. But she never complained to them about me. She didn't tell them how heavy I was getting, or how her back was hurting.

My mother accepted her suffering like a good Sicilian woman resigned to her destiny. After all, in Sicily, all women suffered. They believed that a woman's destiny was to suffer. I sat on my mother's lap listening to the Sicilian women talking about their sufferings: the curse of menstruation, the toil of pregnancy and childbirth, the ravages to the body caused by pregnancy after pregnancy, the exhaustion of raising children, the rigors of poverty... and many of them suffered their husbands — their brutishness, maybe their beatings. My mother, carrying in addition the cross of a crippled child, was the epitome of suffering womanhood. She was the living Addolorata.

When we were alone, my mother laughed a lot. She laughed when the neighbor's cat brought her kittens to our house and I wanted to keep them all, and when the sparrows built a nest under the archway of our back door. She laughed when I spilled the inkbottle on my grandmother's good tablecloth and was so afraid she'd get mad at me.

Sometimes, even while she complained about my being heavy and about her aching back, she laughed. She laughed while we

struggled up the steps to the roof terrace, and when we made it all the way up she would make believe she was dropping me and lay me down on the cement floor and lay down beside me while we both laughed wildly. Every day she would exercise my legs, as the doctor in Catania had taught her to do, and she would tickle my feet and make me laugh so hard I would choke.

She didn't seem at all like the Addolorata then.

When we were alone, my mother seemed happy. She always called me "gioia." I couldn't understand how I could be both her "cross" and her "joy." ❖

Nightbrace

By Ona Gritz

*With the ease of a salesman
she slips my shoe on nightly,
heel pressing her palm.
The brace, cool metal,
buckled near my ankle,
beneath my knee.*

*The pitch,
I could say with her.
"Everybody's got something.
People wear glasses.
Ann Ratshin's daughter caught polio
swimming in a lake upstate."*

*In the dark
I play with words.
Palsy, a tall pansy.
Polio, ring-o-leavio
around the maypole.
When I move my foot
it rips the quilt.
When I feel it itch
I think I may be healing.*



Ona Gritz at age 8, with her mother