

Italian Canadiana

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Nic Battigelli

Volume 34, 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087307ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v34i0.37465>

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Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0827-6129 (imprimé)

2564-2340 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Battigelli, N. (2020). A Family Secret. *Italian Canadiana*, 34, 109–113.

<https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v34i0.37465>

A Family Secret¹

Nic Battigelli

In the late sixties, the ‘C’ word was avoided in our family. We were not allowed to use the term ‘cancer’ in conversation for fear, perhaps, that it would spread to one of our family members.

This illness ironically did take the lives of my grandmother and both of my parents in the eighties and nineties. But in 1962 I firmly believed that my mother was diagnosed with cancer. I swore that all the classic signs were there: my mother crying at the kitchen table, my father giving my brother and me the silent treatment and occasionally an extra slap on the head for good measure, and finally, my *nonna* saying endless Rosaries and novenas to the *Madonna della Misericordia*. Imagine me at the ripe age of nine going to Alessandro—the class bully—and telling him that he could pound and even break my bones because it was nothing in comparison to the pain that I believed my mother was suffering.

Alessandro, whom everyone called Al, really wasn’t the class bully, he just outweighed us by sixty pounds. He grew a moustache before the grade eight teacher could. The only problem was that he took pleasure in picking on us, the skinny Italian kids. I thought it strange since his mother came from the same Italian village as my parents, San Daniele del Friuli, where the *Friulani* fed their children *polenta*.

“When is she going to die?” Al said, wide-eyed.

“Soon. She came home from Dr. Marrone’s and she was in tears. She kept saying, “*Dio mio, why now?*” My *nonna* said, and My father agreed, which is a bad sign in itself, that they should go to church and light candles to the Madonna’s shrine.

I urged Alessandro not to tell anyone of my mother’s illness. That request, it struck me later, was like asking a vampire not to drink blood. Al slowly shook his head in an affirmative manner, and I took this to mean that he wouldn’t tell. Then out of nowhere he said, “You want *to go again?*” The next part was a blur of fists, followed by more jabs. I saw his lips moving but there was no sound. I shook my head and the ringing in my ears stopped.

“Jesus Christ, you went down like a sack of potatoes,” he said. “I just tapped your chin.”

¹ “A Family Secret” was published in *Tales of a West-End Italian Boy*, a creative non-fiction collection that depicts memorable moments throughout Nic Battigelli’s childhood and adolescence with emphasis on the themes of immigration to Canada, family values, religious beliefs, cultural identity, and adaptation to the Canadian way of life.

Then even with my limited hearing I heard his mother yelling, "Alessandro, it's supper. *Cosa hai fatto?*" (What did you do?) He quickly and meekly replied, "It's nothing, Ma." Suddenly behind her back came out the *bastone*, the beating stick. "*Vergognati*. (Shame on you.) Can't you see he's smaller than you? Are you trying to put your father and me in jail? Get in the house before I beat you senseless. And leave some *polenta* and stew for your Pa, he hasn't come home yet." Then she graciously invited me in for supper; I nervously declined.

But I really didn't want to go home. As I trudged up the stairs, the fourth step 'squeaked.' "Just like the geese in Italy before their necks were wrung at slaughter-time," my *nonna* would say.

I peered into the kitchen. My mother's eyes were still red, and her nose matched. No one spoke as we ate. She barely ate and was always going to the bathroom. The vomiting couldn't be masked even as my father kept yelling, "Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ." Meanwhile, Marino, my older brother, was making the sign of the cross at each curse. *Nonna* kept yelling at Dad to stop being disrespectful.

Sunday morning Mass was not pleasant. I was angry with God. My mother was only thirty-seven and He was going to let her die. How could He let this happen to our family? We were good people. I was an altar boy, Marino was going into the seminary. And my *nonna* said enough rosaries to surely count for something.

Mass was finally over, and I put away the priest's vestments.

Then I approached Monsignor Saldi and asked him to say a prayer for a special intention I had. He looked at me closely and asked, "Nic, are you all right?" Suddenly I wrapped my arms around him and sobbed uncontrollably. I blurted out all about my mother's illness. He made the sign of the cross on himself. Then he told me that he would say a special Mass for her.

Monday came and I didn't want to go to school. I just wanted to stay home and be with my mom. I did what I knew would work to be allowed to stay home—I feigned illness with a malfunctioning thermometer. I would rub the instrument vigorously into my pillow and then proceed to show *Nonna* the results. But my mother saw through it and said that I didn't have a fever. Besides, school would do me good even if I was feeling a little sick.

I remember the month was May, the month Catholics associate with the Rosary and the Virgin Mary. I got to school late, but not before I heard over the PA system, "A rosary is going to be said today during lunch for Nic Battigelli's mother who is quite ill." I felt mixed emotions that everyone would now know our 'family secret,' but I was very happy to know that my mom would surely go to heaven after all the rosaries that were going to be said before she died. Just then, I looked down the corridor and noticed Monsignor leaving Sister Josephine's office. When he saw me, he gave me an awkward smile. I figured it was because I was a little late.

I couldn't believe all the attention I was getting at recess time. I had more friends and candy that day to last me until the end of June. Even

Al didn't pick on me.

At the end of the day, I hurried to go home. I felt like I was floating. Running up the stairs, I could smell sauce cooking. I called out, "Hey, where's everybody? Ma, *Nonna*?" But when I walked into the kitchen I stopped and stared. Sitting at the table were Monsignor Saldi, my dad, Mom and *Nonna*. Dad was never home at this time of day—and even Al's mother was there. As usual my brother, Marino, was behind closed doors, studying. *Nonna* had the black rosary beads out that she used at funerals and during severe lightning storms.

"Hey Ma, what's going on?"

"I'm too embarrassed to talk to you. *Bugiardo, vergognati!* (Liar, shame on you!) You put a dagger in my heart that will never be removed. Why did you do this to me?" she wailed.

"What did I do?" I looked around the table, perplexed.

Monsignor said, "Even I am disappointed in you, and puzzled as to what to give you for penance. I don't know that I can forgive what you have done. I hope God can."

"I didn't steal your milk money," I blurted out. "But I can tell you who did."

He rose, and biting down on his jaw, said, "Don't bother coming on the altar any longer. I don't want liars near me or near a sacred space."

I began to cry. My dad said, "Save some of those tears, Nico, because you'll need them when I'm through with you. Why did you tell such lies? Telling people that your mother has cancer. *Disgraziato*. Who told you this?"

My voiced cracked. "Dad what are you talking about? I saw you both crying. You even got *Nonna* to light a candle at the Madonna's altar."

He came over, slapped me and yelled, "*Cretino*. She doesn't have cancer, you idiot. She's pregnant."

"Dad, I didn't know," I said, my voice rising an octave.

"Go to your room and wait for me there," he said.

My brother was huddled in the corner of the room we shared, hugging his pillow, his eyes wide. The door opened and my father entered. He slowly took off his belt. I pleaded with him, "Dad, please not the belt. I'm sorry, I didn't know." But he pushed me onto the bed. I tried to block the blows with my hands, and felt the belt buckle rip the flesh from my baby fingers.

I remember words echoing between blows: "If I have to go to jail to teach you a lesson about lying, so be it."

My mother came in and kept saying, "*Basta!* Enough! You're going to kill him." My brother said, "Dad, God doesn't want you to do this."

But my Dad replied "Shut up before you go to see Him too."

He eventually stopped. I couldn't sit down for a long time. I ate standing up. But not with my dad. I didn't go to school for five days. That was an eternity. No one called to play or just hang out. When I returned to school, my good friend Dave, said, "Man, what were you

thinking? Don't you know anything about the birds and the bees?!" Months later, our 'family secret' was born. My parents named him Frank Thomas. Thomas in tribute to their hometown of San Tomaso in Friuli, Italy. One family legend relates that my baby brother was the result of the angst my parents felt when my older brother announced that he was entering the seminary, against their wishes. That was in 1962.

Frank Thomas was born in October 1963. Eight inches of snow fell on that day in our city of Sudbury, Ontario. It was a day I never forgot.

My brother was ten years younger than me. I remember teaching him everything from walking, talking, biking. He was the only kid in our family to own a bike in 1967, the same year we bought our first car.

Frank loved to play everything hard and fast. He loved pool, cards, golf and fast cars. Not necessarily in that order. He drove a black Datsun 280 Z; fast, so fast that we had a tee-off time at Lively Golf & Country Club for 1 pm, we left 268 Albinson Street in the West End of Sudbury at 12:42pm and were able to tee off on the number one tee at 1:02 pm. A trip that lasts usually 25 minutes was made that time by cruising at 160 km/hr down the Copper Cliff/Lively bypass in October 1991.

This was an exceptionally warm Fall day. We skidded into a nearly empty lot. I looked over towards the Eighteenth Tee and noticed that two boys were diving in the pond for golf balls.

Frank said to me, "That'll be *you* diving in later, Nicolino."

I shoulder-checked him and said, "We'll see, little brother."

This 'little' brother was actually six feet one and weighed a portly 210. He lit a cigarette and I said, "I thought you promised Dad that you would quit?"

He said, "Aren't you tired of mixing roles? Are you my brother or my mother?"

"So are you quitting?" I asked.

"Perry tells me there's a men's hockey league starting next month in Coniston, I'm going to quit then."

This day was the 'official' day of reckoning between brothers on the golf course of life. Bragging rights. Frank decided to throw me off and said, "I hope heaven is like this."

I said, "I don't know man, but if you don't hit it close, you'll be down one after the front nine. I know what you're like under pressure."

He grinned and hit the flagstick and nearly eagled the shot. He knocked in the birdie putt.

After twelve holes we were tied. It seemed that we couldn't miss a shot that day. Frank always wanted to beat me at golf. I tried to tell him, "Don't play me, play the golf course and mother nature."

Lively Golf & Country Club is beautiful on any given day, but on this glorious sunny day, it looked as if we were playing on TV. We both knew it would come down to this hole. This was Lively's signature hole

over water for the second shot. Miss and you're swimming with the white golf fish. The perfect shot for this hole is to take it over the trees on the left and land the ball near the drop zone. To set up a nine iron or wedge onto an elevated green over the water. I hit my five wood exactly as I described how the shot should be played.

"You're up," I smirked.

Frank took out a four iron and crushed it exactly where mine landed, except his was slightly ahead. We both strode to our golf balls as proudly as peacocks. We saw the two boys lying on the rocks with their arms behind their heads waiting for their next victims. I glanced over at my brother who had this impish grin. He said what all good brothers say before they hit a crucial shot, "Don't choke, big brother."

I set up to play my wedge since there wasn't a hint of a breeze. I hit a sky shot that went straight up... and landed softly in the middle of the pond.

One of the boys dove in and went to retrieve his latest golf fish. He raised his fist and yelled, "Thanks, Mister, are you ever nice." I turned and saw Frank throwing himself on the grass, laughing hysterically. He was still giggling over his ball moments later and then he let it fly.

He shanked it and it hit the rock on the right side. The other boy dove in and he came up with his ball, yelling at the top of his lungs, "Gee thanks, are you guys ever nice!" That was the end of our round. We laughed all the way to the Nineteenth Hole where we discussed our last match of the season over our usual beverage.

A month later, Frank joined the men's hockey league in Coniston. I got a call one night after midnight from the Sudbury General Hospital. I was told Frank had been in an accident and to come to the hospital quickly. It was a bitterly cold November night. At the hospital I was told that Frank was skating around the rink when he collapsed. At twenty-nine years old, he had had a heart attack. I was numb. I would have to bring the news to my mother. At two in the morning, I left the hospital. Unlike the joyous day of Frank's birth, there was no snow falling down from the Heavens that night.

My sons and I play occasionally at the Lively Golf & Country Club. Our family tradition is to throw a golf ball into the centre of the pond at the Eighteenth Hole for Zio Frank in case he runs out of them while playing a tough match against the angels.

Arrivederci, Frank. I'll call for the tee-off time when I get there!